THE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE PRESENTS A LARGE EXHIBITION ON THE NAZARENE ARTISTS' COMMUNITY

RELIGION POWER ART
THE NAZARENES

15 April–24 July 2005

Press preview: Thursday, 14 April, 11:00 AM

In times of a Renaissance of religiousness and the influence of a hidden "faith without belief" (Slavoj Žižek), this exhibition uses the example of the Nazarenes' artistic movement to explore terms, phenomena, and strategies of modernity. The German-Austria-Swiss brotherhood around Johann Friedrich Overbeck, Franz Pforr, and Peter Cornelius formed in the early nineteenth century with the goal of using art to revive a social system based on Christianity. Its modernity lies not only in its attitude toward religion and its protest against a society but also in its conceptual definition of art. The exhibition attempts to shine a new light on this artists' group, which has been thought of as retrograde, because its formal language looked back to Raphael and Dürer and its lifestyle was monastically oriented, in order to reassess it as the earliest movement of aesthetic modernism.

The exhibition "Religion Power Art. The Nazarenes" was sponsored by DWS Investment GmbH. Additional support was granted by Georg und Franziska Speyer'sche Hochschulstiftung.

Max Hollein, director of the Schirn Kunsthalle: "There has not been a large exhibition on the Nazarenes in the past thirty years or so, and hence the theme is overdue for a reexamination. Frankfurt is the ideal place for it, since the varied activities of the Nazarenes are nearly as closely associated with this city as Goethe is. In addition, the reunification of Germany made it possible to borrow for the first time works that were previously inaccessible to the West and to present them in the context of the movement."

Christa Steinle, the curator of the exhibition: "In light of the return of religion to the public sphere and the recently ignited wars between religions and civilizations, the early-nineteenth-century art movement of the Nazarenes has, surprisingly, become the focus of public attention again. In addition to offering a broad presentation of this important movement, the exhibition is concerned primarily with reexamining the question of religion, of the function of sacred art in a secular society. Gretchen's question for Faust—"How do you feel about religion?"—is incredibly topical today."

The Nazarnes were the product of a time in upheaval. The mechanist worldview of the Enlightenment was subjected to radical criticism around 1800; faith in science, he progress of human culture, and the structure of reason in the world were challenged. Industrialization and the associated ruthless exploitation of resources to increase productivity shook the balance between man and nature; the loss of religion in the wake of atheistic trends left behind a vacuum. A desire for a fundamental renewal seized society as well as art. One of the paths was a return to religion and myth, and its most powerful manifestation in art was the Nazarenes.

The Nazarenes were a group of student “dropouts” who joined together in 1809 at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna under the name the Broterhood of Saint Luke, in reference to medieval guilds and the patron saint of painters. The painters Johann Konrad Hottinger, Friedrich Overbeck, Franz Pforr, Joseph Sutter, Ludwig Vogel, and Joseph Wintergerst were barely twenty but their goal was no less than to use art to free their age of rationalization and loss of meaning. Part of their program was to return to the German, Christian Middle Ages as a valid view of the world, to revive religious feeling through art, and to reinforce national self-confidence. They were guided by the wish to create a new basis for art among the people and by the utopia of uniting art and life—a utopia that would reoccur repeatedly in the twentieth century, under various ideologies. Hence the programmatic battle cry of Fluxus, the Happening, and Action Art, “Let’s transform our lives into an artwork”, did not originate in the twentieth century but is a Romantic poetic appeal (Ludwig Tieck / Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder). Friedrich Willhelm Schelling also helped set the direction: by liberating the art work from the task of imitating nature, he cleared the path for the Nazarnes and modern art, for the imitation of art and artistic processes of appropriation. The Nazarene’s programmatic approach of the Nazarenes concentrated on the early style of Raphael and the “simple” and “honest” style of Albrecht Dürer, which they appropriated in terms of composition and manner with a totality never seen previously. This approach should therefore not be seen as a backlash but, quite the contrary, as anticipating such twentieth-century strategies as Concept Art and Appropriation Art, making the Nazarenes pioneers of the modern aesthetic.

The outward appearance and the methods of the Nazarenes should also be recognized as programmatic. For all their emphasis on religion and Christian art, it should not be overlooked that the Nazarenes were skilled strategists. The departure of the members of the Brotherhood of Saint Luke from the Academy in 1809 in Vienna represented the first secession in the history of art. In 1810–11 the group moved to Rome and lived together in the San Isidoro monastery with “monastic” rules and caused a sensation by adopting monastic clothing and hairstyles: the artists work a habit that earned them the mocking name “Nazareni,” in allusion to the disciples of Christ. This dismissive name later became their trademark. The antiacademic secessionists and sectarians became successful artists. Many of them later became professors or directors of art academies—for example, Philipp Veith at the Städel in Frankfurt, Josef von Führich at the Academy of Art in Vienna,

Friedrich Wilhelm von Schadow academies of Berlin and then Düsseldorf, and Ferdinand Oliver at the Academy of Art in Munich—and contributed to a new standardization of formal language. In the nineteenth century there works were widely disseminated in large numbers as prints used as devotional images. A readoption of monumental fresco paintings in churches and state buildings also helped anchor their style in the public perception. With the emergence of new styles, such as realism, the Nazarenes began to be forgotten around the middle of the nineteenth century. In retrospect, their position was viewed as merely anachronistic.

It is the explicit goal of this exhibition, curated by Christa Steinle with Rainer Metzger, to reevaluate the Nazarenes, as well as providing and detailed historical and scholarly selection of works and artists, in order to shed light on the absolutely modern aspect of the Nazarenes, which was no less important. Hence the exhibition and catalog are not organized chronologically but in four large groups or chapters: 1. Religion and Art, 2. The Movement, 3. Purity and Truth, 4. Idea Art and Its Consequences. These aspects enable us to explore the Nazarenism in terms of its influence on our current understanding of art: concept and idea, purism and image building.

A catalogue, a guide for students, and a supplementary booklet will be published on the occasion of the exhibition.

CATALOGUE: *Religion Macht Kunst: Die Nazarener*. Ed. Max Hollein and Christa Steinle. With a foreword by Max Hollein and texts by Bazon Brock, Cordula Grewe, Rainer Metzger, Cornelia Reiter, Christa Steinle, Michael Thimann, and Beat Wyss. German edition, 288 pages, 90 color and 79 black-and-white illustrations. Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2005, ISBN 3-88375-940-6. 29.80 €.

PLACE: SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, D-60311 Frankfurt.
DATES: 15 April–24 July 2005. **HOURS:** Tues., Fri.–Sun. 10 AM–7 PM, Wed. and Thurs. 10 AM–10 PM. **INFORMATION:** www.schirn.de, E-Mail: welcome@schirn.de, Telephone: (+49-69) 29 98 82-0, Fax: (+49-69) 29 98 82-240. **ADMISSION:** 7 €, reduced 5 €, family ticket 15 €. **CURATOR:** Christa Steinle with Rainer Metzger. **PROJECT MANAGEMENT:** Ingrid Pfeiffer. **MEDIA PARTNER:** hr2 – Die Kulturwelle des Hessischen Rundfunks. **PROMOTION:** Saatchi & Saatchi

PUBLICITY: Dorothea Apovnik, Simone Krämer.
SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, D-60311 Frankfurt,
Telephone: (+49-69) 29 98 82-118, Fax: (+49-69) 29 98 82-240,
E-mail: presse@schirn.de, www.schirn.de (texts and images available for download under the heading PRESSE).