

WALL TEXTS

STÄDEL'S LEGACY MASTER DRAWINGS FROM THE FOUNDER'S COLLECTION

13. MAY TO 16. AUGUST 2020

Städel Museum, Exhibition Hall of the Department of Prints and Drawings

THE DRAWING COLLECTION OF JOHANN FRIEDRICH STÄDEL

... and then to Mr Stedel who showed us drawings. Priceless things. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was deeply impressed by the drawing collection of businessman and banker Johann Friedrich Städel (1728–1816), and he expressed his enthusiasm in writing. In the eighteenth century, drawings done by hand – that is, in chalk, charcoal, metalpoint, graphite, or ink applied with a pen or brush on paper – were considered unique testimonies to artistic creativity. Städel left a large art collection to his foundation, the present-day Städel Museum, encompassing not only paintings and prints but also more than 4,600 drawings.

For a long time, it was impossible to determine which of the drawings in the museum's current holdings originally belonged to Städel's collection. There is no complete listing of his estate; what is more, in the mid-nineteenth century many of the works were sold. Städel's drawing collection has now been reconstructed within the framework of a research project: some 3,000 works have remained in the museum. Presenting a selection of those works, the exhibition conveys a representative impression of the character, underlying concept and artistic importance of the onetime drawing collection. What is more, it makes the outstanding significance of this founding collection for the Städel'sches Kunstinstitut vividly manifest for the first time.

After the example of French collections of the eighteenth century, Städel organized his drawing collection according to the regional art schools of Europe. The exhibition likewise adheres to that system: at the centre are the Italian drawings, and works by German and French masters are found in the smaller rooms on either side. Flemish and Dutch drawings, which constitute the largest group within the collection, are on display at the far end of the exhibition space. The chronological spectrum ranges from the Renaissance around 1500 to Städel's own lifetime, with the most recent works dating from ca. 1800. Especially worthy of note are the collection's stylistic variety, but also the diversity of drawing techniques and of the works'

functions and purposes. The drawings' provenance – that is, a record of ownership – is given to the extent known. Like the surviving historical passe-partouts, the provenance often points to famous previous owners as well as the internationality of drawing collecting in eighteenth-century Europe.

BIOGRAPHY

Johann Friedrich Städel was born in 1728 in Frankfurt am Main – where his grandfather had moved from Strasbourg – and died here in December 1816 at an advanced age. Initially active in the spice trade and later as a banker, he was one of the city's wealthiest citizens as well as one of its most prominent art collectors. In his will, he made precise arrangements for his foundation, the Städelches Kunstinstitut (the name he himself stipulated), now called the Städel Museum. He envisaged this art institute as a place of learning that would serve the benefit of the town and its citizens. It was to be accessible to all, and the affiliated art school was to train young people in art and the crafts regardless of confession or social status. And finally, it was also to fulfil a representative function. In terms of both society and the economy, the art institute was to serve the further development of the Free Imperial City of Frankfurt.

Städel bequeathed his extensive collection of paintings, prints and drawings to the foundation. It is not known when he began collecting. According to Städel himself, he had nourished a love for art from youth. He will have acquired his first paintings before 1763, the year he is first documented as a bidder at an art auction. Drawings, on the other hand, may not have sparked his interest until later, around 1780/1790. During his lifetime, Städel kept his art collection in his house on Rossmarkt square in Frankfurt (see fig.). The paintings were on view in the business quarters at ground level and above all in the prestige rooms on the first floor. The drawings and prints were stored in cabinets to protect them from light, but made accessible to interested visitors – amongst them Johann Wolfgang von Goethe – without further ado. Städel evidently met regularly with other collectors and art dealers of an evening to discuss art and artworks. Few details are known about how Städel made his acquisitions; in any case, he obtained drawings on the art markets of Paris, London, Amsterdam and Basel as well as the nearby city of Mannheim. He moreover cultivated close contacts to art dealers in Frankfurt, who presumably also served as agents for purchases from further afield.