

Landesmuseum Zürich.

‘Ready to print. Art and advertising at Wolfensberger’

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Media release

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Graphic design, art and commerce at the Swiss National Museum Zurich

Cuno Amiet, Oskar Kokoschka, Otto Dix and Henry Moore – since 1911, the Printing Establishment J. E. Wolfensberger has been the top address for high-quality lithographs, where international artists and renowned designers are regular callers. From October 25th 2013, the exhibition ‘Ready to print. Art and advertising at Wolfensberger’ at the Swiss National Museum Zurich will give an insight into the family-owned company, now managed by the fourth generation, which operates at the intersection of art and commerce.

Arranged chronologically, with displays of first-class printed advertising materials, posters, original prints, historic photographs, art reproductions and paintings, the exhibition ‘Ready to print. Art and advertising at Wolfensberger’ leads through eleven decades into the present. It traces the development of a company operating at the intersection of graphic design, art and commerce, it illustrates the technique of lithography and presents superb lithographs – from small-format advertisements and original prints to art reproductions and posters.

The visionary

A special focus of the exhibition is on the vision of the company’s founder, Johann Edwin Wolfensberger (1873–1944), who in 1911 brought together business premises and living accommodation, a printing shop, a lithographic studio and art gallery under one roof, in an impressive newly constructed building. His goal was to give Swiss art a new platform, and to set new standards in the graphic arts industry. J.E. Wolfensberger successfully promoted the acceptance of a uniform poster format which he, as a visionary entrepreneur, optimistically referred to as ‘world format’. However, its dimensions of 90.5 x 128 cm remain to this day a purely Swiss standard of the F4 poster.

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Eleven decades of quality and creativity

The colourful highlight of the exhibition is the graphic work 'Ready to print', created by Samuel Buri in spring 2013. The twelve-colour print, produced by Thomi Wolfensberger on a flatbed cylinder printing press dating from 1905 illustrates, together with the associated proofs, stones and colours, the sophisticated technique of lithography. The example of the exhibition poster is used to explain the offset printing process, which was only introduced at the Wolfensberger establishment in the 1950s.

The exhibition about the 'Wolfsberg' and its founder at the Swiss National Museum Zurich is also an exhibition of works by Oskar Kokoschka, Otto Dix, Cuno Amiet, Henry Moore, Fischli/Weiss, Samuel Buri, Shirana Shahbazi and many others, which can be seen both as a reflection of the period, as well as simply a collection of outstanding art.

High-quality Swiss advertising graphics

Otto Baumberger, Emil Cardinaux and Burkhard Mangold, pioneers of Swiss advertising graphics, were amongst the first collaborators. Selected paintings, graphic prints and posters by these artists are the highlights of the exhibition, as much as the outstanding examples of printed advertising materials. They include Otto Baumberger's 1913 advertising campaign designed for the Zurich company Seiden Grieder, and the poster designed in 1964 by Ruedi Külling for Bic biros.

From stone lithography to offset lithography

The 'Wolfsberg' is also the first port of call for fine art lithographs and art reproductions. During the first decades, the boundaries were fluid. In the company's first sales catalogue (1927), both fine art lithographs and art reproductions are offered for sale. Both came under the heading of 'Wolfsberg prints'. An impressive example is the reproduction, signed by Otto Dix, of his painting 'Berninalandshaft', exhibited in 1938 at the Kunstsalon. With the change to offset printing in 1956, Wolfensberger embarked on specialist printing. A two-colour offset press with a gold and silver bronzing machine was used to produce special greeting cards and Christmas cards for the New York art publisher Caspari Inc., as well as table sets and gift wrapping paper, items that are still very popular, particularly in England and the USA.

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Hand-signed original prints form an integral part of the company's past and present. Henry Moore, Bernhard Luginbühl, Dieter Roth, John Baldessari, Shirana Shahbazi and many others have had their work lithographed by Wolfensberger. The close cooperation between artist and lithographer is the hallmark of the 'Wolfsberg'. Then as now. In the case of Hans Erni, it stretches over a period of four generations!

Strong partners

The Engagement Migros development fund supports the cataloguing of the valuable graphic art and photography holdings of the National Museum and is thus making them accessible to the public. From 2016, the exhibits will be permanently available for research purposes at the National Museum's new study centre.

The majority of the prints in the exhibition 'Ready to print' come from the holdings of a donation to the Swiss National Museum by the descendants of J.E. Wolfensberger, which was arranged through the Swiss Graphic Design Foundation. The exhibition is a first, publicly visible result of the partnership with this Foundation, launched in 2010, to preserve and present the cultural heritage of graphic design in Switzerland.

Pictures and texts

All media texts and a selection of images are available for downloading on the Website www.landmuseum.ch under 'Press'.

If you have any questions, please contact

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