

PRESS RELEASE

STÄDEL ACQUIRES MASTERWORK OF GERMAN SURREALISM

RICHARD OELZE, *ARCHAIC FRAGMENT* (1935)

PAINTING PURCHASED JOINTLY BY STÄDEL MUSEUM AND STÄDELSCHER MUSEUMS-VEREIN NOW ON VIEW IN PRESENTATION OF MUSEUM COLLECTION. FIRST-RATE ACQUISITION MADE WITH SUPPORT FROM CULTURAL FOUNDATION OF GERMAN FEDERAL STATES AND CONTRIBUTION FROM KURT AND MARGA MÖLLGAARD FOUNDATION.

Frankfurt am Main, 11 July 2018. The Städel Museum is delighted to announce a first-rate new acquisition for its collection. The magnum opus by the German Surrealist Richard Oelze (1900–1980) represents a significant enhancement to the Frankfurt museum’s Surrealist holdings. With the aid of generous support from the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States and a contribution from the Kurt and Marga Möllgaard Foundation, the Städtelscher Museums-Verein and the Städel Museum have jointly purchased the painting *Archaic Fragment* (1935) from a private collection. Long thought lost, the work is one of only three large-scale canvases from the artist’s most important creative period in Paris. The other two – *Expectation* (1935–36) and *Everyday Torments* (1934) – are now in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Kunstsammlung NRW in Düsseldorf, respectively. Following careful conservation and restoration measures, *Archaic Fragment* is now on view in a specially installed cabinet exhibition in the galleries showcasing the Städel Museum’s modern art collection.

“Richard Oelze painted only a handful of large-scale works in his life. All the more delighted are we that – in cooperation with the Städtelscher Museums-Verein and with generous support from the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States – we were able to seize the opportunity to obtain one of these masterworks of German Surrealism for our collection”, commented Städel director Dr Philipp Demandt.

“*Archaic Fragment* is a telling example of Richard Oelze’s distinctive pictorial language and now, following its restoration, it shines in renewed splendour. It is an ideal enhancement to our Surrealist holdings”, added Dr Alexander Eiling, the head of the Städel Museum’s collection of modern art, who is likewise very pleased about the new accession.

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In his Paris years, Richard Oelze cultivated contacts with the chief exponents of the Surrealist movement – among them André Breton, Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy and Salvador Dalí – whose ideas and styles left distinct marks on his oeuvre. The artists of this group were primarily interested in themes that ran contrary to human logic – their main concern was with dreams, visions and explorations of the subconscious. In *Archaic Fragment*, the fantastical motifs of the Surrealists combine with the precise painting style of New Objectivity, which Oelze had learned from his Dresden teachers Otto Dix and Richard Müller. And although this precision applies to even the smallest details, the depiction as a whole defies conclusive interpretation. A hybrid entity of plant, animal and human forms hovers as if alive before an imaginary landscape. It is a meeting of the familiar and the strange which, in keeping with Surrealist logic, unite to form an unsettling fabrication of the subconscious. Yet the artist also plays with erotic undertones and sparks the fears and desires that slumber in the human psyche like “archaic fragments”.

“One of the core responsibilities of a vital museum is the ongoing expansion of its collection. I am all the happier that, through the purchase of *Archaic Fragment*, the Städtelscher Museums-Verein – the museum’s oldest and largest patron – has once again had an opportunity to contribute to the further development of the Frankfurt collection on the highest level of quality”, Sylvia von Metzler, the chairwoman of the Städtelscher Museums-Verein, emphasized.

“Richard Oelze is the most important German exponent of Surrealism apart from Max Ernst. *Archaic Fragment*, long given up for lost, is one of his rare large-scale masterpieces. The fact that, thanks to this acquisition, the Städel’s Surrealism collection has now been crowned with such an outstanding work gives me great pleasure”, remarked Prof Dr Markus Hilgert, the secretary general of the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States.

Restoration and conservation

The painting’s original materials have survived in excellent condition. The careful restoration and conservation measures by Stephan Knobloch, the Städel’s head of painting restoration, focussed on removing patches from the back, closing small tears in the canvas and removing two yellowed layers of varnish as well as older retouching. As a result, the work has been returned almost to its original state. Not only has the original colour scheme been restored, but also the perspective of the overall pictorial composition as intended by the artist. A frame with a type of moulding used frequently

in the 1920s and '30s was copied for the Oelze painting and furnished with a mounting likewise typical of that period.

Cabinet presentation

In the Städel collection, *Archaic Fragment* enhances another painting by Oelze – *Dangerous Desire* (1936), acquired back in 1979. The two works are the highlights of a newly installed cabinet presentation in the museum's modern art galleries. With the aid of three further examples from private holdings, the presentation offers a concentrated look at Richard Oelze's oeuvre and his independent and innovative position within the Surrealist movement. The presentation will be on view until 21 October 2018 in Cabinet 1.11.1 of the Städel's garden wing.

Following the cabinet presentation, the painting *Archaic Fragment* will be on view along with some one hundred important works by international artists in the exhibition "Wilderness", taking place at the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt from 1 November 2018 to 3 February 2019. The extensive thematic exhibition will explore the multitude of different links between wilderness and art from 1900 to the present.

Brief biography of Richard Oelze

Born in Magdeburg in 1900, Richard Oelze studied at the Bauhaus in Weimar from 1921 to 1925. From 1926 to 1929 he lived in Dresden; in 1933 he went to Paris. After his three-year stay in the French capital, he continued to pursue his artistic concerns, painting works that exhibit an affinity to Surrealist imagery. He was called up for war service in 1940, and following his return five years later, he began painting again, if initially with some hesitation. The decade following his first solo exhibition, which took place at the *moderne galerie* in Cologne in 1950, would prove be one of his most productive periods. He figured prominently at the *Documenta II* (1959). In 1969 he was one of three artists representing Germany at the Venice Biennale. Among his numerous distinctions is the Max Beckmann Prize of the city of Frankfurt am Main, which he received in 1978, two years before his death.

The outstanding significance of the painting *Archaic Fragment* is reflected in its exhibition history. The large canvas (98 x 130 cm) was featured alongside works by Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, Man Ray and others in numerous major international Surrealist shows – for example the "International Surrealist Exhibition" at the New Burlington Galleries in London in 1936. It was thus precisely this painting, and the prominence it gained, that account for the status Oelze achieved over the course of the 1930s and '40s: as one of the most important exponents of Surrealism, championed by well-known art historians and art dealers alike. Max Ernst was one of Oelze's greatest admirers.

The work in facts and figures:

Richard Oelze (1900–1980)

Archaic Fragment, 1935

Oil on canvas, 98 x 130 cm

Joint property of the Städtischer Museums-Verein e. V. and the Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main

Acquired with support from the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States and a contribution from the Kurt and Marga Möllgaard Foundation

© Estate of Richard Oelze

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Location: Städel Museum, Schaumainkai 63, 60596 Frankfurt am Main

Opening hours: Tue, Wed, Sat, Sun 10 am – 6 pm, Thu + Fri 10 am – 9 pm, closed Mondays

Admission: 14 EUR, reduced 12 EUR, families 24 EUR. Groups of at least 10 persons who would normally be charged the full admission fee: reduced admission fee per person. Groups are required to book in advance: please call +49(0)69-605098-200 or contact info@staedelmuseum.de