

## A stroll through the exhibition

### The exhausted man

16.10.2020 – 10.1.2021

#### Curtain-raiser

The late Hellenistic sculptural ensemble of *Laocoön*, which forms the starting point of the exhibition, puts on display the masculine hubris of the age – in the naked male body, the notion of divine strength takes on magnificent shape. But despite the assembled examples of classical beauty, the story the exhibition tells is not a triumphant one. Due to its ‘noble simplicity and quiet grandeur’, the portrayal of Laocoön was long regarded as the archetypal expression of the art of the ancient world. According to the poet *Sophocles*, the priest of Apollo was punished because he had married despite his priestly status, and begat children on the altar of his god.

But why isn't Laocoön screaming his pain out loud? Because in the moment captured in this white marble portrayal, he is using all his strength to free himself and his sons from the grip of a pair of deadly snakes. In the 5th century BC, the sculptural depiction of the male form in antiquity changed. For the first time, men were shown in their fatigued state – beaten, spent, exhausted.

A film about Zinedine Zidane flickers on the big screen behind the monumental sculpture ensemble. In a match played in 2005, 17 synchronised cameras follow the French footballing god until the moment when – very much in the style of the hubristic male of antiquity – he is sent off the field for a foul, five minutes before the end of the game.

#### Rise and fall of the ideal specimen

With all the various strategies, mechanisms and constructs he employs, the image of man in the exhibition remains ambiguous, caught between body and mind, stigmatised in his dominance and aggression, helplessly enmeshed in the rigid gender models handed down through the ages.

Since ancient times, the preferred arenas for demonstrating one's masculinity have been myth, war, technology, politics and sport, as well as the broader field of marriage, family and sexuality. On these parade grounds of virility strut gods, demigods and heroes, complete with their Adonis complexes, Achilles heels and fears of castration. Here, control and mastery are laid out for scrutiny, as are unbridled aggression and brutality, rampage, terror and gender struggles. At the same time, however, it is also shown how problematic and blurry is the classification 'the fair sex'. According to the ideas of antiquity, the male body always embodies feminine qualities as well – and vice versa.

In his radical ambivalence, *Achilles* is the figurehead of the exhibition. Despite his divine origins, the classical hero is a mortal. He hates war and loves peace, and so he tries to escape from the Trojan conflict by disguising himself as a girl. But the ploy fails. Achilles is convinced to join the war. And there he shows a different face: as a warrior, he is relentless and brutal. The hero is heterosexual one minute and homosexual the next, fluctuating between subservience and outright mulishness. This ambivalence is particularly evident in the Trojan War when Achilles kills *Penthesilea*, the daughter of Ares, the god of war – and then realises that he loves her. This scene is illustrative of the inner turmoil that defines a man and his self-perception.

When viewing the exhibition, it becomes apparent that a kind of 'sorrow' marks many of the exhibits: the viewer's attention is drawn to the pain, and to the aesthetic of the ugly. The perfect bodies of Greco-Roman statues transmute into the tortured demigod *Marsyas*. In the famous musical contest, Apollo beats his challenger. He then suspends Marsyas from a pine tree and flays him alive. The social and physical torment of Marsyas anticipates the suffering of Jesus Christ, the ultimate Man of Sorrows. In so far as corporeality and the physical form are still the focus, it's no longer about muscles; it's about pain.

The ideal of manliness now puts his suffering on display; a well-groomed appearance is of little import. But this paradigm too is subject to continuous change throughout history. The cavaliers with their posturing and suits of

armour, complete with codpieces, lace collars and shiny accessories, also strut the catwalk of masculine appeal. Their travesty of masculinity persisted until the late 19th century in the styling of uniforms.

Suddenly, everything changed. In a brightly coloured coat and a shiny helmet the soldier marches into World War I, imagining that he will put the enemy to flight with heroic bugle blasts and fluttering flags. But, brightly garbed and making his appearance in hordes, he makes a wonderful target for the enemy behind the machine gun.

### **Retreating inwards**

In the crossover from the 19th to the 20th century, between production and reflection and pressganged into the mechanical discipline of the Industrial Revolution, 'Project Man' got out of control. The overall mechanism threatened to obliterate imagination. Uniquely masculine maladies such as apathy and lack of feeling began to gnaw away at the masculine psyche. Nerve tracts between pain and pleasure centres were connected. The roles of perpetrator and victim were conflated. The exhibition illustrates this by means of a 'cabinet of curiosities' for the bachelor type with their very own machines, hybrids of virility and absurd bricolage. These constructions depict the impossibility of a connection between man and woman. Increasingly, the need for love manifests as a kind of pressure overload. And the libido – as if powered by steam or methylated spirits – finds an outlet in the emptiness of masturbation, in the endlessly repetitive movements of the vehicles and motors.

In contrast, the more the concept of achievement moves into the spotlight in the modern social system, the greater the value we place on the fields of training, education and work. These issues are supplanting the traditional cultural and spiritual practices of manliness. Artists and writers intuitively defend themselves against this. Or they refuse to do so, escaping into alternative survival strategies, into the somnambulistic aesthetic of dandies and misfits. In celebrating the aesthetically successful life, the misfits become the revolutionaries, leading the charge in a perfect society that allows all its members to live a lifestyle of their own choosing. Only in this

way can the misfits of both sexes emancipate themselves from the training drummed into them by the system, and unleash their passions and emotions.

### **The search goes on**

The final part of the exhibition takes up the story after the seismic jolt of World War II. The imperative of evil is followed by the *tabula rasa*, the blank slate – a turning away from the existing values, conventions and calamitous forced learning. So what is left of the man? The cultures of youth and protest represent a dramatic shift away from traditional role models and virtues. For the first time, a liberated, self-determined life seems to be within reach. Gender emancipation, openness and solidarity towards minorities and alternative lifestyles are emerging. But other daunting challenges already lie in wait for the new man. He tries to use improvisation to remove himself from the business of deconstruction; he explores the extremes and starts to oscillate between the poles of the sexes. The spectrum runs the gamut from playboy and macho to family man and transgender individuals.

### **The dream of possibilities**

Finally, the historical circle that began with Laocoön is closed. In a small room at the exit lies a plaster cast of the famous Borghese *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* (3rd-1st century BC). According to myth, this ambisexual being was the product of the divine union between Hermes and Aphrodite, and is revealed as profane humankind in its elemental nakedness. The life-size Hellenistic masterpiece, with its attributes of both Venus and Bacchus, has been igniting the smouldering fantasies and desires of collectors and replica-makers for centuries. For 200 years it has slumbered in the Louvre in Paris. The young French poet Lautréamont went to see the marble sculpture there, and dreamed himself out of his own existence and into a realm of illusions. What is this Hellenic freak of nature dreaming about? In an associative suite of film and video sequences from the past and present relating to hermaphrodites, the creature's dreams are reflected outwardly. And in the fleeting displays of light, the possibilities of an expanded gender self-perception are illuminated in transient flashes.

Juri Steiner and Stefan Zweifel, curators of the exhibition 'The exhausted man'