

THE ART OF THE SUPERFORM: THE SCHIRN PRESENTS CURRENT WORKS BY THE ARTIST THOMAS BAYRLE

THOMAS BAYRLE

BE HAPPY!

FEBRUARY 12 – MAY 10, 2026

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Thomas Bayrle (*1937) is a legend. From February 12 to May 10, 2026, the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt is presenting a major solo show of the Frankfurt-based artist featuring over fifty works from the last twenty years. Bayrle examines fundamental aspects of modern society in his work. How are religion and society, the individual and the mass, industrially manufactured products and the technical apparatuses of their production connected? Alongside the structures of consumption, work, urbanity, and technology, themes such as mobility, pop and mass culture as well as (substitute) religion all play key roles. The artist explores iconic representations as well as popular works of art history from Michelangelo to Caravaggio, Masaccio, and Claude Monet. On view in this exhibition are paintings and graphic works, sculpture and object art, sound installations and a video work.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Bayrle laid the innovative groundwork for his characteristic so called “superforms”. Repetition, connection, and interweaving of single elements into an overall image can be found in almost all of Bayrle’s works to this day and this is closely linked to the artist’s biography. Bayrle initially completed an apprenticeship as a machine weaver before turning to commercial and print graphics. He has continued to use these printing techniques both materially and conceptually in his work, thereby paving the way from analog to digital. His works thus engage in a distinctive dialogue with the current exhibition venue of the SCHIRN, the industrial building of the former Dondorf printing factory.

The title of the exhibition recalls Bayrle’s formative time as a professor at the Städelschule from 1975 to 2002 and his influence on a subsequent generation of artists. “Be happy!” was a guiding principle that he often liked to give his students. For Bayrle himself, “Be happy!” was a way of life, both an artistic and a political stance.

The exhibition “Thomas Bayrle. Be Happy!” is supported by Stadt Frankfurt and Hessische Kulturstiftung.

SEBASTIAN BADEN, DIRECTOR OF THE SCHIRN: “For nearly sixty years, Thomas Bayrle has examined the social impact of an increasingly accelerated, consumption-driven present through visual means. His art is closely intertwined with Frankfurt and is highly regarded worldwide. Bayrle’s life and artistic career have been shaped by technological innovation—from industrialization to digitization.

While his compositional principle of the superform anticipated digital pixel aesthetics in his earlier works, it now responds to today’s highly technologized media landscape. At the same time, the artist has never entirely abandoned analog techniques. Presenting his work at our current location, the former Dondorf printing factory, also creates a meaningful connection to this unique site of Frankfurt’s industrial heritage.”

MATTHIAS ULRICH, CURATOR OF THE EXHIBITION: “With humor and a pioneering spirit, Thomas Bayrle shaped the art world and art history as both an artist and a professor, marked by his understated manner. It is no coincidence that the exhibition bears the title ‘Be Happy!’, a phrase his students at the Städelschule heard from him regularly and one that left a lasting impression on many of their lives.

Bayrle's practice responded to the dominance of Pop Art in the 1960s and to the socially defining consumption of mass-produced goods. Rather than merely critiquing, Bayrle placed the interdependencies and dynamic processes between the masses and the individual at the center of his work. Advocacy of the individual and the opportunities for transforming the whole, which may emerge from the personal and the small, are reflected not only in his pictures but also in the comprehensive approach that has guided his life and work."

THEMES AND WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition brings together works by Thomas Bayrle primarily from the past twenty years. The exhibition layout is clustered into groups of works and series based on motifs, with some themes appearing repeatedly and visitors encountering them in variations during the tour of the show. An audio station featuring the voices of Bayrle's former students at the Städelschule, as well as a film collage by Sunah Choi with previously unpublished footage by the artist Helke Bayrle of her husband during their long-standing working and living partnership, mark the start of the exhibition.

The tour begins with the multi-part work created between 1999 and 2001 on the architecture of Philip Johnson (1906–2005), co-founder of the "International Style" and architectural postmodernism. The installation consists of the cuboid sculpture *Layout Philip Johnson* (1999) made of wooden slats and ten posters *Philip Johnson / The New York Times* (2001/2025). It may be viewed as a structural comparison of architecture and newspaper layout: In the posters, various newspaper pages from The New York Times are superimposed on one another. The text has thereby become illegible, and the grid of the newspaper page is visible in white horizontal and vertical stripes; it now appears as architecture. Located at the beginning of the exhibition, the work can furthermore be understood as an echo of Bayrle's activity as a book producer at the publishers Gulliver-Press, as well as of the exhibition building, the former Dondorf printing house.

The wallpaper *Frankfurter* (1980/2025), which fills an entire wall, consists of photographs of passers-by that the artist Gerald Domenig took for Bayrle on Frankfurt's Zeil in 1980. Consolidated into eight different components in the form of rhombuses, they can be assembled to form image wallpapers of varying sizes. Both crowds of people and individuals are depicted. Bayrle interweaves the ambivalence central to modernism of the individual and society into an ambiguous panorama.

At the Schirn, Bayrle is presenting his series of *Helke* portraits (2022) on it, which he made after the death of his wife. The filmmaker is depicted in various versions with a camera positioned in front of her eye, wearing her signature beret. Helke Bayrle created the innovative series *Portikus Under Construction*. From 1992 onwards, she filmed numerous artists setting up their exhibitions at the Portikus, an exhibition venue belonging to the Städelschule. In this series, Thomas Bayrle combines the motif of the camera as a sign of focused seeing with his method of mapping: A whole emerges from the assembly of the ever-same part.

Since the 1970s, the motif of the highway has played a central role in Bayrle's work. The exhibition shows various works that combine cars, highways, and machines with content and images of the Christian religion. Bayrle produced the video work *Autobahnkreuz* (2006) together with Daniel Kohl, a former student of his at the Städelschule. Numerous tiles of the same image section of cars driving on a highway culminate, in a slow, zooming movement, in the depiction of the crucified Jesus. The video work is presented in combination with several three-dimensional works made from cardboard. In *Weberei / Weaving* (2010), Bayrle has created a fusion of fabric and road with intersecting lanes, corresponding to his idea of social fabric. During his training as a weaver in the 1950s, he came into contact with the Jacquard loom. This revolutionized the textile

industry and, with the binary code of the punch cards used for pattern creation, also formed the basis for the data processing of the first computers. Bayrle views the separate threads of the loom as individuals that together form the fabric and thus form the collective. Here, too, we see his characteristic principle of moving from the micro to the macro level, from the part to the whole. *Gerano Pavesi / Church* (2015) refers to Autogrill, the Italian highway rest stops founded in 1947 by Mario Pavesi, which are here interwoven to form the shape of a figure of Christ. In works such as *Pflanzlich-Carmageddon* (2014), *São Paulo* (2015), and *Weisshorn* (2012), Bayrle draws critical analogies between roads, plants, and natural phenomena. As in his earlier works, Bayrle addresses the destructive effects of industry, tourism, and transportation on the environment, while simultaneously pointing to our own entanglement in these processes.

The Schirn presents several series in which Bayrle explores iconic works from art history and conventions of Christian imagery. On display are, for instance, three of Bayrle's adaptations of Caravaggio's altarpiece *The Inspiration of St. Matthew* (1602), depicting the act of inspiration of the evangelist by the angel. Following his principle of the superform, Bayrle converts the painting into a small grid and fills each of the boxes with the pictogram of an iPhone. These are rotated, scaled, and distorted in such a way that the superform ultimately emerges from the ordered structure. In *Hl. Matthäus trifft Engel* (2015), the reproduction of the Caravaggio painting is displayed on numerous small screens. The viewers snapping away on their smartphones become part of the work and obscure the view of the actual pixelated motif.

A group of works on the theme of the ascension of Christ does not refer to a specific historical model. Here, too, Bayrle's characteristic grid underlies the main figure; the small graphics show female figures ascending and male figures descending. The figure of the ascension is superimposed on various collaged backgrounds. In *Ascension I* (2019), a model city is shown dissolving into a newspaper clipping and a checkered grid; in *Ascension* (2019), a photographic collage thematically referencing the pandemic, figures in white protective suits walk across a surface of thermal foil, from which isolated human heads and bodies emerge. In *Ascension VII* (2019), a protective face mask covers the face of the central figure, which is framed by small glowing screens. The inscription "Pfingsten war immer am überzeugendsten wegen dem brennenden Rosenstock" (Pentecost was always the most convincing because of the burning rosebush) is only partially legible.

Heuhaufen Marmoriert and *Roll Over Smartfon I* (both 2019) are based on Claude Monet's famous series of paintings of the *Meules* (haystacks). In this appropriation, Bayrle uses iPhones, some with colorful screens, to build the grain stacks. The year this work was created, one of Monet's *Meules* paintings sold at auction for the highest price ever realized for a work by the artist. The buyer was art collector and SAP co-founder Hasso Plattner, whose company specializes in software.

In some of his works, Bayrle has referred to Masaccio's fresco *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* (1426) in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence. This early Renaissance masterpiece is emblematic of human awareness of the body, nakedness, and mortality. Bayrle focuses on the central couple and supplements it with contemporary references, from which the bodies of Adam and Eve are formed. In *Brancacci Chapel* (2020), the two figures are filled with two different motifs. Bayrle appropriated these from a South Korean news organization, depicting a group of saluting females and a group of protesting males. In the version *Vertreibung aus dem Paradies* (2020), meanwhile, Adam and Eve can be seen amid a plant-rich environment, as though they had never left the Garden of Eden.

Bayrle combines the Christian pictorial theme of the Pietà (pity) with motifs of technological and social change. Michelangelo's famous marble sculpture *Pietà* (1499) at Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, which shows a seated Mary with the body of her dead son on her lap, serves as a model here. Bayrle's *Pietà red cars* (2019) consists of a busy, intertwined network of streets with small red cars. *Pietà (Airplane)* (2018) is formed of numerous skulls, more densely arranged in the middle to depict an airplane crossing the group. Since the 1980s, air traffic has increased globally to such an extent that it is having a destructive effect on the planet. The tapestry *iPhone Pietà* (2017) addresses the interconnectedness brought about by the smartphone since the 2010s, which connects man and machine in an unprecedented way. Bayrle had this tapestry produced using an automated loom. In *Pietà (Rising Woman, Falling Man)* (2020), the artist takes the Pietà motif as the starting point for a reflection on changing gender roles in the twenty-first century.

A group of works with humorous titles such as *Erholung in der Idiotie I and II* (both 2022), *Non Fungible Tokens "Turn Right"* (2022) or *I Fon Salat-Roboter* (2022) focuses on industrial robots, such as those used in the automotive industry. Arranged in the center of the images, the robots are depicted in various stages of their motion sequences. Here again, the images consist of a large number of small iPhones. The robot's arm and hand maintain an ironic relationship to Bayrle's artistic working method.

At documenta 13 in Kassel in 2012, Bayrle showed cut-open engines in operation for the first time, thus visualizing not only the aesthetics of machines but also the rhythm of life and the human condition in mass society. He removes car components from their actual functional context and elevates them to the status of sculptures. The exhibition presents *Rosary* (2009) with the motorized movement of an isolated Ford Galaxy windscreen wiper. *Rosaire* (2012) consists of the cut-open engine of a Citroën 2CV, whose pistons move visibly in the cylinders. Both *Rosary* and *Rosaire* are collaborative works with Bernhard Schreiner and are accompanied by a sound loop of persons praying the rosary. During his training as a pattern draughtsman and weaver, Bayrle felt reminded of people praying the rosary by the repetitive, monotonous noise of the machines on the Jacquard looms. The sculpture *Automeditation* (1987/2017) likewise refers to the rosary prayers. It consists of four car tires stacked on top of one another with an excerpt from the Latin prayer *Ave Maria* inscribed on the outside.

The exhibition closes with depictions of two popular figures. The portraits *Kim Kardashian XII* and *XIII* (both 2021) show the contemporary media icon composed of many small red lipsticks. Most of Kardashian's income stems from the fashion and beauty industry. Bayrle uses formal references to create an analogy to Jan Vermeer's popular painting *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* (1655). It does not show a specific person, but is a so-called "tronie", a portrait of an imaginary figure.

Pope I and *Pope II* (both 2021), depictions of popes with their liturgical headgear, the miter, likewise resemble a conventional ecclesiastical representative rather than a specific person. The composition is made up of many differently colored small shoes, a reference to Pope Benedict XVI's distinctive red loafers.

THOMAS BAYRLE was born in Berlin in 1937. After an apprenticeship as a weaver in Göppingen, he studied at the Werkkunstschule Offenbach am Main (now HfG of Main/Hessen State University of Art and Design) from 1958 to 1961. As co-founder of Gulliver-Press, he published artist's books and editions and worked with literature and visual reproduction techniques. The principle of seriality became a defining element of his artistic practice. He works across graphic art as well as painting, object art, and video. Bayrle was a fellow at the Villa Massimo in Rome in 1971/72 and participated in documenta III (1964), documenta 6 (1977), and documenta 13 (2012). From 1975 to 2002, he was a professor at the Städelschule in Frankfurt am

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Main. He has had numerous international solo and group exhibitions, and his works are represented in various major museum collections. He lives and works in Frankfurt am Main.

SCHIRN PAPER A new print format SCHIRN PAPER is published three times a year at the Schirn's new location. It complements the digital SCHIRN MAG. To accompany the exhibition "Thomas Bayrle. Be Happy!", issue 2 of the print magazine features articles by Theresa Dettinger and Martin Schmidl.

Issue 2, Spring 2026, published by SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, with contributions by Theresa Dettinger, Katharina Dohm, Alexander Graeff, Laura Margielsky, Jörg Scheller, Martin Schmidl, Bárbara Wagner & Benjamin de Burca, Finn Waldherr, and Sarah Waschke, German-English edition, 80 pages, approx. 95 illustrations, 22.5 × 30 cm, paperback, also available by subscription, see: [SCHIRN.DE/ABO](https://www.schirn.de/abo)

BROCHURE AND AUDIO TOUR WITH TACTILE FLOOR GUIDANCE SYSTEM "THIS WAY" BY THE ARTIST PETER SCHLOSS

A brochure with further information is available to visitors during their visit to the exhibition. As a Schirn pilot project, the tactile floor guidance system "This Way" by artist Peter Schloss has been adapted specifically for the exhibition "Thomas Bayrle. Be Happy!" The unique concept provides orientation and makes the art experience more accessible. A circuit applied to the floor leads to all the works in the exhibition. At fifteen stations, audio texts in German and English provide all necessary information. These texts, written by the curatorial team, have been recorded using artificial intelligence and can be accessed via QR codes. The aim is to offer persons with low vision an autonomous exhibition experience. To this end, "This Way" leads to all relevant works and maintains sufficient distance from potential hazards and sensitive artworks. Persons with low vision and blind persons in particular are thus guided safely through the exhibition. The transitions to the next work are indicated by the tactile floor guidance system. In addition, a tactile 3D floor plan of the SCHIRN is available in the foyer.

VENUE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, GABRIEL-RIESSER-WEG 3, 60325 FRANKFURT AM MAIN **DURATION** FEBRUARY 12 – MAY 10, 2026 **ADMISSION** 10 €, REDUCED 8 €, FREE ADMISSION FOR CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF 8 **FRIDAYS FOR 2** EVERY FIRST FRIDAY OF THE MONTH BUY ONE TICKET, GET THE SECOND FREE **OPENING HOURS** TUES TO SUN 10 AM TO 7 PM, THURS TO 10 PM **INDIVIDUAL TOURS** INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP TOURS CAN BE BOOKED AT [FUEHRUNGEN@SCHIRN.DE](mailto:fuehrungen@schirn.de) **VISITOR INFORMATION** AT [SCHIRN.DE/BESUCH](https://www.schirn.de/besuch) **INFORMATION** [SCHIRN.DE](https://www.schirn.de) **E-MAIL** [WELCOME@SCHIRN.DE](mailto:welcome@schirn.de) **TELEPHONE** +49.69.29 98 82-0 **CURATOR** MATTHIAS ULRICH, SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT **CURATORIAL ASSISTANT** THERESA DETTINGER **MEDIA PARTNERS** MONOPOL MAGAZIN, FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINE ZEITUNG, JOURNAL FRANKFURT **SUPPORTED BY** STADT FRANKFURT, HESSISCHE KULTURSTIFTUNG **HASHTAG** #THOMASBAYRLE #SCHIRN **FACEBOOK, YOUTUBE, INSTAGRAM, PINTEREST, TIKTOK, SCHIRN MAGAZIN** [SCHIRN.DE/MAGAZIN](https://www.schirn.de/magazin)

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