

Vienna, January 2014

FRANZ SEDLACEK CHEMIST OF THE IMAGINATION

- Press conference:** Wednesday, 29 January 2014, 10 a.m.
Opening: Wednesday, 29 January 2014, 6.30 p.m.
Exhibition venue: Wien Museum Karlsplatz, 1040 Vienna
Duration: 30 January – 21 April 2014
Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday and public holidays, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Press photos: www.wienmuseum.at/en/presse

Major Sedlacek retrospective in Vienna

The painter and graphic artist Franz Sedlacek (1891–1945) was one of Austria's leading artists between the World Wars. A creator of strange, bizarre and mysterious scenes, Sedlacek draws the viewer into an unsettling world of surreal imagery. Following earlier works of graphic art and caricatures, Sedlacek turned to painting in the early 1920s. In a technique schooled on the Old Masters, he painted dream-like scenes populated by weird beings and gloomy landscapes suffused with pathos, remote from modern civilization. Many of his paintings were inspired by the art of German Romanticism. Veering between enthusiasm for technological advances and a sceptical attitude towards progress, his paintings combine romantic aspects with modern elements from industry and technology, bringing his motifs close to the art of the New Objectivity movement.

While Sedlacek was quite successful in his lifetime, it took until the 1990s for his œuvre to be rediscovered. The first solo exhibition was staged at the Vienna Technical Museum in 1991, and several key works were on show at a 1995 Bank Austria Kunstforum exhibition on the New Objectivity movement. The first comprehensive retrospective of his paintings was presented by Landesgalerie Linz in 2012; this exhibition is now on show, in slightly modified form, at Wien Museum. It consists of 48 paintings on loan

from private and institutional owners (including the Museum of the Province of Upper Austria and the Nordico Museum of the City of Linz), along with private documents from the life of the artist. Two of Sedlacek's key works – *The Chemist* (1932) and *Winter Landscape* (1931) – belong to Wien Museum.

Self-taught and successful

Franz Sedlacek was born in Wroclaw in 1891 and grew up in Linz in a German-nationalist and anti-Semitic environment. An avid draughtsman already in his school years, he drew caricatures of fellow pupils and teachers. Following the wishes of his father, a manufacturer of machinery, Sedlacek took up studies at the Vienna University of Technology, where he enrolled in architecture at first, but switched to chemical engineering after two semesters. At the same time, however, he launched his career as an artist in Linz, where – together with Klemens Bosch and others – he co-founded the artists' group MAERZ in 1913. The group, which is regarded as one of the earliest secessionist movements outside Vienna, took a position of moderate modernism. Prior to 1920, Sedlacek produced graphic works only, with a strong leaning towards elements of caricature.

Having graduated in 1921, Sedlacek was employed as head curator of the chemistry department at the Vienna Technical Museum (whose deputy director he became in 1937) and embraced the conventional lifestyle of a middle-class citizen with wife and children. "I worked very assiduously in those years, since I had only my spare time after office hours to pursue my artistic endeavours," said Sedlacek in retrospect in 1944. To improve his painter's eye, he studied the Old Masters' paintings (especially Northern Renaissance works from the Low Countries) at the Museum of Art History, and within a few years had developed a surprisingly virtuoso oil painting technique. Sedlacek created urban scenes, still lifes, interiors and many landscapes, which his contemporaries saw as belonging to the New Objectivity school, but also to Neo-Romanticism. He also worked in the literary field, writing poems, short parodic stage plays and an unfinished novel.

Success in Europe and in the USA

Franz Sedlacek pursued his career as an artist with determination: From early on, he had professional photographs made of his pictures, some of which appeared in popular magazines. His work was shown at the Secession in 1920 and on several subsequent occasions, and in 1927 he became a full member of the institution. He also exhibited paintings at international events, including the 1929 World Fair in Barcelona, where he was awarded a gold medal for one of them, and at shows in the US, including the Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Painting.

Sedlacek continued to be present in exhibitions during the years of Austrofascism and Nazi rule, including the propaganda show "Mountains and People of the Ostmark" at Vienna's Künstlerhaus. He also joined several Nazi organisations, such as the "Reich Chamber of Fine Arts". Sedlacek served as an officer in the German Wehrmacht from

1939 to January 1945, when he went missing on the eastern front near Toruń.

The paintings in the exhibition are grouped under seven headings: there are winter landscapes, "romantic" landscapes, street scenes from cities and villages, Sedlacek's extraordinary floral still lives, Christian motifs (e.g. the flight into Egypt), which seem to have been popular with potential buyers, and pictures with phantasmagoric chimeras or deformed human figures, often inspired by literary sources. Another dominant theme is the confrontation between seemingly idyllic landscapes and set pieces of modern technology, such as automobiles, power plants or aeroplanes.

The curators of "Chemist of the Imagination" are Gabriele Spindler, director of Landesgalerie Linz, and Ursula Storch, Wien Museum's curator of 20th-century art. The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue with an introduction by Gabriele Spindler and comments on the pictures by Ursula Storch. Gerold Tagwerker, himself an active artist, designed the exhibition.

- Admission:** Adults EUR 8, concessions EUR 6
(*senior citizens, disabled persons, Vienna Card and Ö1 Club Card holders, students up to 27 years of age, apprentices, conscripts in military/civil social service, groups of ten or more persons*)
Free admission for school pupils and students under 19 years of age
Free admission for all visitors every first Sunday of the month
- Visitor information:** T +43 1 5058747-85173, service@wienmuseum.at, www.wienmuseum.at
- Guided tours:** Sundays and public holidays, 3 p.m.
Booking for groups: T +43 1 5058747-85180, service@wienmuseum.at
- Curators:** Gabriele Spindler (Landesgalerie Linz), Ursula Storch (Wien Museum)
Exhibition design: Henny Liebhart-Ulm/Gerold Tagwerker
Graphic art: Dominik Hruza studio
- Catalogue:** Franz Sedlacek. Chemiker der Phantasie
Eds.: Gabriele Spindler and Ursula Storch on behalf of Wien Museum
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