

PRESENTED BY THE SCHIRN AN EXTENSIVE SPECIAL EXHIBITION IS DEVOTED TO A PREVIOUSLY NEGLECTED CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF EUROPEAN MODERN ART

ARTISTS AND PROPHETS

A SECRET HISTORY OF MODERN ART 1872–1972

6 MARCH – 14 JUNE 2015

PRESS PREVIEW: THURSDAY, 5 MARCH 2015, 11:00 a.m.

In the large-scale exhibition entitled “Artists and Prophets. A Secret History of Modern Art 1872–1972” the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt presents an in-depth appraisal of a long, yet largely unknown chapter in the history of European – and most notably German – art. Featuring over 400 works and accompanying exhibits, including paintings, drawings, lithographs as well as extensive and rare documentary material, the show reveals astonishing causal relationships between artists of the modern period and self-styled “prophets”. The exhibition embeds these artists and prophets in a broad socio-historical context that spans a period of 100 years. Featuring unique and rarely exhibited works by such artists as František Kupka, Egon Schiele, Johannes Baader, Heinrich Vogeler, Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern, Friedensreich Hundertwasser, Joseph Beuys, and Jörg Immendorff on loan from the National Gallery in Prague, the Leopold Museum in Vienna, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Hundertwasser Stiftung in Vienna, the Kunsthaus Zürich, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin as well as numerous private foundations and collectors, the presentation at the Schirn is the highlight of the 2015 spring exhibition season.

The starting point for the exhibition is the birth of a movement of artist-prophets in the German-speaking region around 1872. The protagonists were regarded not only as religious dissenters, but also as social revolutionaries. Their real aim was to bring about a change in the lifestyles and perspectives of their fellow human beings in hopes of empowering them to overcome individual, social, and economic problems. The best known of these artist-prophets were Karl Wilhelm Diefenbach, Gusto Gräser, Gustav Nagel, Friedrich Muck-Lamberty, and Ludwig Christian Haeusser. Each of them possessed considerable charisma and felt called upon to disseminate his revelations to the people, not for purposes of material gain, but for their own good. Although the first three of these men lived on the fringes of society in their time, Muck-Lamberty and Haeusser, who were Gräser’s disciples, attracted huge flocks of followers in the 1920s—until the National Socialists took power. By that time, all five prophets had attained legendary status. That they are scarcely remembered today is largely attributable to the fact that little attention has been paid to the irrational in German-speaking Europe since the Enlightenment. Yet these charismatic leading figures were not only well-known in avant-garde circles, but also had a profound impact on modern art in Europe. The path-breaking abstract art of a František Kupka, for example, can be traced to his contact with Diefenbach and his disciples. Much the same can be said of one of the great themes in the art of Egon Schiele: the artist as prophet. Since 1905, Johannes Baader’s Dadaist actions and collages were closely linked with his self-image as a modern-day Christ—a standpoint and position that was encouraged by Nagel, the “Apostle of Jesus.” The subversive drawings executed by Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern after 1945 were inspired by his lesser-known activities as a prophet during the Weimar Republic. In the 1950s, Friedensreich Hundertwasser positioned himself as an artist-environmentalist, wandered to the most distant corners of the world, and created works of penetrating, holistic radiance for a broad public. The messianic character of Joseph Beuys’s artistic mission was also sustained by principles espoused by the prophets. And Jörg Immendorff was encouraged by them to take his “LIDL” art to the streets of Düsseldorf and profess his belief in the religion of communism.

The “Artists and Prophets” exhibition is supported by the Dr. Marschner Stiftung and the Verein der Freunde der Schirn Kunsthalle e. V.

“In a life in harmony with nature characterized by vegetarianism and veganism, or in the widespread practice of homeopathy, we recognize traces of the ‘prophets’ of that era. Our aim is to examine for the first time the role played by these individuals, who were often scornfully dismissed as ‘kohlrahi apostles’ or

'nature men,' in the progressively developing history of art. The exhibition makes a pioneering scholarly contribution and promises great masterworks of modern art as well as countless unexpected and surprising insights into European cultural history," states Max Hollein, director of the Schirn.

As exhibition curator Pamela Kort explains further, "The story of the prophets is not only a fascinating chapter in our social history. It is also closely interwoven with the history of modern art in Europe. Many figures in the art world have made use of their ideas without bothering to cite their sources. Over a period of some 100 years, artists and prophets pursued similar goals and visions. By placing the protagonists in the limelight, the exhibition calls attention once again to a long and nearly forgotten chapter in the history of modern art. The time has now come to tell this secret history."

KARL WILHELM DIEFENBACH AND HIS AESTHETIC LEGACY

The first generation of prophets voiced reformist religious views and espoused monistic and theosophical ideas based on the teachings of Darwin. **Karl Wilhelm Diefenbach** (1851–1913), the "Vegetarian Apostle," was presumably the first German "artist-prophet"—a source of inspiration with whom most of the following groups of "prophets" closely identified. His 68-meter-long frieze entitled *Per aspera ad astra* (1892) will be exhibited at the Schirn as part of a large selection of 34 panels. After experiencing a revelation on Mount Peißenberg in Bavaria in 1882, Diefenbach put on a monk's cowl and founded his first commune in Höllriegelskreuth in 1885. Dismissed by contemporaries as a "kohlrabi apostle," the nudist, vegetarian, and advocate of free love attract many young artists as well as numerous different followers with his undeniable artistic talent, his anticlerical stance, and his radical lifestyle. Particularly noteworthy among his followers was the gifted Hugo Höppener, whom Diefenbach called **Fidus**. Fidus never regarded himself as an apostle or "redeemer," however, but sought instead to give visual form to a number of different ways of thinking. He studied works of theosophy and monism and met with numerous intellectual contemporaries, who were familiar with his illustrations. Fidus's art, and especially his concept of "temple art," were widely disseminated and highly influential. The utopian architectural and transcendental projects he realized between 1892 and exerted a lasting influence on many artists and architects of the avant-garde.

František Kupka (1871–1957), a pioneer of modernism, was also an admirer of Diefenbach's lifestyle and especially of his ideas. Diefenbach, whom he first met in Vienna, confirmed Kupka's contention that art must be oriented toward the spiritual. After living in Diefenbach's commune in Vienna for some time, however, he became disillusioned and distanced himself from him as a person. Yet both Diefenbach and the works of Fidus played an instrumental role in shaping the development of Kupka's aesthetics, as illustrated, for example, in his depictions of astral bodies and temples. His abstract works, including *Printemps cosmique I* (Cosmic Spring I) (1913/14), offer irrefutable evidence of these spiritual and aesthetic origins.

The "wandering nature prophet" **Gusto Gräser** (1879–1958), who also worked as an artist at times, made contact with Diefenbach in Vienna as well and joined the Himmelhof commune in Ober-St.-Veit. Although he rejected Diefenbach's authoritarian style and thus remained only briefly, he was profoundly influenced by their time together. Firmly convinced that the industrial world would destroy itself, he turned away from the rules imposed by contemporary society, embarked on a wandering tour through German-speaking Europe, and gained fame through his lectures and the sale of his poems. Yet he was also an object of derision and scorn. He was a cofounder of the Monte Verità settlement near Ascona, which became an attraction and a platform for seekers, reformers, and intellectuals from all over Europe. The young Hermann Hesse also lived there for several brief periods and eventually became a secret follower of Gräser.

The young **Egon Schiele** (1890–1918) entered the Vienna scene in 1906 and was exposed to the teachings of the prophets from all sides. Arthur Roessler, his friend and agent, introduced him to theosophy, Buddhism, and parapsychology, among other things. Roessler was well acquainted with the ideas propagated by Diefenbach and Fidus and maintained close ties with Kupka. Several artists and close friends of Schiele's also spent time with Gräser at Monte Verità. One of Schiele's most important themes began to take shape under this omnipresent influence after 1909: the image of the artist as "redeemer" and misunderstood prophet. That idea is reflected both in his unusual work titles, such as *Self-seers II [Death*

and man] of 1911, and in self-portraits reminiscent of likenesses of apostles, in which he appears as a monk-like figure in bizarre postures and dressed in a cowl, of which *Self-portrait with Lowered Head*, (1912) is but one example.

THE JESUS REVOLUTION

Probably the best-known German wandering prophet, **Gustav Nagel** (1874–1952), the “Apostle of Jesus,” was also eager to establish contact with Diefenbach at first, although he was eventually frightened off by the latter’s despotic style of leadership. Nagel, who was not an artist himself, possessed an undisputed talent for self-marketing and self-stylization. He used the emerging medium of the picture postcard to portray himself as a kind of modern-day Christ and thus to enhance his fame enormously throughout Germany. Many people hoped for a reincarnation of Jesus Christ and saw in Nagel the answer to their prayers. This effect was heightened by his unusual appearance as a six-foot-tall figure with sparkling blue eyes, and long, wavy hair dressed in a cowl and carrying a shepherd’s staff. For years, Nagel pursued the dream of building a “Garden of Paradise” with an integrated temple.

Encouraged by Apostles of Jesus like Nagel, the later Dadaist **Johannes Baader** (1876–1955) began to regard himself as “Christ” and to express this self-styled image in Dadaist actions and collages, as in his *Advertisement for myself* of 1919/20. Baader presented himself throughout the 1920s as a kind of prophet. Within the context of Dadaism he referred to himself as the “Oberdada” and “President of the World”—and from 1922 on as the “Oberdada” of Ludwigstein Castle, a destination for pilgrims from the German youth movement. The Christian revolutionaries were motivated by extremely unconventional religious views and often regarded Jesus of Nazareth as a “communist and folk agitator. The German painter **Heinrich Vogeler** (1872–1942) also sympathized with this current, an attitude that was evident not only in his publications. The call for a new redeemer that grew increasingly louder in German-speaking Europe after 1885 is manifested in his paintings as well, as in *Birth of the New Man*, a work completed in 1923

THE RISE OF THE INFLATION SAINTS IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

Inspired by the ideas and increasing popularity of the first prophets, a second generation, known as the “Inflation Saints,” began to attract increasing attention for their radical political and religious pronouncements, especially after 1920. **Friedrich Muck-Lamberty** (1891–1984), the “Messiah” of the German youth movement, saw himself as an “ethical prophet” and the up-and-coming leader of German youth. Though an admirer of Gräser, he developed a growing interest in German nationalist literature and an ideology based on principles of German-Christian doctrine. The high point of his career as a prophet came in 1920, when he travelled through Thuringia with a group of youth known as the *Neue Schar* and attracted a huge flock of followers along the way. The most famous “Inflation Saint” was **Ludwig Christian Haeusser** (1881–1927)—a former champagne merchant, who experienced his calling as a prophet in a kind of Pauline awakening in a hotel room at the Frankfurter Hof. Haeusser, who regarded himself as the new Christ, Tao, and Zarathustra in one person, cooperated with Baader and hoped to see his radical reformist weltanschauung firmly established with a seat in the Reichstag.

THE LEGACY OF TWO GENERATIONS OF PROPHETS FOR THE ART OF THE POST-WAR ERA

Branded as irrational crackpots, the prophets and their wide-ranging circle of followers disappeared into the dark recesses of German and European history after 1945. Only very few artists wished to be associated with them after those fateful years. One figure who remains a focus of discussion in this context is **Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern** (1892–1982), who—having suddenly begun to draw in 1949—though admired by Jean Dubuffet in France, was diagnosed as a psychopath in Germany. One of the questions raised by the “Artists and Prophets” exhibition is that of whether his bizarre, satirical, seemingly surreal drawings are not more likely attributable to his years as an alleged spiritual healer and vagabond prophet during the 1920s and 1930s than to a psychopathic mental condition.

In Austria after 1945 it was **Friedensreich Hundertwasser** (1928–2000) who ignored the prevailing norms of the art world and plunged head-over-heels into the realm of the irrational. He discovered the works of Schiele in Vienna and embarked on a “pilgrimage” through Italy, Morocco, and Tunisia. Both his resistance to established post-war standards of behavior, thought, and work and his eccentric

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home-made clothing are indications of his desire to identify with the two generations of prophets. The environmental activist, who regarded the spiral as a symbol of Haeckel's version of Darwinism—and the theory of becoming and passing away—expressed his radical views about art consistently in such paintings *169 Blood Floating in a circle* and *I have a Bicycle* of 1953.

At roughly the same time, his German contemporary **Joseph Beuys** (1921–1986) discovered Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy and the ideas of the long-forgotten writer and prophet Rudolf Pannwitz. Beuys's mentor Ewald Mataré encouraged him to study the philosophy of the Bauhaus crafts, which was directly related to the temple aesthetics of Diefenbach and Fidus. It was not until after his appointment as a professor of monumental sculpture at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf in 1961, however, that Beuys dared to revive the highly controversial legacy of the "prophets." In this theory of "Social Sculpture" developed in about 1967 he took the idea of the world temple a crucial step further. His timing was perfect. New Age thinking was emerging in Germany in the mid-1960s, and everything else—prophetry, ecology, social reform, and free love—returned in full force along with it. Beuys's conspicuously stylized appearance and his political and environmental commitment may be seen as evidence of an in-depth study of the life and work of various "prophets." Yet it was not until 1972 that he openly espoused the idea of the artist as wandering prophet in a programmatic multiple: In *La rivoluzione siamo Noi* (We are the revolution), a life-sized Beuys is shown striding self-confidently toward the camera. The photograph was taken on the island of Capri, where Diefenbach had spent the last years of his life. Encouraged by his mentor's example, **Jörg Immendorff** (1945–2007) later began to stylize himself as a "Beuys knight" and, armed with a shepherd's staff à la Nagel, to carry his "LIDL" action project *For dark days on the Road (Ego-Scepter)* of 1968, to the streets of Düsseldorf.

An exhibition organized by Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt in cooperation with the National Gallery in Prague. Following the presentation at the Schirn, "Artists and Prophets" will be shown at the National Gallery in Prague from June 30 to October 4, 2015.

CATALOG The exhibition catalog presents the fruits of in-depth research on the subject in the form of a probing examination that enables readers to delve more deeply into the "Secret History of Modern Art." Edited by Pamela Kort and Max Hollein. Foreword by Max Hollein, text by Pamela Kort. German edition with additional text in English, 512 pages, approx. 470 illustrations, 30 x 24 cm, brochure; graphic design by Kühle und Mozer, Cologne; Snoeck Verlag, Cologne 2015, ISBN 978-3-86442-117-4. Price: € 38 (Schirn), € 58 (trade edition).

AUDIO APP and AUDIO GUIDE An App for iOS or Android operating systems is available for downloading by visitors preparing for a visit to the exhibition or at the Schirn via the WiFi connection installed in February. The App contains the full audio tour, including information and commentaries on the major works, and an exhibition film. Background articles posted on the Schirn's online magazine (www.schirn-mag.com) as well as important information of interest to exhibition visitors (e.g. directions, opening hours, admission prices, and the program of accompanying events) can also be downloaded. The audio App is available from iTunes and Google Play in German for € 2.99. The narrator for the audio tour is the actor Sylvester Groth. The tour can also be purchased as an audio guide at the Schirn for € 3.

VENUE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt **DURATION** March 6 – June 14, 2015 **INFORMATION** www.schirn.de **EMAIL** welcomed@schirn.de **TEL** +49.69.29 98 82-0 **FAX** +49.69.29 98 82-240 **ADMISSION** 9 €, reduced 7 €, family ticket 18 €; children under the age of eight free of charge **GUIDED PUBLIC TOURS** Wed. 7 p.m., Thu. 8 p.m., Fri 11 a.m., Sat. 3 p.m., Sun 5 p.m.

CURATOR Dr. Pamela Kort **CURATORIAL ASSISTANT** Cornelia Müller **PROJECT DIRECTOR, SCHIRN** Katharina Dohm **CURATORIAL ASSISTANT, SCHIRN** Katharina Knacker **SUPPORTED BY** Dr. Marschner Stiftung and the Verein der Freunde der Schirn Kunsthalle e. V.

SOCIAL MEDIA The Schirn will be communicating in the Social Web with the **HASHTAGS** #artistsandprophets #schirn #schirnkunsthalle **ONLINE MAGAZINE** www.schirn-mag.com **FACEBOOK** www.facebook.com/Schirn **TWITTER** www.twitter.com/Schirn **YOUTUBE** www.youtube.com/user/SCHIRNKUNSTHALLE **INSTAGRAM** @schirnkunsthalle

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