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KUNSTHALLE
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WITH THIS EXHIBITION THE SCHIRN IS PRESENTING AN INSIGHT INTO THE EFFECTS OF DARWINISM ON THE VISUAL ARTS FOR THE FIRST TIME.

DARWIN
ART AND THE SEARCH FOR ORIGINS

February 5 – May 3, 2009
Press preview: Wednesday, February 4, 2009, 11 a.m.

On the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin in 1809 and the 150th anniversary of the publication of his seminal work “On the Origin of Species” (1859), the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt will present the exhibition “Darwin. Art and the Search for Origins”. Darwin’s epochal book and the ensuing heated discussion around origins not only exploded the boundaries of the biological sciences, but also caught and held the attention of a broad public spectrum. This exhibition is the first to explore the significance of the popularization of Charles Darwin’s ideas for visual artists active from 1859 to 1959. With some 150 paintings, drawings, and lithographs, as well as rare documentary material, the exhibition focuses on artists as diverse as Arnold Böcklin, Frederic Edwin Church, Max Ernst, Martin Johnson Heade, Alfred Kubin, František Kupka, Gabriel von Max, Odilon Redon, and George Frederic Watts. All of them were fascinated by natural sciences to differing degrees either reading texts by Darwin or those who reacted to him.

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Darwin’s early interest in natural history was stimulated by Alexander von Humboldt’s “Personal Narrative” of his journey to South America between 1799 and 1804, which he felt was important enough to accompany him on his five-year voyage round the globe aboard the research ship the Beagle (1831–1836). Upon reaching Brazil, Darwin wrote in his diary, “Humboldt’s glorious descriptions are and will for ever be unparalleled.” Years later, when he published “On the Origin of Species,” the by-words of Darwin’s theory of natural selection – competition, struggle, and reproductive success – were radically at odds with Humboldt’s conception of the natural world as unified and harmonious. For Darwin nature was a battlefield devoid of a higher ordering principle or internal forces.

Soon translated into numerous languages, “On the Origin of Species” was eagerly read by a large scientific community. Almost immediately, the book’s ideas also ignited a hot discussion around origins that reached the living rooms of millions through the vehicle of the illustrated press. Concurrent advances in printing and lithography, which brought down the costs of weekly journals, encouraged this trend. Popular science books and the emerging genre of science fiction were also eagerly read. In Germany, the initial edition of Alfred Brehm’s “Illustrirtes Thierleben” (1864–1869), which by the end of the century included some 1,500 illustrations (many in color), was also important in bringing the ramifications of many of Darwin’s ideas to both adults and children. Though they may be “red in tooth and claw,” these illustrations suggested that “wild” animals could have feelings too. Concurrently, Jules Verne helped to popularize Darwin’s ideas in the pages of his widely read science fiction books “Voyage au centre de la terre” (“Journey to the Center of the Earth,” 1864) and “Vingt mille lieues sous les

mers" ("Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea," 1869). It was not long before debates about all kinds of origins, survivals, and developmental histories began to escalate. Not just natural scientists, but also cultural and art historians took a stance, Edward Tylor, Aby Warburg, and Julius Meier-Graefe amongst them.

One of the best-known and perhaps earliest books to challenge Darwin's ideas was "The Reign of Law," published by George Campbell, Duke of Argyll, in 1867. Although it did not appear in German, Alfred Russel Wallace's lengthy review of its ideas was translated into that language in 1870. The following year, in "The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex," Darwin expounded the theory of the evolutionary relationship between man and animals, claiming that the latter even have a sense of aesthetics. Translated shortly thereafter into German, it further fuelled debates around origin and evolution, fanning the formation of large anti-Darwinian fronts. In answer, floods of lectures, articles, and books ensued in support of Darwin's theories, spearheaded in Germany by Ernst Haeckel, in England by Thomas Henry Huxley, and in the United States by Asa Gray.

Not only Darwin's ideas, but those of a whole host of these advocates and detractors soon caught and held visual artists' attention. In Germany, Arnold Böcklin came into contact with the theories of Darwin, Brehm, and Haeckel no later than 1872. In several subsequent paintings, Böcklin joined mythological and Christian motifs with more radical evolutionary ideas and pictorial schemes being advanced by natural scientists at the time. In the process, he subtly took a stand against the direction of classical scholarship then dominant in Germany, which was essentially indifferent to the implications of Darwin's ideas. Later in 1880, Böcklin spent a week with Anton Dohrn, the head of the Zoological Station in Naples, who saw his task as corroborating Darwin's theories through empirical findings. Thereafter, the artist made several sea paintings dominated by mermaids and other ocean creatures with features and expressions reminiscent of humans. With them, he took evolutionary schemes that he had already begun to explore in several paintings between 1872 and 1873 a step further.

Convinced that all life was once hermaphroditic and born out of the depths of the ocean, Alfred Kubin presented an almost morbid picture of evolution in his early bizarre hybrid creatures. Kubin's early drawings reveal his obsession with almost every aspect of Darwinism. The sometimes sinister and always strange transmutational species that inhabit them subtly mock scientists' progressive optimism and rationalism. With them he underscored the grimmer implications of Darwin's ideas.

Works by artists active in France such as František Kupka and Odilon Redon reveal that there the spread of Darwinism was linked not just to the idea of life having evolved out of the swamps and seas but also to a growing concern with "L'homme primitif."

In the USA, responses to Darwin's teachings were somewhat more reserved. Despite their knowledge of Darwin's theories, some painters remained convinced creationists, Frederic Edwin Church chief amongst them. In contrast, Darwin's vision of nature as an "entangled bank" inspired Martin Johnson Heade to paint South American views of nature, in which the struggle for survival is everywhere subtly hinted at. In England, although Darwin was hotly debated, few artists seemed willing to risk a side-taking. George Frederic Watts was a notable exception: in his paintings he proposed evolutionary processes as the spiritualization of matter.

Almost a quarter of a century later, Max Ernst began to assemble a body of work largely inspired by images in nineteenth-century popular science books. He was fascinated not only by paleontology – the scientific study of the geologic past – but increasingly also by astronomy and meteorology. In many of his paintings and collages, he advanced his own version of the evolution of life, creating new scenes of "deep time." In these works he not only questioned

mankind's origins but also the future of life on earth. Those made between 1920 and 1933 advance a positive take on evolutionary processes. Thereafter, just prior to and during World War II, his paintings increasingly put forth the possibility of mankind's impending extinction. Ultimately, this exhibition solicits a reconsideration of a question that Darwin essentially left unresolved: is evolution necessarily progressive; can man survive? Such a query is perhaps the most urgent issue of the twenty-first century.

In collaboration with the Senckenberg Research Institute and Natural History Museum, the Schirn dedicates a gallery to introducing the general public to the key ideas of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. A special gallery will also be devoted to presenting several large vitrines that made up part of the "scientific collection" of the late nineteenth century artist Gabriel von Max. This portion of the exhibition has been realized in cooperation with the Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen Mannheim.

LIST OF ARTISTS: René Binet, Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka, Arnold Böcklin, Jean Carriès, Frederic Edwin Church, Max Ernst, Léon Maxime Faivre, Ernst Haeckel, Martin Johnson Heade, John Heartfield, Xénophon Hellouin, Max Klinger, Alfred Kubin, František Kupka, Gabriel von Max, Odilon Redon, George Frederic Watts

CATALOG: "Darwin. Art and the Search for Origins" (German edition: "Darwin. Kunst und die Suche nach den Ursprüngen"). Edited by Pamela Kort and Max Hollein. With a foreword by Max Hollein and essays by Jane Goodall, Pamela Kort, Marsha Morton, Robert Richards, Julia Voss, a.o. German and English editions, each 288 pages and approx. 280 colour illustrations, Wienand Verlag (Cologne, 2009), ISBN 978-3-87909-973-3 (English), ISBN 978-3-87909-972-6 (German), each € 29,80 (Schirn), € 39,80 (bookstores)

VENUE: SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt, Germany. **EXHIBITION DATES:** February 5 – May 3, 2009. **OPENING HOURS:** Tue, Fri – Sun 10 a.m. – 7 p.m., Wed and Thurs 10 a.m. – 10 p.m. **INFORMATION:** www.schirn.de, e-mail: welcome@schirn.de, phone: (+49-69) 29 98 82-0, fax: (+49-69) 29 98 82-240. **ADMISSION:** € 8, reduced € 6. **CURATOR:** Dr. Pamela Kort. **EXHIBITION ARCHITECTURE:** Kuehn Malvezzi, Berlin. **MEDIA PARTNERS:** Die Welt and Welt am Sonntag, 3sat, hr2-Kultur, VerkehrsGesellschaft Frankfurt am Main mbH (VGF)

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