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The poet as painter

In what is the first ever retrospective of Hermann Hesse's visual works, *Jo Caird* finds much to like

We know Hermann Hesse as the Nobel Prize-winning writer of *Siddhartha*, *Steppenwolf* and *The Glass Bead Game*, but most of us would be surprised to learn that he was also a prolific artist, producing as many as 4,000 watercolours, oil paintings, pen drawings and illustrations in his lifetime. This year, the 50th anniversary of the great poet and novelist's death, the Kunstmuseum Bern is joining forces with the Fondazione Hermann Hesse Montagnola to launch *The Poet as Painter: Hermann Hesse*, the first ever retrospective of Hesse's visual arts oeuvre.

The Swiss-German writer began painting regularly in 1916 at the suggestion of his psychoanalyst following a traumatic period in which his father died and his youngest son became seriously ill. Already famous for works including *Peter Camenzind* and *Beneath the Wheel*, as well as for his editorship of a bi-weekly journal critical of the German Empire,

Hesse took to working with watercolours with remarkable assiduity. It would be a major part of his life well into the 1930s.

In 1919, after the break-up of his first marriage, Hesse relocated from Bern to Ticino, in Switzerland's Italian south. Based at the Casa Camuzzi, now home to the Hermann Hesse Museum, the writer painted every day if the weather was good, sometimes finishing one picture after a morning's work and another by the evening. It is the landscapes of this region – the rich vegetation, moody hills and brightly painted dwellings of the Collina d'Oro – that dominate his visual output.

The Poet as Painter is the result of an ambitious plan formulated in December 2010 to locate and catalogue as much of Hesse's visual arts oeuvre as possible. Representing about 10 percent of the total works found (although documentary evidence hints at his having produced

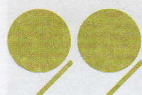
- 01 *Selbstbildnis*, 1919
Privatbesitz © 2011,
Hermann Hesse- Editionsarchiv, Volker
Michels, Offenbach
- 02 *Ohne Titel*, 1926
Privatbesitz © 2012,
Hermann Hesse- Editionsarchiv, Volker
Michels, Offenbach



02



His watercolours express...
the fluid limits between
human and nature, living
and dead



3,000–4,000 individual pieces) and featuring examples from each of Hesse's creative periods in a range of media, it brings together around 200 works. Hesse experimented with different styles, trying his hand at expressionism, symbolism and surrealism, yet never devoted himself to a particular school. Valentine von Fellenberg, the exhibition's curator, remarks on the writer's "detached language of art", which we see in "the conspicuous and unusual saturation, as well as the stylistic variations and compositional regularities" in his paintings. "His image of nature", she says, "is strongly subjective. His aquarelles [watercolours] express – just like his literary texts – the fluid limits between human and nature, living and dead matter." Painting was an outlet of creative expression for Hesse, but it never stopped being an intensively therapeutic practice. The artist's massive oeuvre shows him exploring

the same themes again and again and his daily commitment over more than a decade is evidence of a remarkable dedication to his craft. "The process of painting", Dr von Fellenberg believes, "was far more important than its result ... Painting became a necessity".

Posthumous appreciation

Even so, Hesse yearned for recognition as a painter. Some artists among his acquaintance offered him encouragement and buyers were occasionally found for the illustrated manuscripts of his works, but as a visual artist, Hesse never achieved anything like the success he enjoyed as a writer. Dr von Fellenberg points out that although "Hesse himself spoke modestly about his artistic works all his life ... in 1926, when he was elected as a member of the Council of the Prussian Academy of Arts, he wrote to his son Bruno that he unfortunately rose into the

section for language and literature rather than the painters' section."

For admirers of Hesse's poetry and prose, *The Poet as Painter* represents a unique opportunity to learn more about this complex figure. Hesse's art, Dr von Fellenberg says, offers an insight into the "mental and emotional world which shapes his literary works". No longer will we be limited to understanding Hesse in purely literary terms, but as he really was, "a creative man, who shaped his rhythm of life, and satisfied his needs by means of various art forms." Finally, 50 years after his death, this artist is getting the recognition he sought. ■

The Poet as Painter: Hermann Hesse is running from 28 March to 12 August at the Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern, Switzerland. www.kunstmuseumbern.ch

Further exhibitions:

There are plenty more worthwhile exhibitions taking place across the European art scene, including Damien Hirst at the Tate Modern in London, and undiscovered masterpieces of Russian art in Tallinn, Estonia



Marcel Duchamp, *Fresh Widow*

FRESH WIDOW: THE WINDOW IN ART SINCE MATISSE AND DUCHAMP

The title of this show is taken from a work by the surrealist artist Marcel Duchamp, one of 20th-century art's most important figures. The piece, which comprises a miniature French window whose panes have been blacked-out with leather, marks a moment in art history when artists begin to turn away from the notion of the picture as window and start to consider a more inward-facing version of pictorial reality. Including works by Ellsworth Kelly, Eva Hesse, Robert Motherwell, Gerhard Richter and Olafur Eliasson, this show explores the progression of the window in art from 1912 to the present day.

***Fresh Widow: The Window in Art since Matisse and Duchamp* is running from 31st March to 12th August at Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Dusseldorf, Germany. www.kunstsammlung.de**



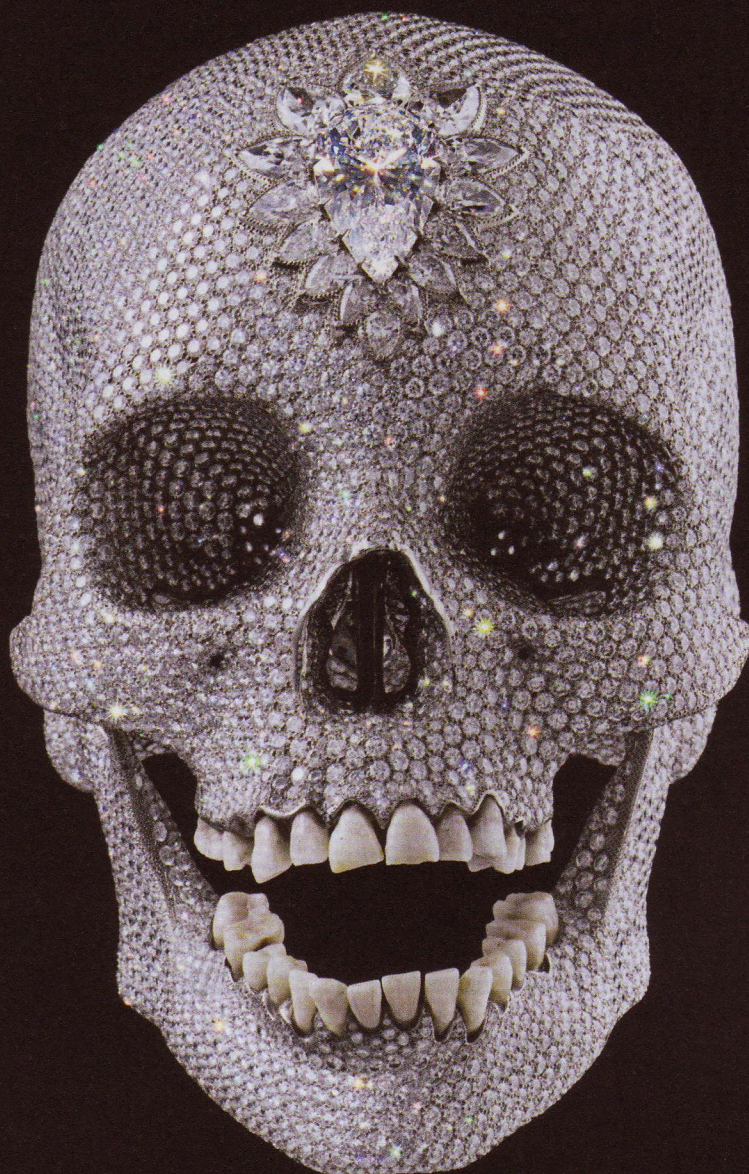
Ivan Shishkin, *Pine Woods*, 1878. Oil on canvas. Art Museum of Estonia / Kadriorg Art Museum

UNDISCOVERED MASTERPIECES: RUSSIAN ART FROM THE COLLECTIONS OF THE BALTIC COUNTRIES

The largest-ever exhibition of Russian art in Estonia, this show is a collaboration between the Kumu and two major museums in Latvia and Lithuania, each of which boast impressive collections of Russian artworks. Since the 1700s, Russia has exerted a strong cultural influence over the Baltic countries, an influence carries with it a legacy of wonderful art. This show includes paintings, sculptures and prints dating from the mid-19th century until the 1930s, encompassing Russian Impressionism; National Romanticism; the Avant-Garde; and the work of the realist artists known as 'The Wanderers'.

***Undiscovered Masterpieces. Russian Art from the Collections of the Baltic Countries* is running from 22nd March to 12th August at the Kumu Art Museum, Tallinn, Estonia. www.ekm.ee**

Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God*, 2007. Platinum, diamonds and human teeth.



DAMIEN HIRST

Forming part the London 2012 Festival, the finale of the Cultural Olympiad, this is the first major UK retrospective of the work of one of the country's most influential contemporary artists. Damien Hirst has been making waves in the art world ever since 1988 when he curated *Freeze*, a show of his own work and that of his friends and fellow Goldsmith's College students held in a disused London warehouse. This survey features over 70 works from two decades of the British artist's headline-making career, including two major installations. Expect to see sculptures including *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, Hirst's famous 1991 work showing a tiger shark suspended in a tank of formaldehyde, and paintings from his 'spot', 'spin', 'butterfly' and 'fly' series.

Damien Hirst is running from 4th April to 9th September at Tate Modern, London, UK. www.tate.org.uk