

THE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT PRESENTS THE BEGINNINGS OF ABSTRACT ART AS MANIFESTED IN THE WORKS OF WILLIAM TURNER, VICTOR HUGO UND GUSTAVE MOREAU

# TURNER HUGO MOREAU THE DISCOVERY OF ABSTRACTION

**06 OCTOBER 2007 – 06 JANUARY 2008**

**PRESS PREVIEW: FRIDAY, 05 OCTOBER 2007, 11:00 AM**

Long before abstraction was declared an avant-garde art form in the twentieth century, painters and graphic artists were creating images without any recognizable objects. The most prominent examples are found in the oeuvres of the landscape painter J. M. William Turner (1775-1851), the poet and draughtsman Victor Hugo (1802-1885) and the French "Symbolist" Gustave Moreau (1826-1898). The exhibition "Turner – Hugo – Moreau" represents the first endeavour to compare these three nineteenth-century authors of abstract imagery by juxtaposing some 130 of their watercolours, oil paintings, sketches and drawings, many of them unpublished to date. In contrast to previous presentations, the show emancipates itself from the perspective which takes the abstract art of the twentieth century as its vanishing point, and proposes a reassessment: The primary concern here is not "where do these abstract works lead?" but "what tradition do they follow?". In its effort to answer this newly formulated question, the exhibition is more than just a presentation of the three artists' oeuvres. With 80 further paintings, albums, rare books and art objects, it moreover draws attention to the two traditions forming the basis for abstract imagery since the eighteenth century: on the one hand the fascination with "blots" – "pictures" created by chance – and on the other hand the aesthetics of effect, i.e. theoretical reflections on how the means of painting affect the viewer.

The exhibition "Turner – Hugo – Moreau. The Discovery of Abstraction" is being carried out with the support of Lazard & Co. GmbH and the Verein der Freunde der (Society of Friends of the) Schirn Kunsthalle e. V. Further funds are being provided by the Mercure Hotel & Residenz Frankfurt Messe, the Novotel Frankfurt City and the Georg und Franziska Speyer'sche Hochschulstiftung.

Max Hollein, the director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt: "Turner, Hugo, and Moreau discovered the qualities and potentials of lines, blots and colours and took a profound interest in non-representational pictures. They conceived of these drawings and paintings as experiments, idle pastimes, sketches and studies. As a rule, therefore, the drawings, watercolours and oil sketches on display here were not intended by their authors for viewing by the public, and are now being shown in this combination for the first time – an undertaking which in effect leads to a reappraisal of the abstract art of the twentieth century."

Raphael Rosenberg, the show's curator: "The exhibition provides clear evidence that non-representational pictures were widespread long before 1900, but were executed without laying claim to the status of the 'artwork'. The accomplishment of the years around 1911-12 – marking the first exhibition of the *Blauer Reiter* in Munich, Kupka's first presentation of abstract paintings

at the Parisian *Salon d'Automne* and the publication of Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* – did not consist in the invention of a new pictorial form (abstraction), but in the act of elevating abstract pictures to the rank of artworks and exhibiting them as such.”

In the period around and after 1911, within the context of a widespread longing for a new and better age, a great number of artists turned to abstraction as a means of renewing art down to its very foundations. Abstract pictures did not emerge from a vacuum, however, but had already existed long before the turn of the century, both in artistic practise and as a topic of theoretical reflection. This circumstance is particularly evident in works by Turner, Hugo and Moreau: in the estates of all three artists, there are hundreds of drawings, watercolours, even oil paintings which do not depict anything objective. In a selection of superb examples, these works are now being shown together for the first time.

**Joseph Mallord William Turner** was a versatile landscape painter and the most famous British artist of his day. A native of London, he successfully carried out and completed his academic training as a student at the Royal Academy of Art. He would later become a professor and vice-president of that institution, and he regularly showed his works at its annual exhibitions. Turner was thus anything but an outsider, but his work was unconventional for his time on account of its distinct abstraction: as the years went on, he abstained increasingly from depicting the details of individual motifs. The painting style he developed – and for which he is known – was unusual in the contemporary context, consisting of lavishly applied, intermeshing masses of colour and dynamic brushstrokes.

The French poet **Victor Hugo** was a self-taught artist who made drawings throughout his life, leaving some 3,500 works of draughtsmanship to posterity. Characterized by a wealth of variation, his graphic work ranges from sketches closely reproducing nature, made during his travels, to imaginary, romantically sombre landscapes. It moreover comprises several hundred abstract works in which he experimented with a wide spectrum of techniques for applying colour: squirting or spraying ink, allowing it to run and then dry, fold-blotting and printed impressions of various objects of everyday use. In the 1930s, the Surrealist André Breton was one of the first to discover Hugo's drawings, whose modernity he greatly admired; numerous major exhibitions have been devoted to them in the intervening decades.

No other artist of the nineteenth century executed such abstract images in such a wide range of media and with such differing intentions as **Gustave Moreau**. Like Turner, he successfully completed the various stages of an academic artist's career: he was a student and later a professor at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris and exhibited regularly at the Paris Salon, where, from 1864 onward, he was among the most highly regarded painters and his work a frequent topic of discussion. In addition to the history paintings which he exhibited and sold, he had hundreds of abstract pictures in his studio whose function remains something of a mystery to this day. We do know, however, that many of his oil sketches and drawings were executed as compositional studies, and that randomly occurring watercolour blots sometimes inspired new works.

In addition to Turner, Hugo and Moreau, the exhibition also shows abstract images by other painters and writers of the nineteenth century, works likewise largely unknown to date: colourful “dendrites” by the writer George Sand (1804–1876), created by pressing painted sheets of paper together and then separating them again, abstract monotypes by Edgar Degas (1834–1917),

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“Klecksographies” by Justinus Kerner (1786–1862) and Wilhelm von Kaulbach’s (1805–1874) “Kaffeeklexbilder”.

Two discursive/visual traditions form the background for these non-objective works: the aesthetics of effect, i.e. deliberations on the effect of colour, composition and line on the beholder, and the fascination with “blots”, – “pictures” which emerge by chance.

In treatises and manuals, artists and theoreticians examined the expression of abstract lines and colours and, from as early as the second half of the eighteenth century, reproductions of non-representational images were made to illustrate their scholarly writings. The exhibition will show a selection of these publications, of which some are very rare and many have all but sunk into oblivion. In any case, they played a very important role in the training of artists.

The phenomenon of patterns and abstract formations shaped by chance, on the other hand, has preoccupied and fascinated human beings since pre-historical times. Colourful stone and glass vessels of ancient Egypt (3000 B.C.) and classical Roman antiquity as well as multi-hued marble paper of the eighteenth century are included in the exhibition as a means of showing that the aesthetic interest in imagery which exceeds the bounds of nature’s imitation can be traced back to the early days of human civilization.

Nevertheless, with their discoveries, Turner, Hugo and Moreau as well as other artists of the nineteenth century were on the cutting edge of artistic conceptions of their time. Turner’s abstraction was frequently criticized by his contemporaries. As early as 1799, he was accused of exhibiting sketchy – in other words, unfinished – paintings containing painterly excesses. Victor Hugo occasionally gave one of his non-representational drawings to a friend as a gift, but never showed them in public. As the epitome of the absurd, abstract paintings were a popular theme of caricatures (e.g. by Wilhelm Busch), a circumstance which demonstrates just how inconceivable they were within the official exhibition practises of the nineteenth century.

**CATALOGUE:** Turner – Hugo – Moreau. Entdeckung der Abstraktion. Ed. by Raphael Rosenberg and Max Hollein. With a foreword by Max Hollein and texts by Raphael Rosenberg. German edition, 360 pages, approx. 300 colour illustrations, Hirmer Verlag München, ISBN 978-3-7774-3755-2, 34.– EUR.

**LOCATION:** SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, D-60311 Frankfurt.

**EXHIBITION DATES:** 6 October 2007 – 6 January 2008. **OPENING HOURS:** Tue., Fri – Sun. 10 am – 7 pm, Wed. and Thu. 10 am – 10 pm. **INFORMATION:** [www.schirn.de](http://www.schirn.de), E-Mail:

[welcome@schirn.de](mailto:welcome@schirn.de), Telephone: (+49-69) 29 98 82-0, Fax: (+49-69) 29 98 82-240. **ADMISSION:** 8 €, reduced 6 €, family ticket 16 €, combi-ticket 14 €, reduced 10 € **CURATOR:** Prof. Dr. Raphael Rosenberg (Heidelberg). **PROJECT DIRECTION:** Cornelia Tschosch, Katharina Dohm.

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