

Rooms 1, 5–7: Franz Gertsch. Iron Bed and Trumpet, Family and Couples

Introduction

The exhibition in room 1 of the Museum Franz Gertsch comprises paintings, collages, a linocut, and drawings Franz Gertsch created between 1965 and 1969. The museum is happy to have been entrusted with the works “Der grosse Spielmann” [The Big Musician] and “O mein Papa” [Oh My Papa] (both 1966) from the art collections of the Canton and the City of Bern, as well as “Paar” [Couple] (1968) from the municipality of Bolligen on permanent loan. For the first time, these works can now be presented in the context of other pieces from this period.

Further paintings and woodcuts by the artist are presented in the annex. The exhibition was curated by Anna Wesle.

Room 1

Franz Gertsch started to develop a motivic interest in circus artists and musicians, but also in couples and family scenes in the mid-1960s. In 1963 Gertsch embarked on a second marriage with Maria Gertsch-Meer. The couple and their four children, who were born in 1963, 1965, 1966, and 1968, lived in a small flat in Bern.

The collages and paintings after collages Gertsch produced during this time are informed by formal reductions and a restrained colour palette. Muscular male and female circus artists are the protagonists in pictures with titles such as **“Artistenfamilie” [Family of Circus Artists]** or **“Pyramidaler Auftritt” [Pyramidal Perfor-**

mance]. It is unclear whether works featuring father-mother-child constellations, such as **“Familie bei Nacht” [Family at Night]**, **“Trompeternachwuchs” [Trumpeter Offspring]** or **“O mein Papa” [Oh My Papa]**, also belong to the world of performers and musicians. The recurring male figure seems sturdy and is often depicted with a dark moustache, the child (Gertsch’s daughter Renate, who was born in 1959 during his first marriage to Denise Gertsch or a son he chose not to identify) is repeatedly referred to as Harlekina or Harlekin and portrayed in a diamond-patterned shirt or dress. In some pictures the mother figure is also wearing this outfit.

Autobiography and fiction merge in a pictorial whole. Elements such as the white iron bedstead Franz Gertsch sketched in a holiday home or the golden trumpet he bought second-hand resurface in variations.

“Familie bei Nacht”, which can be found in the front part of the exhibition room, already features an intertwined couple, a theme Franz Gertsch derived from Gustave Courbet’s (1819–1877) **“Le Sommeil” [The Sleepers]** (1866). In 1967 the artist won the contest to create murals for the new school building in Langenthal with a similar design. Due to a scandal – both the teaching staff and the people of Langenthal deemed the motifs of a reclining and a standing couple indecent and inappropriate for a school – the paintings were never implemented. Nonetheless, the artist used variations on the theme of the reclining couple in several works, some of

which are on display in the back of the room. This area is dedicated to the subject of couples in Franz Gertsch’s oeuvre: he used stencils to create figures of sitting and reclining men and women, predominately in the primary colours red, blue, and yellow.

Room 5 – Film **“Giving Time to Time. Franz Gertsch” (2023)**

The Czech-Swiss director and scriptwriter, Dana Maeder and her team accompanied Franz Gertsch, his wife Maria Gertsch-Meer, and the exhibitions at our museum from 2019 to 2021. The result is an atmospherically dense film which not only allows his companions to be heard, but also provides a perceptive portrait of his studio, his paintings and woodcuts, and above all, of the protagonists Franz and Maria Gertsch. The 52-minute film is available at the museum shop in German (with English and French subtitles).

Room 6 –Woodcuts

The artist worked on several blocks for a subject at the start of his woodcut phase and then printed the different motif and colour blocks over each other. This can be seen in our exhibition in the later print **“Silvia” (2001/02)**. In the case of other woodcuts, he printed with one block and only one colour, thus approaching his old dream of a monochrome and nevertheless realistic picture in the medium of the woodcut.

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The woodcuts entitled **“Winter” (2016)** and **“Sommer I” [Summer I] (2016/17)** concern printed realizations of the landscapes familiar from the magisterial Four Seasons Cycle (2007–11). The motifs **“Frühling” [Spring]** and **“Herbst” [Autumn]** have not been realised.

Room 7 – The Four Seasons (2007–11)

The Four Seasons group of paintings from the Dr h.c. Willy Michel Collection has received a room in the extension which was designed specifically to showcase these works and their fascinating effects in a permanent presentation.

In 2007 the then 77-year-old Franz Gertsch started working on the Four Seasons cycle – knowing full well that he would need about a year for each painting. In 2011 he completed his masterly Seasons cycle with the painting **“Frühling (Spring)”**. Without doubt the cycle can be regarded as a pinnacle of the artist’s late work.

“Franz Gertsch paints the four seasons” – the idea was triggered by a photograph of an autumnal forest from 1994 the artist came across while going through his slides. This image served as a template for **“Herbst” [Autumn] (2007/08)**: After enlarging the slide to oversized proportions, Gertsch projected it onto the canvas as a foundation for his monumental painting. In spring, summer, and winter he revisited the nearby forest to take further pictures. While working on the cycle he followed the changing seasons to capture photographic templates for the other pieces: **“Sommer” [Summer]**

is the summer of 2007, **“Winter” [Winter]** is the winter of 2008, and **“Frühling” [Spring]** is the spring of 2009. Viewers inspecting the whole cycle will also notice how the landscape changed in the approximately twelve years between the first and the last pictures.

The autumn picture marks the beginning of a new phase in the artist’s creative approach. For the first time, he used watercolour pencils to sketch directly onto the canvas and dispensed with the slide projector for a longer period. While the artist’s brushstroke seems more liberal, the painting is still astoundingly photo-realistic when viewed from a distance. To see **“Herbst” [Autumn]** clearly, the viewer has to take several steps back: seen up close, the painting seems abstract and starts to flicker. While his earlier works provide an equilibrium between the close-up view and the photorealistic impression from afar, the balance seems to have shifted in favour of painting.

There is much to discover in the vibrant green painting **“Sommer” [Summer] (2008/09)**. The initial impression is of a planar composition depicting the leafy piece of forest as an impenetrable thicket. However, upon closer inspection the viewer is pulled into its depths while different zones constantly reveal new nuances and effects.

In **“Winter” (2009)** the leafy summer forest has made way for a snowy piece of woodland at daybreak. Trees, branches, and twigs shaped with finely shaded browns cover the surface of the painting like a web; although the snow is

everywhere it does not distort the view of nature. Some branches are layered with snow, the bottom right corner seems to be completely white. Viewed up close, the freshly fallen snow is almost palpable. Franz Gertsch structured the white landscape with the finest nuances thereby visualising the soft powdery qualities of the snow.

“Frühling” [Spring] (2009–11), the last of the Four Seasons paintings, shows a slightly larger section than the previous works. It becomes apparent that all four works need to be viewed to understand the topography of the landscape. Pictorially this painting represents another highlight in the cycle; with a precise, yet liberal brushstroke Franz Gertsch captured the many details such as little leaves, sun flecks, and textures.

The presentation of the Four Seasons in one room highlights the colour harmonies between the paintings. Franz Gertsch limited himself to a reduced colour palette, to a few shades he himself made using pigments derived from minerals, earth, and other sources. While viewing the Seasons as a group, the colours in the individual works form connections, certain shades resurface from one painting to the next. The interplay between the subject, brushstroke, and colouring in each picture is enhanced by the synergy between the paintings.

(Text: Anna Wesle, translation:
Katherine Lewald)

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Biography				
		1999	Solo presentation at the Venice Biennale	2016–19 Woodcuts <i>Winter, Sommer I</i> , and <i>Sommer II</i>
1930	Born in Möriegen in the canton of Bern on 8 March	2002	Opening of the Museum Franz Gertsch in Burgdorf	2018 “Franz Gertsch. Pictures Are My Biography” at the Kunsthalle Kiel
1947–50	Training at the Max von Mühlenen School of Painting, Bern	2004–07	Woodcut series <i>Ausblick</i> with <i>Pestwurz</i> , <i>Waldweg</i> , and <i>Gräser</i>	“Franz Gertsch. Polyfocal Allover” at the Swiss Institute, New York
1950–52	Further education with Hans Schwarzenbach, Bern	2005	Retrospective at the Museum Franz Gertsch and the Kunstmuseum Bern with further presentations in Aachen, Tübingen, and Vienna (2006)	2019 Opening of the annex of the Museum Franz Gertsch in Burgdorf
1955	Marriage with Denise Kohler and honeymoon in Scotland		Honorary Citizen Award from the Christian-Albrecht University of Kiel	2019 Continuation of the <i>Gräser</i> series with <i>Gräser V–VII</i>
1963	Marriage to Maria Meer	2006	Honorary Citizen Award from the municipality of Rüschegg	2019–21 Paintings of the ultramarine phase, <i>Gräser VIII</i> , <i>Blauer Sommer</i> , <i>Gräser IX</i> , <i>Blaue Pestwurz</i> , <i>Blauer Waldweg</i> (<i>Campiglia Marittima</i>)
1967	Louise Aeschlimann Scholarship	2007–11	Four Seasons cycle with the paintings <i>Herbst</i> , <i>Sommer</i> , <i>Winter</i> , and <i>Frühling</i>	2020 “Franz Gertsch. The Seventies” at the Museum Franz Gertsch and the LENTOS Art Museum, Linz
1969	First large-format realistic paintings	2011	“Franz Gertsch. Seasons. Works from 1983 to 2011” at the Kunsthaus Zürich	2022 “Kaleidoscope. Twenty Years of the Museum Franz Gertsch” at the Museum Franz Gertsch
1970	Family and group scenes, “Situations” portraits	2011–15	Group of works <i>Guadeloupe</i> with the paintings <i>Maria</i> , <i>Bromelia</i> , <i>Soufrière</i> , and the woodcut <i>Bromelia</i>	Last paintings <i>Meer II</i> , <i>Cima del Mar</i> , and <i>Schwarzwasser</i> , one <i>Gräser</i> painting remains unfinished
1972	Participation in the <i>documenta V</i> with the picture <i>Medici</i>	2013	“Franz Gertsch. The Secret of Nature” at the Frieder Burda Museum, Baden-Baden	Died in Riggisberg in the canton of Bern on 21 December
1974–75	DAAD Scholarship, Berlin	2013–18	Paintings <i>Waldweg</i> (<i>Campiglia Marittima</i>), <i>Pestwurz</i> , <i>Meer I</i> , and <i>Grosse Pestwurz</i>	2024/25 „Franz Gertsch. Blow-Up“ at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, Denmark and the Deichtorhallen Hamburg
1976	Move to Rüschegg	2014	“Franz Gertsch” at the Les Abattoirs Museum, Toulouse	
1978	Participation in the Venice Biennale			
1980	Initiation of the portrait series with <i>Selbstbildnis</i> ; followed by <i>Irène</i> , <i>Tabea</i> , <i>Verena</i> , <i>Christina</i> , and <i>Johanna</i>			
1986	Temporary abandonment of painting; new focus on large-format woodcuts			
1994	Return to painting, production of <i>Gräser I–IV</i> and <i>Silvia I–III</i> until 2004			
1997	Kaiserring Art Award from the city of Goslar			