

Press Release

Basel, May 2017

Otto Freundlich Cosmic Communism

June 10 – September 10 2017, Kunstmuseum Basel | Neubau
Curator: Julia Friedrich, Museum Ludwig Cologne

Otto Freundlich (1878–1943) knew everyone and everything. Hardly another artist of the first half of the 20th century had engaged with such passion and intelligence with all the different movements of art. He was personally acquainted, and often friends, with nearly all the leading artists of all the movements of the avant garde – Expressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Orphism, Dadism, De Stijl, Bauhaus, the Cologne Progressives, and finally abstraction. There was no lack of mutual influence. And yet in his paintings and sculptures, his mosaics and stained glass, Freundlich followed a path entirely of his own making.

The exhibition *Otto Freundlich – Cosmic Communism* aims to span the entirety of Otto Freundlich's life and work and explore the development of his artistic and philosophical thought. It focusses attention on the work of an artist on whom the Nazis had declared war: they destroyed a significant portion of his work, and ultimately murdered him in a death camp. To this day, his best-known work remains the sculpture *Large Head* (1912). It appeared on the cover of the catalog to the Nazi exhibition *Degenerate Art*. The retrospective demonstrates that the Nazis falsified not just the title of the work (they gave it the title *The New Man*, by which it is still known today), but even the sculpture itself: on at least one stop of the *Degenerate Art* exhibition tour, a crude copy was presented in place of the original.

As politically active and determined as Freundlich was, he was not drawn to the struggles of the day but rather to utopian conceptions. His *oeuvre* is guided by an all-encompassing universalism, which he called "cosmic communism". Freundlich's persecution in Germany led to the loss of the greater part of his significant early works. Fourteen works were confiscated just in the *Degenerate Art* action alone. The work that remained in France was preserved by some supporters after his death and finally housed at a foundation in the Pontoise Museum near Paris.

The exhibition – conceived by the Museum Ludwig in Cologne and now shown at the Kunstmuseum Basel – gathers some 50 works, including 20 paintings, five sculptures, 25 works on paper, and two applied works as well as photos of lost work. This retrospective of Freundlich's work will shed light on the artist's development from 1909 until 1940 with fascinating new scholarly insights.

Otto Freundlich and Basel

Otto Freundlich's most loyal supporter was surely the Basel teacher Hedwig Muschg, whom he met in Paris in 1927. Hedwig Muschg was the half-sister of the writer Adolf Muschg. She

consistently sent the penniless artist money from her meager earnings and attempted to buy his pictures in Switzerland. As a sign of gratitude, Freundlich sent her works that she sold after his death. In this manner, the former director of the Basel Kunstmuseum, Georg Schmidt, personally acquired a gouache (today in a private collection) and a large oil painting was purchased by the Basel Kunstmuseum. Additionally, the museum acquired a tempera on wood and a pastel from the gift of Marguerite Arp-Hagenbach.

Otto Freundlich's Life

Otto Freundlich came from an assimilated Jewish family in Stolp, Pomerania (now Poland). After completing a shop apprenticeship in Hamburg, he studied art history for three semesters in Berlin and Munich. Around 1906, he began to produce his own work. In 1908, he moved to Paris, where he got to know Picasso. In the years following, Freundlich moved between Paris, Hamburg, Munich, Berlin, and Cologne. He was friends with numerous figures in the art world, but especially close to artists. In addition to Hedwig Muschg, Freundlich's particularly significant supporters included the Cologne collector Josef Feinhals and the director of the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe (Museum for Fine and Applied Arts) in Hamburg, Max Sauerlandt, who acquired important works that were confiscated in 1937 and remain lost to this day – with the exception of one work that has recently resurfaced. After 1924, Freundlich lived mainly in Paris. The artist escaped to the Pyrenees when the Nazis marched into Paris, but was denounced and deported. He was 65. He was transported to the death camp Sobibór, where he was murdered on arrival, if he did not already die on the way.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalog published by Prestel Verlag, with ca. 250 color illustrations and essays by Christophe Duvivier, Julia Friedrich, Verena Franken, Otto Freundlich, Joachim Heusinger von Waldegg, Adolf Muschg, among others.

The exhibition is mounted by the Museum Ludwig Cologne in collaboration with Kunstmuseum Basel.

The exhibition has received generous support from KPMG AG and the Foundation for Kunstmuseum Basel.

Media Briefing for the exhibition

Thursday, June 8, 2017, 10 a.m.

Kunstmuseum Basel | Neubau, Foyer Upper Level 1, please enter through the Hauptbau

Opening

Friday, June 9, 2017, 6:30 p.m.

Kunstmuseum Basel | Neubau, Foyer Upper Level 1, please enter through the Hauptbau

Images and information about the exhibition

www.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/medien

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