

PRESS INFORMATION

EN PASSANT IMPRESSIONISM IN SCULPTURE

UNTIL 25 OCTOBER 2020

Städel Museum, Exhibition Annex

Frankfurt am Main, 4 May 2020. Even today, a century and a half after its emergence, impressionism still fascinates people worldwide. Especially the paintings, with their loose, sketchy brushwork, bright palette and depictions of everyday scenes, are familiar to us all. The diversity of impressionism in sculpture, on the other hand, is a subject that has received far less scholarly attention to date and is unknown to the broad public. The Städel Museum will present the first major exhibition ever to explore the question of how the attributes of impressionist painting – such as light, colour, movement and even ephemerality – found expression in sculpture. The show will revolve primarily around five artists – Edgar Degas (1834–1917), Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), Medardo Rosso (1858–1928), Paolo Troubetzkoy (1866–1938) and Rembrandt Bugatti (1884–1916) – whose oeuvres represent the various manifestations of impressionist sculpture.

“EN PASSANT: Impressionism in Sculpture” is being sponsored by the DZ BANK AG, the Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne and the Kulturfonds Frankfurt RheinMain gGmbH. The city of Frankfurt am Main and the Städel Freunde 1815 are providing additional support.

The show will unite outstanding sculptures by the five artists and juxtapose them with impressionist paintings, pastels, drawings, prints and photographs by Pierre Bonnard, Antoine Bourdelle, Mary Cassatt, Camille Claudel, Henri Matisse, Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, Giovanni Segantini, John Singer Sargent and others. Encompassing altogether 160 works, it will provide a comprehensive overview of the possibilities and challenges of impressionism in sculpture.

In addition to prominent international loans from institutions such as the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, the Tate Modern in London, the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in

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New York and the Musée d'Orsay in Paris as well as numerous private collections, the exhibition will also feature works from the Städel Museum's own rich impressionist art holdings.

“Remarkable though it may seem, there really are ‘blind spots’ in the extensive international research on impressionist art. Taking works from the Städel's own superb collection of impressionist art as its point of departure, enhanced by outstanding loans from European and international museums, the exhibition will show how the artists sought to adapt sculpture to the circumstances of their time concurrently with the endeavours undertaken in impressionist painting. The presentation will stage a striking dialogue between sculptures and paintings, works on paper and, not least of all, photographs – many of which came about at the behest of the artists themselves”, comments Städel director Philipp Demandt.

“Then and now, impressionism was and is perceived primarily as a two-dimensional art. The exhibition discusses the existence of impressionist sculpture and spotlights five artists – Degas, Rodin, Rosso, Troubetzkoy and Bugatti – who explored new avenues and were referred to by their contemporaries as impressionist sculptors. Yet their approaches were so different that it is impossible to speak of just one form of ‘impressionist sculpture’. What we have instead are suspenseful manifestations of ‘sculpture in impressionism’ that broaden our view of a stylistic current hitherto dominated by painting, printmaking and drawing”, the exhibition curators, Eva Mongi-Vollmer and Alexander Eiling, explain.

The discussion of impressionism in sculpture began with the presentation of Edgar Degas's *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* (1878/81) at the sixth Impressionist exhibition in 1881. There is thus no question as to the existence of impressionist sculpture. Even if it was defined quite cautiously and discussed for the most part only by art critics, it was a firmly established term until after the turn of the century.

Degas, Rodin, Rosso, Troubetzkoy and Bugatti were all referred to as “impressionist sculptors” during their lifetimes. The reasons are multifarious. On the one hand, in their artistic work they devoted themselves increasingly to contemporary – and often commonplace – themes. On the other hand, they chose materials other than the academic-classical marble, using wax, for example, not only for three-dimensional studies but also for finished sculptures. Rather than smooth, ‘closed’ surfaces, they developed lively structures that refracted the light. What is more, by leaving behind visible traces of the working process, they endowed their sculptures with an aesthetic similar to that of impressionist paintings.

In conjunction with sculpture, however, the term “impressionism” did not prevail in art historiography after World War I as it did in connection with painting. The term “impressionist sculpture” is hardly used by art-historical scholarship today. And the fact that it defies concise definition presents a further obstacle to critical appraisal of the subject. There is no nutshell for “impressionist sculpture”, any more than there is for “impressionism”. In the show, the Städel Museum joins this discourse by introducing multifaceted examples of impressionism *in* sculpture.

A TOUR OF THE EXHIBITION

Beginning on the upper level of the Peichl annex, the exhibition presents the various approaches to impressionism in sculpture primarily in monographically oriented rooms devoted to the individual artists. The many juxtapositions between sculptures, paintings, drawings, prints and photographs serve to shed light on the interplay between the different mediums.

The show gets off to a start with three of the altogether seventeen sculptures presented in Paris between 1874 and 1886 in the framework of the eight Impressionist exhibitions. These sculptures – two by the Neoclassicist sculptor Auguste-Louis-Marie Ottin (1811–1890) and one by Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) – are on view in conjunction with paintings and prints by, among others, Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), Claude Monet (1840–1926) and Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919). The three-dimensional works come as a surprise in this context because they exhibit none of the attributes we associate with impressionism today. Nevertheless, they were included in the eponymous Impressionist exhibitions.

The Städel then goes on to present one of the principal works of impressionism in sculpture: **Edgar Degas’s** *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* (1878/81, private collection, Europe). It was in response to this work, when it was on display at the sixth Impressionist exhibition in 1881, that the critic Jules Claretie first introduced the term “impressionist sculptor”. By depicting a young ballet pupil, Degas had chosen a topic related to the dark side of the Parisian entertainment business: back then, the public associated the portrayal of a young ballerina with the subject of prostitution. The artist underscored the novelty of the motif by employing everyday materials unusual in art at the time. He made the figure primarily of wax which, regarded as modern and unconventional, would soon come into use as an alternative to marble and bronze. The work is thus a prototypical example of a sculptural approach that sought to react to the circumstances of a fundamentally changing society with new kinds of materials. Whereas the *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* is the only sculpture Degas exhibited in

public during his lifetime, the Städel exhibition holds a wide range of small-scale three-dimensional works by the artist in store for the visitors. After his death in 1917, his heirs translated the numerous wax figures found in his studio into a durable material by having them cast in bronze in limited editions. These sculptures bear a direct connection to the motifs Degas favoured throughout his career – dancers, bathers and boudoir scenes, horses and jockeys. For the artist, they were part of a cross-media working process. He tried out various expressions and movements in two- and three-dimensional studies alike, and profited from the interplay between them.

The focus then turns to the sculptures of **Rembrandt Bugatti**. He usually made them *sur nature* – that is, directly vis-à-vis his models in the zoological gardens of Paris and Antwerp. His depictions depart from a tradition of animal sculpture in which the subjects were understood primarily as mirrors of human characteristics. Instead he created veritable portraits of panthers, lions, flamingos, etc. He omitted detail in favour of conveying striking poses and movements. In some cases, for example his *Lioness Eating* (1903, The Sladmor Gallery, London), the motif is hardly recognizable. The artist considered rapid modelling directly from nature decisive for the success of a work. For his markedly free modelling technique, he used (among other materials) Plastiline, a compound that, still a new invention in his day, was extremely malleable and remained so for a long time. Due to the openness of his forms and the visible traces of the working process, the surfaces of his works resemble those of impressionist paintings.

Bugatti's early depictions of cows and goats are on view with paintings by his uncle Giovanni Segantini (1858–1899). This arrangement sheds light not only on the two artists' motivic affinities, but also on their shared interest in interweaving figure and space by means of an overarching structure and harmony.

The exhibition continues on the ground floor of the Peichl annex with works by **Medardo Rosso**. As far back as 1886, the French press referred to this artist as *the* founder of impressionist sculpture. His figurative pieces are attempts to capture ephemerality, the fleeting moment, and integrate the surrounding space in the process. The *Portinaia* (1883/84, cast 1887; Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest) is a vivid example of how Rosso realized this endeavour; scholars consider it a key work. It depicts the concierge of the house the artist lived in – a woman he saw every day in passing. He translated the brief instant of perception into blurred contours. The ensuing lack of focus makes the portrait subject recognizable only from a certain vantage point and leads to an unusual slurring of the boundaries between figure and space. With this complex approach and his concern with subjective perception, Rosso

associated himself with the development of impressionism in painting. He liked to present his sculptures in conjunction with paintings and photographs. In the exhibition they are on display with works by Eugène Carrière (1849–1906) and Tranquillo Cremona (1837–1878).

The vibrating bronzes by **Paolo Troubetzkoy** exemplify yet another facet of impressionism in sculpture. Particular highlights of his approach are the portrait sculptures in which the Russian-Italian artist focused primarily on the dynamic representation of clothing and hair. His *After the Ball (Adelaide Aurnheimer)* (1897, private collection, London) is a case in point. Whereas Troubetzkoy endowed the face of this wealthy patron of the arts with a smooth surface, he portrayed the fabric of her gown as an exuberant cascade of folds with numerous peaks and ridges in which his fingerprints are still discernible. He moreover deliberately integrated the casting seams and remnants of the casting channels into his works' compositions. These direct interventions in the material are still clearly recognizable even in the subsequent bronze cast, and the sculpture accordingly echoes the loose brushwork of impressionist portrait paintings such as John Singer Sargent's likeness of *Lady Agnew of Lochnaw* (1893, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh).

The show concludes with key workgroups by **Auguste Rodin** that account for his classification as an impressionist. Their arrangement in the room is modelled after the solo exhibition organized by the artist himself at the Pavilion de l'Alma in 1900. Even if Rodin never spoke of himself as an "impressionist sculptor", art critics referred to him and Rosso as the two most prominent exponents of that current. It was his sculpture *Balzac* (downscaled version, ca. 1892/93, private collection London) that gave rise to this assessment. Contrary to the academic specifications for such monuments, Rodin did not elevate his subject, but instead strove to depict the essence of the writer's personality and character in unprettified manner. His terracotta *Head of John the Baptist* (1878, Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe) testifies to his interest in surfaces and the visibility of the working process. A series of bronze busts, for their part, bear witness to the fact that he took the iridescent light into account in his surface compositions. And in a historical reconstruction of his presentation of his sculpture *Eve* (1881, cast probably between 1928 and 1942, Städel Museum), our exhibition shows what great importance Rodin attached to the staging of his works. At the Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts of 1899, he sensationally buried the base of the life-size bronze cast in sand. As a result, Eve appeared to be standing barefoot in the sand at eye level with the viewer. The artist thus deliberately aimed for the direct encounter with the sculpture.

EN PASSANT: IMPRESSIONISM IN SCULPTURE

Curators: Dr Alexander Eiling (Head of the Department of Modern Art, Städel Museum), Dr Eva Mongi-Vollmer (Curator for Special Projects, Städel Museum) with the assistance of Dr Juliane Betz and Fabienne Ruppen

Exhibition dates: 19 March to 25 October 2020

Information: www.staedelmuseum.de

Visitor services and guided tours: +49(0)69-605098-200, info@staedelmuseum.de

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

Opening hours: Tue, Wed, Sat, Sun & holidays 10.00 am – 6.00 pm, Thu & Fri 10.00 am – 9.00 pm

Holiday opening hours (10.00 am – 6.00 pm): 10 & 13 Apr, 1, 21 & 31 May, 1, 2 & 11 Jun 2020

Admission: 16 EUR, reduced 14 EUR; families 24 EUR; admission free for children under 12; groups of at least 10 persons who would normally be charged the full admission fee pay the reduced admission fee per person. Groups are required to book in advance: please call +49(0)69-605098-200 or contact info@staedelmuseum.de

Advance ticket sales online at: shop.staedelmuseum.de

General guided tours of the exhibition: Tuesdays 12.00 noon, Saturdays 4.00 pm, Sundays 11.00 am

Catalogue: A comprehensive catalogue edited by Alexander Eiling and Eva Mongi-Vollmer with the assistance of Juliane Betz and Fabienne Ruppen and published by the Prestel Verlag will accompany the exhibition. With a foreword by Philipp Demandt and contributions by Juliane Betz, Stefano Bosi, Dominik Brabant, Philipp Demandt, Yvette Deseyve, Alexander Eiling, Eva Mongi-Vollmer, Astrid Reuter, Dietmar Rübel, Fabienne Ruppen and Nina Schallenberg. German edition, 328 pages, 39.90 EUR (museum edition), English edition, 328 pages, 49 EUR (bookshop price).

Audio tour: a tour of the exhibition in German and English. The German version is narrated by the actress Bibiana Beglau. The tour is available free of charge as an app for iOS and Android and can be conveniently downloaded onto your smartphone wherever you have Internet – for example at the museum on Städel WiFi. On site at the museum, the audio guide is available for rental for 4.50 EUR (8 EUR for two audio guides).

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Städel Blog (in German): Even more stories and background information about the exhibition at blog.staedelmuseum.de / Don't miss an article: blog.staedelmuseum.de/blog-abonnieren