

# From Albrecht Dürer to Andy Warhol Masterpieces from the Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich

Sep 10, 2023 — Jan 7, 2024 | MASI Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana, Lugano, Switzerland

ETH Zürich is a well-known institution, highly renowned both in Switzerland and internationally, but not everyone is aware of its Collection of Prints and Drawings. With the exhibition "From Albrecht Dürer to Andy Warhol. Masterpieces from the Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich", MASI offers the public a unique opportunity to experience 300 masterpieces from one of Switzerland's most important collections of prints and drawings.

Arranged chronologically, the exhibition explores techniques, motifs, styles and conceptions of art through the centuries. Works by leading figures in European art history - from Albrecht Dürer to Rembrandt van Rijn, Francisco de Goya and Maria Sibylla Merian, Pablo Picasso and Edvard Munch - are presented alongside pieces by living artists such as John M Armleder, Olivier Mosset, Candida Höfer, Susan Hefuna, Shirana Shahbazi and Christiane Baumgartner. This unique, exceptional dialogue between masters of the past and contemporary artists generates a host of unexpected, surprising connections. Topics such as the process of creating art, the relationship between copy and original, the dissemination of motifs and iconographies, and partnerships between different artistic skillsets have characterized the history of graphic art since it first began, and remain relevant to this day.

As well as highlighting the vast array of different graphic techniques - from woodcut and burin engraving to etching and silkscreen printing - the exhibition features drawings, photographs and multiples, and is a source of information and a host of little-known facts on the origins, functions and importance of these works through the centuries.

"The Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich, which was founded in 1867 as a university Collection to support study and teaching activities, is one of Switzerland's most important institutions for prints and drawings, with works from the 15th century to the present day. Every time I visit it, I am struck by the quality and topicality of the works, and I am therefore delighted that several masterpieces from this extraordinary Collection can be presented to a broad audience at the MASI Lugano for the first time", underlined Joël Mesot, President ETH Zürich.

Coming face to face with centuries of art history: the exhibition layout

The exhibition opens with a large wall featuring self-portraits or portraits of artists, hung picture-wall style. In this atmospheric overview spanning different eras, visitors to the show literally come face to face with centuries of art history: from the intense gaze of Rembrandt in the etched self-portrait which also features his wife Saskia, to the more celebratory expressions of Anton van Dyck and Maria Sibylla Merian; from the black-and-white self-portrait photographs of Urs Lüthi and Fischli/Weiss to Max von Moos' version depicted in a few lines, to Meret Oppenheim's mouth in Markus Raetz's engraving, to name but a few.

The exhibition continues with historical works from the Collection dating from the late 15th century to the present day, presented in chronological order. Before the invention of photography, from the 16th century onwards paintings and other works of art were "translated" into engravings to enable a broader audience to enjoy them. Some printmakers gave their own interpretation of the original work: the exhibition features Niccolò Boldrini's *Caricatura della copia del Laocoonte* (*Three Monkeys Imitating the Laocoön*), a 16th-century Venetian print that puts an irreverent spin on a storied image: the ancient figures have been replaced by monkeys.

Printmaking was also a way of representing scientific and naturalistic subject matter: one example in the exhibition is Albrecht Dürer's famous *Rhinoceros* woodcut. Although the artist had never seen the exotic animal, his depiction of it was long held to be a realistic one, and reprinted in multiple editions.

Meanwhile the book *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium*, published in 1705 by Maria Sibylla Merian, is based on meticulous observations of insects in Surinam in South America.

An entrepreneur and teacher, Merian was one of the leading entomologists of her day, and among other things, was also the first artist to depict the different stages in insects' life cycles, shown alongside the plant species they fed on.

The show's sweeping timeline points up how printmaking techniques have been passed down through the ages, as well as highlighting the different techniques used by different artists. With a great master like Rembrandt, this aspect is evident in the two versions of the engraving *Ecce Homo*, from clearly show how he constantly tweaked and perfected his works. This was also made possible by the drypoint technique: the sharp, needle-shaped steel instrument used to etch the metal plate could be handled much like a pencil. Over time, the drypoint technique has frequently been revisited and adapted, as in the works of the contemporary artist Miriam Cahn, who in her 1995 series *soldaten, frauen + tiere* (*soldiers, women+animals*) worked directly on the plate with her hands, wearing gloves covered in sandpaper to etch out highly evocative faces, expressions and gazes.

Subject matter is another aspect that recurs through the centuries. One such example is bullfighting, from Francisco de Goya's dramatic depictions of 1816, to the svelte figures in Pablo Picasso's aquatint *Salto con la Garrocha* (*Vault*) from the series *La Tauromaquia*, to Bernhard Luginbühl's woodcut on cotton fabric, which presents a more plastic, stylized rendering. The human figure, and thus the human body, is a theme that is explored throughout the exhibition, with a particular focus on the turn of the 20th century and the work of the Expressionists, the prints by Edvard Munch and Käthe Kollwitz, and the filigree drawings of Egon Schiele and Ferdinand Hodler.

Félix Vallotton's series *Intimités* (1891) explores the intimacy of a relationship between a man and a woman and is an interesting example of how things were changing in the world of art prints: the late nineteenth century saw the introduction of the limited edition, which proved a commercial success. In the case of Vallotton's series, for example, after the printing process was finished, all the wooden matrices used by the artist were cut into bits and printed on an additional sheet to ensure the buyer that no further editions could be made. Several works in the exhibition testify to the evolution of printmaking as a form of graphic art in the second half of the twentieth century, such as the series of diptychs featuring text and image created in 1999 by the illustrious Louise Bourgeois. Bearing the question *What is the shape of this problem?* on the title sheet, the artist attempts to translate emotions into visual form, getting the viewer thinking in a sort of question-and-answer session. Meanwhile Shirana Shahbazi's series of evocative, vintage-effect risographs, entitled *Camping The Two*, investigates the classic genre of travel photography, rejecting the usual documentary approach to focus instead on everyday situations.

Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup* was of course also inspired by everyday life. Icon of pop culture and pop art, the most famous red and white soup can in art history is also present in the exhibition, in a silkscreen print from Warhol's celebrated series of 1968.

The exhibition is curated by Linda Schädler, Head of the Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich

