

PRESS RELEASE

OUTSTANDING! THE RELIEF FROM RODIN TO PICASSO

24 MAY TO 17 SEPTEMBER 2023

Exhibition annex

Frankfurt am Main, 23 May 2023. Rodin, Matisse, Gauguin, Picasso, Jean Arp, Yves Klein... They all created outstanding art in the truest sense of the word—reliefs. This summer, the Städel Museum is presenting a major exhibition on the relief from 1800 to the 1960s. Is it painting or sculpture, surface or space? Hardly any artistic medium challenges our sense of sight like the relief. And that is what has always made it so appealing for the most famous artists. From 24 May to 17 September 2023, the exhibition will present prominent works spanning some 160 years by Bertel Thorvaldsen, Jules Dalou, Auguste Rodin, Medardo Rosso, Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Alexander Archipenko, Jean Arp, Kurt Schwitters, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Yves Klein, Louise Nevelson, Lee Bontecou and others. For the exhibition, the Städel Museum collaborated with the Hamburger Kunsthalle to bring together works from their own collections and leading European museums, among them the Musée d'Orsay, the Musée Picasso and the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, the Kunstmuseum Basel and the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon. The show will also feature rarely exhibited works from private collections.

“Outstanding! The Relief from Rodin to Picasso” is being carried out with support from the Gemeinnützige Kulturfonds Frankfurt RheinMain GmbH and the Städtischer Museumsverein e. V. with the Städtelfreunde 1815. Additional support for the exhibition comes from the Georg und Franziska Speyer'sche Hochschulstiftung.

Philipp Demandt, director of the Städel Museum, on the exhibition: “This summer, our visitors will have the opportunity to encounter an exciting artistic medium—the relief: an art form between painting and sculpture that literally breaks through the confines of the frame and bursts the boundaries of our sense of sight! We are devoting a major exhibition to this sometimes underacknowledged medium. The show will be a unique chance to experience some 140 prominent works by nearly 100 groundbreaking artists of the nineteenth century, Classical Modernism and

**Städtisches Kunstinstitut
und Städtische Galerie**

Dürerstraße 2
60596 Frankfurt am Main
Phone +49(0)69-605098-170
Fax +49(0)69-605098-188
presse@staedelmuseum.de
www.staedelmuseum.de/en

PRESS DOWNLOADS
newsroom.staedelmuseum.de/en

PRESS AND
ONLINE KOMMUNIKATION
Pamela Rohde
Phone +49(0)69-605098-170
rohde@staedelmuseum.de

Susanne Hafner
Phone +49(0)69-605098-212
hafner@staedelmuseum.de

Elisabeth Pallentin
Phone +49(0)69-605098-195
pallentin@staedelmuseum.de

Carolin Fuhr
Phone +49(0)69-605098-234
fuhr@staedelmuseum.de

international post-war art right here in Frankfurt and to appreciate the relief for what it is: an expression of great art.”

“The relief is one of humankind’s oldest pictorial mediums. As a hybrid it not only occupies a place between painting and sculpture, but also—in the viewer’s perception—a sensory realm between sight and touch. Our exhibition is devoted to the special possibilities and opportunities offered by the relief in art from Neoclassicism to the 1960s. The period around 1800, with its reorientation towards classical antiquity, represents a distinct break in the meaning and aesthetic of the relief. In the 1960s, on the other hand, the “departure from painting” and the associated transfer of sculptural into spatial concepts mark yet another pivotal point. Rather than providing a comprehensive history of this art form, our exhibition will shed light on the meanwhile somewhat obscure discourse revolving around the art of the relief,” the exhibition curators Alexander Eiling and Eva Mongi-Vollmer add.

From antiquity, we are familiar with the relief primarily as architectural decoration. In the Renaissance it played an important role in the competition between painters and sculptors over which medium best imitates reality. When the relief began to figure increasingly in art-theory debates around 1800, it was referred to as an intermediate medium among the arts. In the zone between the second and third dimension, however, it remained a primarily sculptural endeavour. As time went on, a new artistic interest in overcoming the traditional boundaries between the mediums took hold. Painters made sculptures; sculptors preoccupied themselves with painting. In that context, the relief became a laboratory for experimentation with new forms, materials and techniques. Reliefs were no longer made primarily of the classical materials—that is, stone, clay, plaster or bronze. Artists began using everyday and found objects to open surfaces out into the third dimension. Whether glued or nailed, made with natural sponges or a soup ladle, the relief took on entirely new manifestations. Its significance for society grew with the cataclysmic changes of the early twentieth century: the relief became a place of utopias and a mirror of the departure for a new world.

A TOUR OF THE EXHIBITION

A tour of the exhibition reveals the tremendous scope of the relief between 1800 and the 1960s. Transcending the boundaries between the epochs, the show’s thirteen sections are dedicated to the unique possibilities and limitations of relief art above and beyond historical development lines and conventional stylistic categories.

Reliefs are encountered in very different spatial and thematic contexts, for example in and on public buildings, on memorials and funerary monuments. They often recall

historical events or serve as universal symbols. They can appear as individual works or as series with multiple segments unfolding a pictorial narrative. The exhibition begins with such striking juxtapositions as that between the shallow *Epitaph for Johann Philipp Bethmann-Hollweg* by **Bertel Thorvaldsen** (1830, Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung) and the *Memorial to the Racing-Car Driver Émile Levassor* executed in high relief by **Jules Dalou** (1898–1902, Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris).

Along with outstanding works by **Honoré Daumier**, **Edgar Degas**, **Constantin Meunier** and **Medardo Rosso**, **Henri Matisse's** lifesize bronze *Back I (Nu de dos I)* (1909, Hamburger Kunsthalle) and **Auguste Rodin's** *Young Mother in the Grotto (Jeune mère à la grotte)* (1885, Musée Rodin, Paris) bespeak the lively discussion characterizing late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French relief art. How can the means of painting be applied to sculpture—and vice versa? These works form an antithesis to the Neoclassicist concept of the relief, which distinguishes clearly between figure and ground. Instead, said artists looked to the loose brushwork of Impressionist painting for orientation and thus developed a modern interpretation of the relief.

One of the key works on display is the relief *Be Mysterious (Soyez mystérieuses)* by **Paul Gauguin** (1890, Musée d'Orsay, Paris). In the context of the show, it serves to introduce the theme of colour in relief art. Artists had various means at their disposal to create polychrome reliefs—from the classical application of paint to the use of different-coloured materials to the targeted colouring of the material. This section features, among others, vividly colourful works by painters such as **Arnold Böcklin**, **Maurice Denis** and **Ernst Ludwig Kirchner** as well as examples by sculptors, for instance **Adolf von Hildebrand**, **Artur Volkmann** and **Albert Marque**, who, unlike their painter colleagues, availed themselves of a reductive colour spectrum or the natural hue of the chosen material.

The famous reliefs of the Parthenon temple on the Athenian Acropolis (5th c. BC) served numerous nineteenth-century artists, among them **Johann Gottfried Schadow** and **Edgar Degas**, as models for the formal composition of their own works. The exhibition presents examples that strikingly reflect this fascination with the historical reliefs and how artists continued exploring them until well into the twentieth century, as seen, for instance, in the work of **Bernhard Hoetger**. Their approaches to their classical model differed vastly—from faithful copying to slight variation to free quotation.

With its elevations and depressions, the relief is reminiscent of the earth's surface with its highlands and lowlands. Artists such as **Yves Klein** with his *Relief éponge*

bleu (Kleine Nachtmusik) (1960, Städel Museum), **Max Ernst**, **Paul Klee** and **William Turnbull** approached the theme of landscape by rigorously structuring the surfaces, employing natural materials such as sand and sponges or incorporating steep perspectives. In their hands, the relief became a medium for the artistic recreation of natural spaces that invite us to immerse ourselves in worlds as different as the forest and the ocean floor.

At the transition from the second dimension to the third, relief depictions sometimes put our powers of perception to the test. As far back as the Early Modern age, painters and sculptors engaged in the competition between the arts, the so-called *paragone*, vying to achieve the better imitation of nature and representation of corporality. **Philipp Otto Runge's** painting *Triumph of Love* (1802, Hamburger Kunsthalle) used the means of painting to create a seemingly haptic relief. Deceptively real-looking still lifes (*trompe-l'œil*s) likewise lend themselves to the illusionistic depiction of all kinds of materials. Artists such as **Daniel Spoerri** and **Gerhard Richter** took the reception of these traditions to a head: the former in *Restaurant Spoerri* (1968, Kunsthalle Mannheim) and the latter in *Large Curtain* (1967, Städel Museum)—already in antiquity, the curtain motif was the quintessence of consummate deception.

Another section of the exhibition is devoted to portrait art in the relief medium. From the medal to the “material picture”, the relief offers a variety of artistic possibilities for capturing the uniqueness of faces. Since antiquity, particularly the profile view has been the established form for portraits in relief. Departing from that convention, artists such as **Käthe Kollwitz** and **Pablo Picasso** adopted the hollow form of the mask, which demands to be viewed from the front, and tested it as a medium for representing emotion. **Alberto Giacometti** and **Constantin Brancusi**, for their part, employed incisions and hatching to sketch the faces of their sculptures, while **Eugène Leroy**, for instance, used a thick colour paste to form his self-portrait on the surface of the canvas.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, artists increasingly incorporated space into the composition of their works. In their works, the relief extends beyond the support surface in all directions. Cut-out sections and voids grant a view of what is behind, thus enhancing the two-dimensional work through the introduction of an additional plane at the back. Elsewhere, constructions protrude so far from the surface that they embrace the space in front of them and enclose it within themselves, as strikingly exemplified by **Antoine Pevsner's** *Dynamic Construction (Construction dynamique)* (1947, Centre Pompidou, Paris) and the works by **Lee Bontecou**.

Evenly structured surfaces, serially arranged everyday objects, colouration reduced to the point of monochromy—these are the attributes characterizing many of the works by **Piero Manzoni**, **Adolf Luther**, **Peter Roehr** and **Jan Schoonhoven**. In our mind's eye, the structures of these works can continue seamlessly beyond the edges of the depiction and thus connect the relief with the wall. We often discover the finely tuned interaction between nuanced spatial qualities and the subtle play of light only on closer inspection. Artists of the 1950s and '60s, in particular, explored the impact of reductive colouration and material on the viewers' perception, frequently in the form of repeating patterns and shapes. With *The Eggboard (La planche à œufs)* (1922, private collection), **Jean Arp** had already conceptualized the idea of an “all-over”—that is, a structure lacking a main motif and spreading across the entire surface—back in the 1920s.

In the early twentieth century, artists all over Europe sought to participate in the shaping of a new society—or to critically question the existing one—by way of their art. Across national boundaries, they turned to the relief, which played as important a role in the works of the Russian Constructivists **Vladimir Tatlin** and **Ivan Puni** as in those coming out of the Dada movement around **Jean Arp**, **Christian Schad** and **Kurt Schwitters**. A geometric formal language prevailed in their works. Many artists also made use of found materials, combining them in object assemblages. Relief art and painting engaged in productive interchange. Reliefs had painted surfaces; paintings incorporated relief-like structures or glued-on objects.

Thanks to the role it played in the context of architecture, the relief experienced a substantial boom in post-war modernism. The exhibition features, among other works, designs for wall reliefs by **Barbara Hepworth**, **Henry Moore** and **Ben Nicholson**. The three English artists left a perceivable mark on the German Federal Republican art scene through their participation in the first Documenta exhibitions.

As seen in **Aristide Maillol's** *Desire* (1907, Collection Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam) as well as works by **Jenny Wiegmann-Mucchi**, **Erich Buchholz** and others, the frame itself can be an integral part of the relief. As both artistic setting and protection, the frame emphasizes the artwork's autonomy by enclosing it vis-à-vis its interior and setting its boundaries to the world outside. And when artists make the motifs and the edges of their reliefs from the same material, the frame is part of the concept and the execution from the very start, and thus a fundamental element of the work.

The tour concludes with the polyviewability of reliefs by showing fully sculptural works that approach reliefs in their form. The early twentieth century saw the production of

freestanding figures that link attributes of three-dimensional sculpture with the surface-emphasizing perspective actually reserved for the relief, as illustrated by **Alexander Archipenko's** *Bather (Baigneuse)* (1915, Städel Museum). The most important catalyst for this development was Cubism, as is strikingly conveyed by such outstanding **Pablo Picasso** works as *Violin (Violon)* (1915, Musée national Picasso, Paris). Cubism breaks up form and pictorial space and depicts objects or figures from various perspectives at once. The viewer is called upon to adopt changing vantage points and then unite the multifarious sensory perceptions in a single overall impression.

An exhibition of the Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main and the Hamburger Kunsthalle.

OUTSTANDING! THE RELIEF FROM RODIN TO PICASSO

Curators: Dr. Alexander Eiling (Head of Modern Art, Städel Museum), Dr. Eva Mongi-Vollmer (Curator for Special Projects, Städel Museum)

Project director: Dr. Friederike Schütt

Exhibition dates: 24 May to 17 September 2023

Information: [staedelmuseum.de/en](https://www.staedelmuseum.de/en)

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

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

Tickets: Tickets for the exhibition are available online at shop.staedelmuseum.de/en. Tue–Fri 16 EUR, reduced 14 EUR; Sat, Sun and holidays 18 EUR, reduced 16 EUR. Admission free for children under 12. Groups of at least 10 persons who would normally be charged the full admission fee: 14 EUR per person, weekends 16 EUR. Groups are required to book in advance by contacting +49(0)69-605098-200 or info@staedelmuseum.de

Audio guide app: Discover the exhibition and experience outstanding works of relief art with the audio guide app. The approximately 60-minute guide contains audio tracks and images on approximately 30 artworks. Starting on opening day, it will be available free of charge for the iOS and Android operating systems at the App and Google Play Stores and conveniently downloadable onto smartphones, for example at home or within Städel WiFi range. The audio-guide is also available in the museum via hireable handhelds, at a fee of 5 EUR (or 8 EUR for two).

Catalogue: A catalogue published by the Prestel Verlag will accompany the exhibition. With contributions by Juliane Au, Alexander Eiling, Svenja Grosser, Eva Mongi-Vollmer, Karin Schick and Friederike Schütt, edited by Alexander Eiling, Eva Mongi-Vollmer and Karin Schick. In German and English. 264 pages, € 39.90 (museum edition).

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