

1\_Press release for the exhibition *History Tales. Fact and Fiction in History Painting*, June 2023



Claudia Bauer  
+43 1 588 16 2211  
c.bauer@akbild.ac.at  
kunstsammlungen\_presse@akbild.ac.at

Academy of Fine Arts Vienna  
Art Collections  
Schillerplatz 3, 1010 Vienna, Austria  
[www.kunstsammlungenakademie.at](http://www.kunstsammlungenakademie.at)

## *History Tales. Fact and Fiction in History Painting*

From autumn 2023, the Art Collections exhibition entitled *History Tales. Fact and Fiction in History Painting* will explore the representation of history and its narratives in terms of identity and nation. How is the rise and fall of civilisations depicted in history? How has the hubris of humankind been allegorised in history paintings since the 17<sup>th</sup> century? And what sort of media transformations has the invention of photography and film brought about on the representations of myths, heroes, heroines, rulers and sovereigns as well as on pivotal historical events since the 19<sup>th</sup> century right through to the present day?

The exhibition examines history painting in the light of the Academy's own historical collections – its Paintings Gallery, Graphic Collection, Plaster Cast Collection – and prominent loans from museums as well as of works by contemporary artists. The capacity of the history painting and its variations in the age of mass media to oscillate between fact and fiction and make historicity itself the subject matter of the image is examined from today's perspective.

### History painting at the transition to modernity

The history painting has been in vogue time and again ever since the Renaissance proclaimed it was the pictorial genre of the highest order. Under the Sun King Louis XIV in particular, the French Academy underscored the superior value of the doctrine of virtue conveyed by the history painting through the example of great events, heroes and heroines, rulers and sovereigns while substantiating the history painting as a propaganda machine with an underpinning of art theory. The genre really came into its own at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after which its particular merits gradually gave way to conventional bourgeois taste and the fast pace of popular illustrations, press graphics and the new medium of photography. Industrialisation, social unrest, social upheavals and the impact of the French Revolution on the political structure of Europe in particular and the self-perception of an emergent bourgeoisie as well as the impoverishment of large sections of the population proved to be the catalysts of an eventful transformation process. These bourgeois tastes were reflected more in the salons as a showcase for the self-representation of the gentry than in the academies and the moralising history painting taught there. Nonetheless, history painting throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century had the special merit of focusing attention on historicity even as the age of a 'headless' (i.e. monarch-less) modernity was dawning. People's interest in specific historical events gradually gave way to a particular interest in history as a model reflecting the philosophy of history. The exhibition *History Tales. Fact and Fiction in History Paintings* sets out to explore the complex reasons behind this transformation as part of an outlined itinerary.

### Itinerary through the centuries to the present day

*History Tales* takes up the contemporary process of reassessment of the current position at a time when the talk everywhere is of a 'turning point' in world history, with new nationalist tendencies and wars threatening to rip apart the political fabric, both in Europe and globally. Familiar tropes such as 'The Golden Age' and the 'Iron Age' are invoked, i.e. times of political and social prosperity and equilibrium and, by contrast, times of decline, downfall and natural cataclysms.

Indeed, the idea of the rise and fall of civilisations is the starting point of the new exhibition in the Paintings Gallery. It then continues via mythological depictions to narratives of nation-building, of heroes, heroines, rules and sovereigns, offset against anti-heroes and parodies as well as harsh social criticism in the still relatively young mass medium of newspapers. Last but not least, the exhibition focuses on the French Revolution and its aftermath as well as the Vienna Academy and its exponents Füger and successors, who revived heroic history paintings in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions (Pompeii) and their reception in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century are not excluded from the 'accounts' rendered by travellers on their grand tours. The impact of the discovery of Pompeii in 1748 on entire generations – their fashion, architecture and the idealisation of a post-Hellenistic *polis* – are also touched upon.

The role of battle depictions and their more fictional than factual 'event painting', mostly genre-like in their execution, from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century are also addressed, as is the literary, cross-media approach to the Holocaust, the Second World War and the wars in Lebanon and Afghanistan. This raises the question of the factuality and authenticity of photography as well as the aesthetic and ideological demands placed on the 19<sup>th</sup> century's new medium for depicting reality. Finally, the Hansen Gallery leads into the inferno of the Bosch Room with its depictions of the Last Judgement, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

The aim is to question and challenge the understanding of history in representational depictions and their counter-images while analysing how certain origin myths and key historical events are always subject to interpretations shaped by the age in which they are 'revisited'. *History Tales* tells the story of these revisionary movements in the interpretation of 'history paintings', through which images of the past can become encapsulated commentaries on the present.

Artists / writers / filmmakers / researchers, illustrators (selection):

Josef Abel, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Jan Asselijn, Hieronymus Bosch, Sébastien Bourdon, Jacques Callot, Antonio Calza, Wilhelm Camphausen, Daniel Chodowiecki, Hendrick van Cleve, Jacques Courtois, Lucas Cranach t. E., Henri Durand-Brager, Eduard von Engerth, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Heinrich Friedrich Füger, Peter Johann Nepomuk Geiger, Luca Giordano, Pietro Graziani, Jakob Philipp Hackert, Sir William Hamilton, Theophil von Hansen, Karel du Jardin, Joseph Anton Koch, Johann Peter Krafft, Johann Baptist von Lampi t. E., Filippo Lauri, Charles-Nicolas Lemercier, Herman van Lin, Philippe Jacques de Louthembourg, Nicolaes Maes, Hans Makart, Édouard Manet, Hubert Maurer, Adolph Menzel, Martin von Molitor, Petros Moraites, Felix Alexander Oppenheim, Max Raphael, Johann Elias Ridinger, Hubert Robert, Salvator Rosa, Peter Paul Rubens, Johann Martin Schmidt known as Kremser Schmidt, Ludwig Ferdinand Schnorr von Carolsfeld, Johann Nepomuk Schödlberger, Moritz von Schwind, Francesco Solimena, Theodoor van Thulden, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, Tiziano Vecellio known as Titian, Paul Troger, Charles André Vanloo, Paolo Veronese, Jacques Antoine Volaire, Johann Wittmer, Philips Wouwerman, Michael Wutky

Plaster casts after antique and classicist models, historical photographs and press graphics

Contemporary positions such as Eleanor Antin, John Berger, Hannes Boeck, Marcel Broodthaers, Anne Carson, Danica Dakić, Harun Farocki, Omer Fast, Ulrike Grossarth, John Murphy, W. G. Sebald, Ana Torfs, Akram Zaatari

Curated by Sabine Folie

# A...cademy of Fine Arts Vienna

Art Collections

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## Exhibition

*History Tales. Fact and Fiction in History Painting*

- Exhibition run: 27 September 2023–26 May 2023
- Opens: 26 September 2023, 7 pm
- Press conference: Tuesday, 26 September 2023, 11 am
- Accreditation: [kunstsammlungen\\_presse@akbild.ac.at](mailto:kunstsammlungen_presse@akbild.ac.at)
- Where: Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Paintings Gallery, Schillerplatz 3, 1010 Vienna
- Opening hours: daily except Monday 10–18 h, T +43 1 588 16 2201

## *Lektionen/Lessons*

The lecture series on the exhibition

Lecture by Bernd Stiegler

*Geschichtsklitterung* [A Historical *Mélange*]. A brief history of political photo montage from 1870 to 1945

Wednesday, 27 September 2023, 6 pm

Long Night of the Museums

Guided tours of the exhibition, on the hour every hour

Saturday, 7 October 2023, 6 pm to midnight

Overview tours

on Sundays, 10.30 am

Curator's tours:

Sabine Folie on the exhibition

15 November 2023 und Thursday, 14 March 2024, 4 pm

## Exhibition publication

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication with texts by Maha El Hissy, Sabine Folie, Eva Kernbauer, Claudia Koch, Alexander Roob, René Schober, Bernd Stiegler, Susanne Watzenboeck and others, that will be presented in January 2024. Pre-orders: [kunstsammlungen@akbild.ac.at](mailto:kunstsammlungen@akbild.ac.at)

Full details of the exhibition and press photos for downloading *History Tales. Fact and Fiction in History Painting* can be found under [www.kunstsammlungenakademie.at/en/information/press/2023-06-30](http://www.kunstsammlungenakademie.at/en/information/press/2023-06-30)

All the current dates and full details can be found on the Art Collections homepage at [www.kunstsammlungenakademie.at](http://www.kunstsammlungenakademie.at)

Image page 1: Johann Peter Krafft, *David with the Head of Goliath*, 1852  
, 1852 © Paintings Gallery of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna