



Johannes Robert Schürch
See all

14.9.2024 – 12.1.2025 **E**





Untitled, n.d.



Die Beweinung, 1928



Untitled, n.d.

Johannes Robert Schürch (1895–1941) is considered to be one of the main representatives of early modernism in Swiss art. It is therefore all the more surprising that the work of the Aarau-born artist is hardly known to a wider public today. Almost 50 years after the retrospective at the Aargauer Kunsthaus, the exhibition *Alles sehen*, or *See all* in English, is bringing the touching and haunting work of this outstanding draughtsman back into focus. The largely self-taught artist left behind an extensive and stylistically varied body of work comprising more than 7000 works when he died at the young age of 46.

The solo exhibition at the Aargauer Kunsthaus is dedicated to his drawings from the 1920s and early 1930s. It provides insight into the artist's most productive phase, during which he created numerous pen and ink-brush drawings and watercolours. In their direct expressiveness, these are among his artistic highlights. Schürch created these works in the ten years he lived with his mother in poverty and seclusion in a remote forest house in Monti, near Locarno.

With its thematically focused structure, the exhibition invites visitors to take an associative stroll through Schürch's artistic cosmos. Interwoven circles of motifs touch on universal concepts of human existence: death, grief, suffering, and oppression as well as the longing for belonging,

closeness, and love. Schürch's view of human vulnerability is reflected in our present, as it is characterized by uncertainty and crises.

Lyrical contributions from the writer Simone Lappert (*1985) complement the exhibition. Her poems on selected works highlight the timeless validity of Schürch's drawings. The poems are available as an audio track via QR codes and can also be found in the accompanying publication, *Johannes Robert Schürch. Alles sehen* (2024).

Room 1

A wall-sized photograph from 1924 shows Schürch as a tightrope walker on a pole, hovering over the abyss. It is the symbol of an artist who moved on the fringes of society and sought to explore the human condition beyond conventions, in a balancing act between highs and lows. The artist Dieter Roth (1930-1998) aptly described Schürch's depictions as "the observation of a man who wants to see all".

Room 2

The motif of death occupies a special place in Schürch's oeuvre, which can be attributed both to the zeitgeist of the interwar years and to the artist's personal experiences. The early loss of his father and two sisters during his childhood left its mark on him. Schürch does not approach death primarily with a melancholy attitude, but rather sees the exploration of mortality as an existential experience. In Schürch's *danses macabres*, lust for life and a premonition of death combine to form a dance that is as seductive as it is frightening. Death appears in many forms, sometimes devouring people (*Untitled*, n.d.), sometimes making music and celebrating the moment, or as a subtle force behind beauty,

which itself is transient. Schürch found archetypal models for the depiction of suffering and grief in the Bible, which he took up and abstracted in works such as *Die Beweinung* (1928).

Room 3

Schürch's virtuosity and diversity as a draughtsman can only be guessed at from his lesser-known landscape paintings. They make it clear that Schürch's motifs and compositions were inspired by his early mentor Ferdinand Hodler (1853–1918) as well as by the works of Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) (*Badende*, 1925). With expressive brushstrokes, trees and their branches become striking elements lending structure to the painting (*Untitled*, n. d.), while colours and forms become shapes on the verge of abstraction (*Untitled*, n. d.).

In contrast to most of Schürch's works where people take centre stage, human figures in his landscape paintings largely recede into the background. This is exemplified by a group of landscapes with lakes, in which Schürch takes up well-known motifs from art history and arrives at his own formulations. He translates the melancholy subject of romanticism—the small figure surrounded by overwhelming nature—into dreamy visions, suspending the proportions and perspective in favour of a heightened expressiveness



Landschaft mit See, n.d.



Traum, 1925



Skizzenbuch 37, n.d.

(*Landschaft mit See*, n.d.). With their earthy tones and muted colours, these works have a meditative quality.

Schürch's landscapes are not only representations of nature and experimental fields of artistic expression but also projection surfaces for inner sensitivities, reflecting his longing for a sense of security in the world.

Room 4

In his engagement with Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), who inspired him to develop a more open, intuitive style, and in the solitude of Monti, Schürch broke away from his role models and developed an unmistakable pictorial language. It is characteristic of all his themes and finds its expression in the combination of linear pen and ink drawings and thin painterly applications of ink or watercolour. In concentrated creative phases that alternate with periods of stagnation and self-doubt, he directly translates his flood of ideas. In the so-called spontaneous drawings, reality and imagination merge, interweaving external impressions and realistic depictions with dreamy visions and fantastic motifs. This blending of the inner and the outer world, coupled with virtuoso design, underlines the intensity of the artistic vision and distinguishes Schürch's works from the documentary in the

social-critical realism of George Grosz (1893–1959) or Otto Dix (1891–1969).

The careful use of chiaroscuro (*Traum*, 1925) reminds us of the shadow play of Rembrandt (1606–1669) but transforms it into a modern formal language that oscillates between figuration and abstraction. Contrasts and subtle nuances of colour (*Angst*, 1925) characterise Schürch's pictorial worlds, which unfold their mysterious power in the ambivalence and openness of their interpretation. In surreal scenes that illustrate his profound knowledge of the nightmarish visions of Francisco de Goya (1746–1828), the artist himself sometimes appears, surrounded by animals and hybrid creatures that straddle the boundary between life and death, dream and reality (*Untitled*, 1927). They are metaphors for Schürch's proximity to the unfathomable world of the irrational.

Room 5

Contrary to expectations, Schürch did not use the 56 surviving sketchbooks, a selection of which is shown here for the first time, as preliminary studies for his works. Rather, they served as a motivic and stylistic training ground and give us a glimpse into his artistic practice and development. They show that Schürch was constantly searching for new forms of artistic expression, albeit without a discernible linear process.

The largest part of the sketchbooks are the "Notes": small notebooks that Schürch must have carried with him at all times, beginning around 1920. They mainly contain ephemeral pencil sketches of observations and copies of classical works of art, which Schürch used to build an extensive inner image archive. This allowed him to draw freely from memory and to act independently of the immediate reality in his artistic work. A converted appointment book in which Schürch pasted small, often interrelated drawings and sketches, illustrates his artistic development towards more abstract forms. Another medium-sized sketchbook with wildly arranged drawings shows unusual, experimental stylistic devices. This sketchbook is digitally available for the public to browse on the screen.

Room 6

Selected historical documents and excerpts from the Estate Foundation's oral history archive provide insights into the history of Schürch's reception and shed light on his biography. It is thanks to Erica Ebinger-Leutwyler (1915–2015)—his partner in his final years—that Schürch's work has been so comprehensively preserved today and is represented in important public collections in Switzerland. A 2006 conversation between her and Schürch expert Peter F. Althaus (1931–2021) and a film portrait show an extraordinary woman and her tireless commitment to Schürch's legacy.

Schürch was a passionate reader. A selection of books from his extensive private library provides insight into the topics that shaped his thoughts and work. In addition to writings on cultural history, art, philosophy, and astrology, there are numerous works of modern literature and poetry. Like the Bible, they served as a source of inspiration and were important illustrative material for him. In particular, the marginal characters in the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881), which Schürch basically seems to have devoured, found their way into his pictorial worlds.



Zwei Mädchen, n.d.



Nach dem Fest, around 1925



Paar, around 1931

Room 7-10

The intimacy of the cabinet rooms provides space for works in which Schürch varies the topic of interpersonal relationships with everyday motifs typical of the time: Tamers, prostitutes (*Zwei Mädchen*, n.d.), and drinkers (*Untitled*, 1936) are allegorical depictions that reflect man's entanglement in suffering and longing.

The bent bodies (*Nach dem Fest*, around 1925, *Heimkehr*, n. d.) and empty gazes reveal Schürch's extensive examination of the human condition. His works reveal a broad spectrum of individual emotional worlds that reflect the inner turmoil of the time and illustrate the loneliness of the individual in the crowd. The motif of the masquerade appears above all in the context of anonymous urban milieus, in pubs, brothels, and circus rings. The "circus of existence" serves as a metaphor for the masks behind which people often hide their true feelings in personal relationships and in society.

Sketchy figures, lines that range from delicate to powerful, and opaque areas of ink form a dynamic interplay with empty spaces and gaps. The endless pursuit of motifs, typical of modernism, finds its expression in the fleeting and incomplete. In his freest sheets (*Paar*, around 1931), Schürch brings out the essence through suggestion and accentuation. Although Schürch's works often appear

melancholy, they also contain something touching in the vulnerability they openly display.

Room 11

The tour ends with a photograph of Schürch from 1941. The artist is marked by his severe lung disease, to which he succumbed a short time later. 18 years earlier, he had written to his childhood friend and close confidant, Walter Kern (1898–1966): "I just want the facts, you understand, the way things are, the truth, unsparingly, shamelessly, if you like." This statement echoes what characterises Schürch's life and his artistic work: the will to arrive at the essential. He did this with unconditional dedication, often close to the abyss and without regard for commercial success. His works still touch us today with their quiet depth and raw emotionality.

The adjoining presentation of the collection shows works by Schürch's contemporaries and forges a bridge to contemporary artists whose works show a motivic, stylistic, or thematic proximity to his work on paper.

Publication

Johannes Robert Schürch. Alles sehen, edited by Nicole Rampa and Simona Ciuccio, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich, 2024 (in German).

This comprehensive publication sheds light on Schürch's work from the perspectives of art history, cultural studies, and philosophy and builds a bridge to astrology. The collected essays provide an insight into Schürch's thoughts and actions. Excerpts from his sketchbooks are published for the first time, accompanied by passages from his extensive correspondence with his childhood friend Walter Kern. New poems by the Swiss writer Simone Lappert on selected works are a lyrical echo of Schürch's art in the here and now.

With texts by: Elisabeth Bronfen, literary and cultural scholar; Verena Dengler, artist and author; Stephan Kunz, Artistic Director Bündner Kunstmuseum Chur; Simone Lappert, freelance writer, and Olivia Röllin, philosopher and editor of "Sternstunde Religion", as well as Simona Ciuccio and Nicole Rampa, co-curators of the exhibition.

Acknowledgements

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Curators
Nicole Rampa
Simona Ciuccio

Curatorial assistance
Florian Brand

A selection of events

Thursday, 7.11.2024, 6:30pm
Guided tour with Simone
Lappert, freelance author,
the curators Simona Ciuccio
and Nicole Rampa

Sunday, 17.11.2024, 1pm
Johannes Robert Schürch and
modernism
Panel discussion with Dr. David
Schmidhauser, curator 18th–20th
century, Kunst Museum
Winterthur and member of the
board of the Erica Ebinger-
Leutwyler Foundation, Beat
Wismer, art historian and
former director of the Aargauer
Kunsthhaus, and Simona Ciuccio
(moderator), co-curator of the
exhibition.

All events can be found on
aargauerkunsthhaus.ch/agenda.

Aargauer Kunsthhaus
Opening hours
Tuesdays – Sundays 10am – 5 pm
Thursdays 10am – 8 pm
Monday closed

Special Hours of Operation
10am – 5 pm
St. Stephen's Day 26.12.2024
New Year's Eve 31.12.2024
New Year's Day 1.1.2025

Christmas Eve 24.12.2024 closed
Christmas Day 25.12.2024 closed

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