

Landesmuseum Zürich.

‘1900–1914. Foray into Happiness’

28.3.–13.7.2014

A tour of the exhibition

The years between 1900 and 1914 are characterized by groundbreaking discoveries and inventions, the breaking down of gender roles, the emergence of the avant-garde, investigations into the unconscious, and increasing prosperity – but above all the period was marked by a prevailing and deeply felt belief in peace and security. The exhibition looks at the explosive era that led up to the First World War and explores thematically arranged ‘forays into happiness’:

1. The new century

Before man became an instrument of war, the new century had inspired his *Weltanschauung*: People were going to improve and abandon the old world of the fathers and grandfathers. Life was going to be a wonderful adventure.

In 1900 the philologist and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who had once lectured in Basel, died. Nietzsche criticized Christianity and its moral values and denied compassion, but affirmed life. According to Nietzsche, society and the civilizing of society in the 19th century had become rotten. He predicted the emergence of a new man, the *Übermensch* (superman).

Ferdinand Hodler and his era dream of the birth of a new century, a new world. They peer into a kaleidoscope of wonders in which hitherto unknown forms of science and art provide a glimpse of what might be a better future.

2. Sexuality and dreams

In 1900 Sigmund Freud develops psychoanalysis in Vienna, and his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* throws light on the repressed world of the unconscious. He frees the mind from the straitjacket of psychiatry, and sexuality from the corset that had strangled it during the Victorian era. His methods, which are based on investigations into the way people are driven by their unconscious, soon spread to Zurich, Berlin, New York and London.

The realization that one also has to examine a person *below* the surface was one that also occurred outside the field of psychoanalysis. The X-ray apparatus, the avant-garde and the cinema all have the same objective.

Landesmuseum Zürich.

3. Woman and man

Industrialization creates a new urban working class. The proportion of women working in factories rises steadily, resulting in a reshaping of traditional family structures. There is an extension of educational possibilities for the daughters of bourgeois families; the number of schools for girls rises rapidly around the turn of the century, and more and more girls receive a higher education. The University of Zurich plays a pioneering role in this trend by becoming the first institution in the German-speaking region to allow women to study officially for a degree. As a consequence, Zurich emerges as a hub for intellectual and self-confident women from all over Europe, Russia and the USA. In 1904 the International Alliance of Women is founded in Berlin. Sporting activities are no longer a privilege enjoyed solely by men. The emancipated woman enjoys being seen on a bicycle or behind the wheel of a car. The sexes mingle informally while playing tennis or badminton, or skiing or ice-skating, in a way that would have been unthought of in earlier times. Old gender roles crumble and a new perception of women emerges, which is also evident in the world of fashion and the visual arts. The suffocating corset is replaced by the flowing reform dress; the nakedness of men and women is depicted ever more explicitly by artists such as Klimt, Schiele and Hodler. The Russian ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky's expressive and androgynous free dance performances in Debussy's *L'après-midi d'un faune* and Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* provoke major scandals. The liberation of sexuality – helped by the invention of the rubber condom – is a cause for celebration; and youth spirit – elevated almost to cult status – runs rampant, shaping styles and trends: 'Jugendstil' (Art Nouveau) and 'modernity' are synonymous.

4. Utopia and leisure

Trains, ocean steamers, cars and aircraft make the world a smaller place. One can travel throughout Europe without a passport; cities become closer to one another. In 1912, the ambition to achieve the fastest crossing of the Atlantic results in the sinking of the Titanic. The reign of the automobile – epitome of elegance and speed – begins. In order to make cars faster, more streamlined models are manufactured. The rapid development of the era is reflected in motor racing events that are witnessed by countless spectators. And the age-old dream of human flight becomes a reality. In around 1900, the aviation pioneers Henri and Armand Dufaux from Geneva construct several aircraft models. In 1910 Armand flies the entire length of Lake Geneva, thereby beating the world record set by Louis Blérot, who a year earlier became the first person to fly across the English Channel.

Landesmuseum Zürich.

Not everyone is convinced of the virtues of such rapid technological progress. Some critics of the generally ecstatic frenzy feel unsettled by developments and seek refuge in adventure, such as the jurist and alpinist Xavier Mertz, who lost his life on an Antarctic expedition in 1913. Others create utopian alternative worlds. People – truly in the spirit of Nietzsche – want to play like children once again. ‘Learning in a playful way’ is key to the approach of the educational reformer Maria Montessori, who works with innovative teaching materials (such as simple cylinders, chains and cubes) aimed at stimulating, challenging and fostering the child. Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy provides ideas for a wide variety of disciplines, from art and architecture to medicine and biodynamic agriculture. In 1913 the first Goetheanum is built. At Monte Verità reform-conscious dropouts experiment with ‘alternative’ lifestyles, nourish themselves on vegetarian food, and celebrate the liberation of the human body with naked dancing and orgies of creation. Physical training and sporting activities become integral components of a health-conscious way of life. Newly won leisure time is spent on popular sporting activities and mass tourism – the Swiss mountains are discovered as a haven of light, fresh air and sun, winter sports, alpinism and après-ski. In the high-altitude clinics of the so-called *Luftkurorte* (health resorts with good air) people suffering from lung disease come to convalesce. The Olympic Games allow nations to compete peacefully against one another. And everywhere – in balloons, on the racetrack, at the sports ground or while dancing or playing games – the handy camera is capturing a visual record of people’s activities and impressions. And whenever possible the portable phonograph, known as *Le Charmeur*, provides a captivating musical accompaniment, the tango, for example – a dance that brings the eroticism of South America to Europe, where it becomes highly popular in around 1910.

5. The military in peacetime

In 1901 the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded for the first time. One of the two prize-winners is Henri Dunant, the Swiss founder of the Red Cross. The major European Powers have not been at war with one another for over 30 years. Reacting to the Balkan Wars, the Basel Peace Congress of 1912 calls for world peace. Switzerland at this time becomes a melting pot of free thinkers, anarchists and socialists. Lenin spends about six-and-a-half years in the country. He adopts a reclusive and modest lifestyle and applies himself to his revolutionary writings, without having a profound influence on the Swiss socialist movement.

Collections of folk songs are interspersed with soldier’s songs. Even if Europe itself has been spared war for many years, wars are going on elsewhere all over the

Landesmuseum Zürich.

world. In China and many parts of Africa there are bloody uprisings that are put down by colonial troops. Italy is at war with the Ottoman Empire. Morocco and the Balkans are trouble spots waiting to explode. Strategic plans for war are drafted – Germany's so-called Schlieffen Plan is drawn up in preparation for a possible war on two fronts – and non-stop British and German naval expansion betrays just how fragile the peace is. Even in neutral Switzerland there is a fondness for 'war games', even if military service here can resemble an idyllic picture postcard setting or a shooting club event rather than hard drilling in preparation for bloody conflict. In autumn of 1912 the German-speaking part of Switzerland is honoured by the presence of the German Emperor William II, who is enthusiastically greeted when he is received by Ulrich (later General) Wille who is commanding the *Herbstmanöver* (large-scale military manoeuvres). Ulrich Wille presents the Swiss army as a viable flank protection for Germany's southern borders.

6. The economy and imperial markets

The new century needs copper from Peru, rubber from the Congo, coffee from Brazil, cigars from Cuba, meat from Uruguay and oil from the Middle East. Ever-tighter International trading networks span the globe, creating mutual dependencies between nations that convince thinkers, poets and politicians from all over the world that no one has any desire to go to war again, at least not in Europe. No one in Europe talks about the massacres committed abroad by the imperial states until cheap, mass-produced cameras such as the Brownie 1 (1900) and more exclusive models that also work in tropical conditions turn photography into a mass medium of information: shocking images of colonial atrocities in the Congo or of the misery of factory workers arouse public opinion all over the world. Rubber becomes a symbol of both progress and oppression. The contact with Africa, as well as reaping economic profits, also results in an influx of cultural influences. Encountering the religions and customs of indigenous peoples makes scientists interested in their ritual and artistic forms of expression. Industrialists who make their money in the colonies bring African artworks back to Europe – figures, masks and ritual cult objects. Western artists – the cubists and expressionists in particular – are inspired by the exotic and highly expressive new forms.

7. Scientific inventions

Virtually no other era in history generates so many technical inventions and scientific discoveries in such a short space of time as the period around the turn of the century. People are fascinated by electricity. The microscope makes visible

Landesmuseum Zürich.

that which was once invisible. In Berne, Einstein revolutionizes the understanding of time and the speed of light. The two-time Nobel Prize winner Marie Curie and her husband Pierre discover the radioactive elements polonium and radium; and Marie Curie makes a name for herself for her research into the nature and use of X-rays, which enable doctors to look inside the human body.

Science becomes increasingly specialized until it is practically incomprehensible for the layperson: electricity is invisible and direct current is seemingly indistinguishable from alternating current. Philosophy and religion are dethroned by mathematics and physics. Contemporary artists respond in their own way to the stress and pressure that accompany the discoveries and inventions of the period. Increasingly, their works explore questions of science and perception, physics and fantasy. The future is illuminated by revolutionary colours and abstract forms: Picasso demonstrates how the world can be pieced together from cubes and circles. Pent-up inner tensions find release in the uninhibited and grotesque work of the expressionists. Futurism celebrates the breakneck speed of cars, aircraft and trains, and the explosive force of grenades and bombs.

8. The age of the masses

The Paris World's Fair of 1900 becomes a symbol of mass production and the resulting mass consumption of consumer goods, which goes beyond merely fulfilling basic needs. The world discovers Aspirin and – in 1913 – the drug Ecstasy. Brands such as Toblerone, Odol and Ovomaltine become mass-produced products. Housework is revolutionized by dynamos, electric vacuum cleaners, light bulbs and gas cookers, while office routines are radically by the arrival of calculating machines and Dictaphones.

The assembly line enables a dramatic increase in productivity and a rapid decrease in manufacturing costs. Consumer goods become affordable also for the 'little people' – a prime example being the extraordinary success of the Model T Ford (1908) car in the United States.

Newly founded department stores cater to new consumer needs. In France the first department stores – the *grand magasins* – have been around since the second half of the 19th century. In Zurich, at the end of the 19th century, the simple fashion/fabric store and mail-order business Jelmoli, which was founded in 1833, emerges as the largest department store in Switzerland. In 1899 Jelmoli relocates to a spectacular art nouveau glass palace – modelled on a Paris department store – on Bahnhofstrasse.

Landesmuseum Zürich.

9. EXIT

People were challenged if not overwhelmed by the years of rapid emergence that ushered in the new century. Some people, like Marcel Proust with his monumental novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* (In Search of Lost Time), cut themselves off from the world with memories of the past. Others, such as Franz Kafka, realized that they had landed not in the land of freedom but in the penal colony.

Most people, however, sought refuge in traditional patterns, in struggles and war between heroic nations. The shots that rang out in Sarajevo on the 28 June 1914, killing the heir to the throne Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, precipitated the First World War, the horrors of which can hardly be assimilated with mere words and images. The noise of war remains in the darkness of 'the last days of humanity'.