

Zurich, 14 July 2020

Press Release

Franz Gertsch. Looking Back. A Ninetieth Birthday Tribute 1 September – 15 November 2020

Due to the coronavirus, the exhibition in honour of Franz Gertsch was not shown as planned in spring 2020. The Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich is therefore all the more pleased to present it from 1 September.

Anyone who thinks of Franz Gertsch is likely to think first and foremost of his large-format paintings and woodcuts. He has worked with huge formats since the 1960s. They made him internationally famous. Less well known, however, are the works that came before. To mark the ninetieth birthday of this leading Swiss artist, the Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich has chosen to focus entirely on his early works. The selection ranges from filigree drawings to sketches to artist's books and also includes atmospheric colour experiments undertaken in the printing process related to his later large-scale woodcuts.

Franz Gertsch (*1930) is one of Switzerland's most prominent artists, represented on the international stage. He looks back on a long career. This year, he celebrates his ninetieth birthday. To mark the occasion, the Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich is devoting an exhibition and catalogue to him, primarily showing his early work. ETH's collection of prints and drawings has long been associated with the artist and holds many prints emanating from his mature period. However, for this exhibition, the Graphische Sammlung decided to go beyond its own holdings of his works in order to shed a brighter light on his early drawings and woodcuts, most of which are held by the artist himself. In close collaboration with Franz Gertsch, the curators collated a concise group of works created between the 1940s and the 1960s, complemented by some pieces from the Graphische Sammlung.

In contrast to the predominant postwar trend, Franz Gertsch never aimed to create entirely non-figurative images. He neither created concrete art nor was he a follower of Abstract Expressionism or colour field painting. Nevertheless, his own path was not easy. Gertsch was a seeker who turned to numerous artistic styles, scanning them for their power, so to speak. For a long time, he had little confidence in his early work. From 1969 onwards, he no longer exhibited his works of this period, because it was not until the 1960s that he saw his own work as mature and valid. From the late 1990s onwards, however, these earlier works increasingly found their way into exhibitions, because they so clearly illustrate just how intensely Gertsch explored diverse forms of expression. Although he remained committed to the figurative in art, his works are stylistically diverse: from the delicate pencil drawings in which he subtly outlines his subject matter, to the ink sketches of precise and boldly sweeping lines. In his prints, too, he developed a wide variety of forms, ranging from the linearly emphatic and almost sketchlike black-and-white woodcuts to the clear forms of his more experimental colour prints. During this time, Gertsch also produced four artist's books with woodcuts and texts. The exhibition groups his early works thematically and underlines the way the artist often returned to the same subject matters. These include female figures in back view, faces, landscapes, mythological figures such as Orpheus, and interiors with almost fantastically surreal elements.

Moreover, colour tests created in the course of the complex printing process of the large-scale woodcuts invite the visitors to get to know the sheer splendour of another facet of Gertsch's oeuvre. The colour tests that the artist referred to affectionately as «études (de) couleurs» and for which he created a personal collection, encompass an enormous panoply of expressive forms. It must have been around 1997 when the artist began to perceive the collected colour samples as valid variants, as a sideline, so to speak, to the reprinting of his early woodcuts, which was running simultaneously. They served him not only as technical aids, but also as a stimulus: the appeal of these tiny, monochromatic colour fields was simply irresistible to him, as it is to others.

The exhibition is accompanied by a lavishly illustrated catalogue (English / German) published by Hirmer Publishers with two essays in which two aspects are explored in depth: Alexandra Barcal looks at the colour tests and delves into the mystery of the colour spaces they evoke, while Linda Schädler focuses on the four early artist's books in which Gertsch so cleverly combines image and text.

Kindly supported by the City of Bern and 'SWISSLOS/Kultur Kanton Bern'.

Practical Information

Curatorial Team	Dr. Linda Schädler, Head of Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich Alexandra Barcal, Conservator 20th – 21st C., Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich
Opening	Due to the Coronavirus there will be no official opening reception.
Events	We will keep you informed about further events on our website as well as via our newsletter, which you can subscribe to at https://gs.ethz.ch/newsletter/ . For details, visit: https://gs.ethz.ch/en/agenda/
Opening hours	Daily 10 a.m. - 4.45 p.m.
Entrance	free
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