Eva Kaiser, *Crucifixion* (2005).

EARS TO HEAR, EYES TO SEE

Showing Modern Art In Austria's Historical Monastery

Interview with Wolfgang Huber

Andrei Zolotov, Jr.

Visitors come to the magnificent Klosterneuburg Monastery outside Vienna—which recently celebrated its 900th anniversary—for many reasons: to celebrate the foundation of the Austrian state (which more or less began here), to pray in the imposing Baroque church, to tour the ornate imperial residence built around it as a kind of Escorial, to see the crown of the Archdukes of Austria, to venerate the relics of the monastery's founder, St. Leopold of Babenberg, and to contemplate the world-famous masterpiece of medieval art housed here—the gold and enamel reredos made in 1181 by Nicholas of Verdun. Last but not least, they come here to visit the cellars and buy wine from one of the country's largest estates!

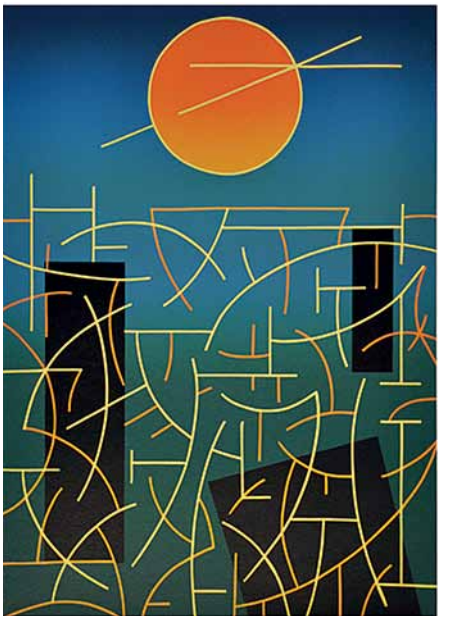
What casual tourists stumble upon rather unexpectedly, after passing through the exhibits of Baroque paintings and ancient books, is a rather stunning gallery of modern art, the Galerie der Moderne. Here there are four halls dedicated to the 20th and 21st century treatments of Christian symbols, beliefs, and values. One hall is dedicated to the creation, another to the resurrection and the ascension, the third to the passion, and the fourth to the cross. The oldest work dates from the 1900s—a ceramics crèche by Julie Sitte, an artist of the Wiener Werk-

stätte, one of the main laboratories of the *Jugendstil* movement. The newest piece was purchased last year.

Wolfgang Huber, the curator of the art collections of the monastery, told *The Wheel* that the gallery was opened four years ago, when the monastery inherited the private collection of the Roman Catholic prelate Dr. Alfred Sammer, former director of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, who was ordained a priest at a mature age and served as a military chaplain while continuing to champion and to collect modern Christian art. Around the same time, the monastery also came into possession of the estate of an important Austrian expressionist painter, Adrienne Doxat-Fistravec. Since 2008, the monastery has awarded the St. Leopold Peace Prize for modern art, giving a 10,000-euro award every other year for a work which Huber describes as "contemporary art with a certain claim to humanist social criticism based on Christian ethics." The winning work becomes part of the museum's collection.

"Besides all of this, there was an idea coming out of our canons that during its 900 years, the Abbey of Klosterneuburg used art to bring the Word of God to the people. According to some of the canons, this tradition had been neglected in recent decades, but the Abbey should now allot a certain amount of money to buy modern religious art and encourage artists who want to do something in this field," says Huber. "It was perfect because it all came together and the Galerie der Moderne opened—at first only with an exhibition of the collection of Dr. Sammer. But this was now the third season in which we have shown a mixture of works that are part of the collection of the Abbey and loans both from artists themselves and from the families of artists who have died. The news is now spreading that we are doing this. People come and say, 'Oh, I am the son or grandson of a certain important Austrian artist—and he also did religious works. We were not able to sell them, because this market is not so strong. Are you interested in showing them?' Often I say yes, sometimes I say no; and sometimes parts of these exhibitions are also bought for the museum's collection. Meanwhile, this is a wonderful collection that has been started and that will hopefully grow over the years."

Strictly speaking, Klosterneuburg is not a monastery, but a community of Augustinian canons, which means that the order has always been outward-looking and involved in pastoral



Ludwig Gebhard, *Celestial Sign* (1992).

care. One of the late members of the community, Pius Parsch, was a pioneer of liturgical renewal in the Roman Catholic Church, including the moving of the altar into the middle of the church, and thus substantially influenced the decisions of the Second Vatican Council. This open-minded atmosphere at Klosterneuburg has certainly contributed to the modern art venture.

Huber has worked at the monastery for 25 years. For most of this time, he has cared for its enormous collection of historical art, encompassing, he said, about 50,000 pieces, including more than 1000 paintings. In terms of numbers, the roughly 200 pieces of modern art now in possession of the abbey, of which about 70 are exhibited, are just a fraction of his work—but a beloved one. "It is interesting to deal with artists who died 500 years ago. But, I have to say, it is even more thrilling to deal with artists that you can phone and meet and talk with. You can ask them: why did you do this? What did you mean?"

In the exhibition hall dedicated to the cross, Huber shows several works fashioned from rubbish. Here are crosses by Alfred Virant made from mustard-colored tubes of plumbing pipes. Above hangs a large blue cross by Johann Lengauer made from shattered empty bottles. "The idea is that God is the creator of everything, and part of his presence is present in all parts of the creation. And the material that people think they don't need any more and throw away also has the sign of God in it," he says. Next is a cross by the Viennese artist of Bulgarian origin, Peter Atanasov, who made a cycle of colorful crosses from garbage. "He did them in Italy, where he lived close to Assisi, and his idea was that if St. Francis of Assisi lived today, he would also take the rubbish and make a picture of God out of it. All his crosses are bright and colorful and not at all negative, because the cross bears in itself the revelation," explains Huber.

Gerd Paulicke, *Emergency Exit* (2012).

A large number of paintings here date from the Expressionist movement of the 1920s, including a major work by Adrienne Doxat-Fistravec, *At the Foot of the Cross*. The artist's son became a canon at Klosterneuburg and brought with him almost all his mother's art that his family possessed. But *At the Foot of the Cross* stands out because of its size, expression, and significance. According to Huber it was exhibited only once, in 1928, before it appeared in the Galerie der Moderne.

Another series of works, by artists from the 1960s and 70s, came from the collection of Dr. Sammer, including the *Resurrection* of Günther Kraus, which

View of the exhibition space of the Modern Art Gallery (Gallerie der Moderne).

is remarkable for its spectrum of bright yellow to red colors, interpreting the resurrection of Christ as an explosion. Others are on loan from the artists' families, such as the giant triptych *Creation* by Robert Kell (1972).

Some modern works demonstrate the quest for innovative means to express theological ideas. *Emergency Exit* by Gerd Paulicke is a green metal box with a light inside, hanging high up near a door. Instead of the word "Exit," a crucifix and upward-pointing arrows are painted in white, while an electric cable (containing three wires) represents the Holy Trinity giving power to this depiction of ascension.

Occasionally, the gallery engages in collaborative art projects. In 2013, the Museum of Lower Austria organized an exhibition dedicated to the state's patron saint (and the founder of Klosterneuburg), St. Leopold. The museum's director and Huber invited thirteen artists of different ages and genres to create works about St. Leopold. "He lived in the 12th century and was proclaimed a saint in 1485. At the time, no one knew what this person looked like. So artists had to invent a figure—and they did it very successfully, because now everyone here in Lower Austria knows how St. Leopold has to look," explains Huber. The same is true of Leopold's wife, Margravine Agnes, who came from a royal family and whose wealth stands at the foundation of the monastery. She had eighteen children with Leopold, in addition to three children from her first marriage. Agnes Prammer, a young Viennese photographic artist, created a series of portraits of bearded men and pregnant women, made black and white using a 19th-century technique, and chose from them a modern Leopold and a modern Agnes. Three sets of portraits were assembled in a traditional three-part folding altar, offering viewers the chance to pick their saintly couple.

According to Huber, when the project was conceived, he thought many artists would turn down the proposal. But no one did. "Everyone said, 'Oh, how interesting!' Some said: 'It's a topic I've thought about and it's great that I can now do it.' Some of the ideas were so interesting and so fresh, and it is evidence of the fact that artists more or less wait for the opportunity to do something on religious topics," the curator says.

The most prominent presence in the halls of the Galerie der Moderne are the winners of the St. Leopold Peace Prize. The latest is *Funny Games* by a young German sculptor, Peter Müller. The theme is Cain and Abel, and the artist interpreted an episode of brutal beating by young men that occurred in the Berlin metro and was captured by video cameras and widely publicized by the media. "He took still images from the video, abstracted the figures, monumentalized them, and built them out of wooden spikes. It is not possible to touch this sculpture—you will hurt yourself! He portrayed brutality, but he used wood, a natural material, because he said brutality and murder are part of human nature, which we cannot deny: even in the Bible we see that already in the second generation one brother kills the other," says Huber.

Mariele Bergmann, *Leidkultur* (2011).

The most controversial item in the entire exhibit is the winner of the 2011 St. Leopold Prize. It is a life-size sculpture by the Berlin artist Mariele Bergmann of a barefoot woman wearing a burka, her face fully obscured by the veil, holding a naked child—an allusion to a Madonna and Child. The title is *Leidkultur*, a pun on the German word *Leitkultur*. This word, which translates as "leading culture," is meant to suggest that German culture is in some sense paradigmatic, but it is debated whether it is also paradigmatic for immigrants, who are mainly Muslims. Leidkultur means rather "culture of grief."

"Mariele Bergmann is one of the artists who decline to talk about their works. She does not use the word 'Madonna' for this. But everyone who sees it makes his own reflection. It's a beautiful example, because, of course, it causes discussion. From my experience, many priests, many members of the Church want discussion. And even very conservative priests have said to me that it's wonderful that you show something like this. 'I don't like it,' they say, 'I am a conservative person. But so many people don't want to know anything about the Church, and this is a means for me to bring them in and to discuss faith with them. And if you showed only boring things here, which I might like, it would not be good for my work.' We get very positive reactions and I am sometimes really surprised that we are encouraged to be more provocative," says Huber.

"Of course, there are frontiers and there are works which it would not be possible to show here at the gallery. But in this case everyone, 100% of our priests said that this is a wonderful work of art and the basis for discussion. The boundaries of acceptability are not overstepped here." What are the frontiers, then? "It is difficult to

say. Perhaps if she were not wearing a burka but were naked, it would be impossible to show," answers the curator.

But don't people see a reference to Our Lady depicted as an observant Muslim woman as blasphemy? When the sculpture won the St Leopold Prize back in 2011 and was exhibited near the grand entrance to the monastery, there was a guest book nearby. "There were a few remarks in the guestbook saying that it was a shame we put up something like this. But they were so few! Such an attitude exists, but it is negligibly small."

Huber is familiar with cases, in particular in Russia, in which contemporary artworks reinterpreting Christian imagery were vandalized by Orthodox Christian protesters. But he doesn't see any active conflict between the contemporary art scene and the church in Austria—rather, an isolation. "I am sure that there are some parallel worlds that don't have any contact with each other. Sometimes, I go to the museum of modern art and I see things… If I told them to come and see what we show here, they would not understand this. And I don't understand what they are doing either," says Huber.

The pieces that he selects to be exhibited in the gallery need to receive a blessing from the provost of the Augustinian community. Is there ever debate or a conflict between the curator and the superiors of the Abbey? Huber says such a clash is theoretically possible, but hasn't happened so far, since he has a good feel for what is acceptable. "I have worked here long enough to know what is possible and what's not," he says with a smile.

Adrienne Doxat-Fistravec, *Adoration of the Magi.*

What encourages him is the fact that the gallery seems to be fulfilling one of its missions: to cultivate a demand for modern Christian art. Last year, three artists whose works were purchased by the gallery—painter Gottfried Hula, sculptor Johann Lengauer, and photographer Wolfgang Sagmeister—met at the monastery and decided to form a group, called *Hymnus* ("hymn"). "They want to do what we want to show—modern religious art," says Huber. "I am very glad the tradition lives on." ❋

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