

## **In the Forest. A Cultural History**

National Museum Zurich | 18.03 – 17.07.22

### **Tour of the exhibition**

#### **Prologue: Forest and man**

The forest is a habitat for people, animals and plants, a provider of valuable resources, and an ally of the planet in the battle against climate change. The greatest beneficiary of the forest is humankind – but we are also its greatest threat. As they enter the exhibition, visitors are immersed in a forest where they experience sounds and images that allude to this threat.

#### **1. Section: Deforested: History of forest use**

The first part of the exhibition explores the stages of forest use, from the archaeological epochs to the 19th century. The history of forest use is at all time a story of destruction. The Romans deforested large swathes of the Mediterranean region, and in the Middle Ages settlement expansion came at the expense of the forests. Since the era of industrialisation, rampant deforestation has resulted in huge tracts of earth stripped bare. A platform with a display of woodworking tools gives an indication of the arduous work involved in forestry, and by the end of this section it has become clear what an extremely important role wood as a natural resource has for humankind.

#### **2. Section: Depicting the forest**

After this historical review, the next room is dedicated to artistic representation: paintings by Caspar Wolf, François Diday and Alexandre Calame captivate with their seductive, heroic visions. Depictions in art and literature are in stark contrast to the real situation: the more the forest is destroyed as a result of industrialisation, the more exaggerated and idealised the depictions. With breath-taking realism, Robert Zünd dedicated himself to the oak forest and, like many of his contemporaries, left the studio to paint *en plein air* – outdoor. In the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, the ubiquitous forest becomes both a menacing backdrop, and an idealised place of longing and an antithesis to the industrialised city where life revolves around rivalry and the pursuit of profit.

In the 20th century, artists distanced themselves from the representational and experimented increasingly with the material, as Max Ernst does in his *Histoire Naturelle*. Until finally, performance artist Joseph Beuys paved the way for a new form of political art. In 1972 Beuys and 50 art students launched a call for the forest to

be saved; in 1982, as part of *documenta 7* he had 7,000 oak trees planted in Kassel. The forest has become symbolic of the fight to protect nature and the environment.

### **3. Section: Guardians**

In the third part of the exhibition, a large-format image draws visitors' attention to the signs of forest destruction. Now, the guardians of the forest emerge: towards the end of the 19th century, it was Johann W. Coaz and Paul Sarasin who pushed forward the idea of a Swiss national park. In the 20th century, the focus turned to the rainforest. In 1945, Armin Caspar and Anita Guidi travelled to the Amazon region to call attention to the plight of the forests and their inhabitants, while 50 years later Bruno Manser was using more radical means to fight deforestation.

### **4. Section: Art for the forest**

The fourth part of the exhibition focuses on contemporary artistic works. Scores of artists are reacting to climate change and the plundering of nature for commercial gain. With his most recent cycle of works *Als ob die Welt zu vermessen wäre* (As if the world were there to be measured), Swiss artist Guido Baselgia presents the largest tree in the tropical rain forest, the *Ceibo*. The painting *Waldweg (Campiglia Marittima)* by Franz Gertsch, Thomas Struth's work *Paradise 30, Rio Madre de Dios, Peru 2005*, and the hand-coloured photographs of Shirana Shahbazi prompt the viewer to question suppositions of intactness and accepted ways of seeing things. And in her work *Helvécia, Brazil, 2017 – 2022* Denise Bertschi alludes to the connection between deforestation, forest use and slave labour.

### **5. Section: The forest today**

After the artistic depictions of the 20th and 21st centuries, we must now turn our attention to the importance of the forest today. Around 30 percent of the planet's land surface is forested. Reforestation is bearing fruit in Europe, Oceania and Asia. But the world is losing huge areas of forest due to deforestation, fires and climate change. Every year since 1990, between 100,000 and 160,000 square kilometers of forest have been destroyed worldwide – for wood and paper, or to be converted into grazing land, or palm oil and soybean plantations. In the 21st century, many people around the world are fighting to stop rainforest clearance. People such as Kenyan Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai, who died in 2011 – on her initiative, millions of trees were planted. Forests are also credited with healing powers ("forest bathing"), and some believe that trees communicate with each other (Peter Wohlleben), and these aspects make us aware of the value of the forest.

### **Epilogue: Between apocalypse and hope**

The exhibition closes with Ugo Rondinone's sculpture *wisdom? peace? blank? all of this?*, modelled on a 2000 year old olive tree in southern Italy – cast in meticulous detail. The work acts as a warning sign against climate change. The video piece *Ever Since We Crawled Out* by Julian Charrière also portends ill, cutting straight to the heart of the drama: can the forest still be saved? Or will the last tree be cut down soon? A study by ETH Zurich highlights the potential of reforestation in the fight against climate change. Reforesting an area the size of the USA could offset two-thirds of the world's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Critics of the study think it makes more sense to put an immediate stop to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and deforestation. But at this stage both seem unlikely, despite the global struggle.