

PRESS RELEASE

VICTOR MAN THE LINES OF LIFE

14 OCTOBER 2023 – 4 FEBRUARY 2024

Old Masters Collection

Press Preview: Friday, 13 October 2023, 9.30 am

Frankfurt am Main, 30 August 2023. The Romanian artist Victor Man (*1974) has for years been considered one of the most sought-after and at the same time rarest protagonists of contemporary art. His intimate paintings, which seem to have fallen out of time, elude immediate interpretation. In the midst of the Old Masters Collection, the Städel Museum presents an exhibition from 14 October 2023 to 4 February 2024, featuring twenty works by the painter from the last ten years, dedicated to his artistic focus: portraits. In deep dark green, blue, and black, Man creates portraits as sensitive as they are enigmatic, dominated by an existentialist, sombre, and introspective tone. Subtle influences of the pre-Renaissance, dense with metaphors, emerge in his melancholic imagery. Stylistically complex and difficult to categorize, his inimitable oeuvre reveals numerous art historical references while at the same time representing a unique position in contemporary painting. At the Städel Museum, a fascinating dialogue between history and the present emerges.

The title of the exhibition, *The Lines of Life*, is a quote from Friedrich Hölderlin's poem *To Zimmer* (1812) and refers to Victor Man's close connection to poetry and literature. These references, as well as connections to his own life reality, are repeatedly found in his painting – for example, the individuals depicted in the portraits in the main part of the exhibition come from his family environment and circle of friends. Immersed in predominantly dark scenarios and with a contemplative gaze, the sitters are enveloped in existential heaviness. The paintings bear witness to an intense exploration of human existence and speak of the poetic as well as tragic ambivalence of life. In the second part of the exhibition, the genre of portraiture is continued and at the same time deconstructed with the series *The Chandler* (since 2013). Victor Man presents the same motif in various paintings, always in a slightly different form – a seated figure with a head on its lap – and invites us to explore our own perception. The Städel Museum brings together all the works from this series, which has rarely been seen in its entirety – including the latest work, which has never been shown before.

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“As a museum of pictures, the Städel is the perfect place for the first institutional solo exhibition of Victor Man’s works in Germany in almost a decade. Man’s oeuvre is committed to painting. Surrounded by the collection, which spans 700 years, his paintings open a dialogue anchored in the richness of art history. The quiet and timeless portraits appear as an antithesis to our highly technological and complex living environment. Let us see them as an invitation to embark on a quest for the essence of our own existence”, says Philipp Demandt, Director of the Städel Museum.

Svenja Grosser, curator of the exhibition, further elaborates: “Victor Man’s work is timeless, and his paintings thus resist art-historical classification according to criteria such as style, date of execution, or even the period to which they belong. Multi-layered references from art history and literature also open up a wide range of possible interpretations. However, one thing is always at the center: Victor Man’s entire oeuvre revolves around painting itself and its inherent possibilities to put us as viewers to the test.”

The exhibition *Victor Man. The Lines of Life* is supported by Deutsche Bank and the Städtelscher Museums-Verein e.V.

Portraits

The main part of the exhibition comprises twelve paintings, mainly portraits. The exhibition opens with the double portrait *Self with Father* (2017), which hangs in the hall of Old German Masters. It interweaves past and present: the motif of the father refers both to the artist’s own biography and, surrounded by the works of the Städel Collection, to the lineage of art historical tradition. The shadowy half-profile in turn represents the artist himself.

As with almost all the people portrayed by Man, the father’s expression cannot be interpreted. The eyes are closed. An eerie emptiness lies in the eyes of the person depicted in *Untitled (From Wounds and Starry Dreams)* (2022). Gentle and thoughtful gazes, as in *Untitled* (2013), *Portrait of A. with My Left Ear* (2021), and *Girl with Laughing Cat* (2021), pass by or through the viewer. It is an introspective style of painting.

Moreover, Victor Man’s painting is linked to poetry and literature. Influential for the artist are poets who possess a sensitivity to the mysterious experience of life and human existence, such as Georg Trakl, Gottfried Benn, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Friedrich Hölderlin, as well as the Romanian philosopher and poet Lucian Blaga. The significance of literature in Man’s oeuvre becomes particularly evident in the title of

the work *Untitled (Connaissez-vous des Esseintes?)* (2015; Eng.: Do You Know Des Esseintes?). It refers to Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *Against the Grain* from 1884, which is considered an outstanding example of Aestheticism and Symbolism and tells of the escape of the young, extravagant Parisian aristocrat Jean Floressas des Esseintes from the banality of modern city life into a world of decadence and artificiality. The transition between reality and inner emotional world can also be discerned in *Girl in Love with a Wound* (2020–2021): in front of the portrayed person's face lies an abstract, organic form that seems to come from another world. In other works by Victor Man, Christian iconography and representations of martyrdom, icons, and spiritual objects transform into significant metaphors. The beginning and finitude of life are embodied, for example, in *Girl with Goya's Skull (Memorable Equinox)* (2021) by the depiction of the exposed female genitalia and by the Old Master vanitas motif of the skull. In the self-portrait *Self as the Man of Sorrows* (2021), the Christian representation of the "Man of Sorrows" mentioned in the title and an expressionist use of form and colour merge into a composition with references to his own earlier works as well as to art history in general.

The Chandler

Currently comprising eight works, *The Chandler* series began in 2013 and was extended by Victor Man with one painting each in 2014, 2018, and 2023. Painted in different sizes and techniques, all the works feature the same motif as if elevated to an icon, but in a slightly altered form: a seated figure, with its face cut off at the top edge of the canvas. On its lap rests a head that reveals nothing about its origin, gender, or history. Rotating around its own axis throughout the series, the head is visible from almost all sides in the works, giving the impression that it is always the same head.

With the theme of decapitation, the artist again interweaves various references from Christian iconography, literature, and art history and already hints at this in the title of the series: in the Middle Ages, the "chandler" was responsible for the maintenance of candles in wealthy homes, which included cutting the wicks. The severed head is reminiscent of significant myths and narratives depicted many times throughout art history, including St. Dionysius of Paris, who carries his head in his hands, Judith and Holofernes, and Medusa. In addition, Victor Man refers to Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando: A Biography* from 1928, whose protagonist plays with the severed heads of his forefathers' opponents at the beginning of the novel. The artist also places a pictorial quotation from the cover of the first edition of *Orlando* in one work of the series with the depiction of leaping deer on an emblem resembling a coat of arms. In another painting, titled *The Chandler with Gauguin's Evil Spirit* (2014), there is a

direct quotation from several of Paul Gauguin's works with the grimace of a horned head gazing out of a mirror placed behind the figure.

By making the slightest changes in the motif of the seated figure, it becomes clear how Victor Man challenges our perception. For example, in two paintings, the leg of the chair on which the figure sits is interrupted, and in the series' only watercolour, it is missing entirely. This discrepancy is only noticeable at second glance.

With the series *The Chandler*, Victor Man questions the genre of portraiture by cropping the image of the human face through the edge of the canvas. An encounter with the portrayed person becomes impossible. As in an abstract painting, Man thus places the focus primarily on the form and the painting itself rather than on the complete reflection of the person depicted. The painted portrait does not correspond to a real counterpart, becomes autonomous, and can be regarded as an independent picture.

Victor Man (*1974) lives and works in Rome and his native city of Cluj (Romania). He represented Romania at the 52nd Venice Biennial in 2007. In 2014, he received the "Artist of the Year" award from Deutsche Bank. His works have been shown in institutional solo exhibitions at the KunstHalle in Berlin, the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, Haus der Kunst in Munich, and most recently at the Museo Tamayo, Mexico City. His works are part of numerous international collections, including those of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, the Contemporary Art Collection of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Tate Modern in London, and the Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main. Furthermore, his works can be found in important international private collections.

VICTOR MAN. THE LINES OF LIFE

Exhibition dates: 14 October 2023 to 4 February 2024

Curator: Svenja Grosser (Deputy Head of the Collection of Contemporary Art, Städel Museum)

Project Coordinator: Maja Lisewski (assistant curator, Collection of Contemporary Art, Städel Museum)

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Tickets and admission: Tickets can be purchased online in advance at shop.staedelmuseum.de/en.

Tue – Sun: €16, reduced €14, free admission for children under 12; groups of 10 or more (non-concession adults): €14 per person. Ticket prices as of 2 November 2023: Tue – Sun: €18, reduced €16, groups of 10 or more (non-concession adults): €16 per person. All groups are required to book their visit in advance by contacting us at +49 (0)69-605098-200 or info@staedelmuseum.de.



Catalogue: The exhibition is accompanied by a bilingual (German/English) catalogue edited by Svenja Grosser, with a foreword by Philipp Demandt and essays by Svenja Grosser and Maja Lisewski, 104 pages, €32. The catalogue is supported by Antje and Stefan Judisch.

The exhibition is supported by: Deutsche Bank, Städtischer Museums-Verein e.V.

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