

**MASI Lugano**

Museo d'arte  
della Svizzera italiana,  
Lugano

Via Canova 10  
CH – 6900 Lugano

comunicazione@masilugano.ch  
+41 (0)58 866 42 40  
www.masilugano.ch

# Alexej von Jawlensky in Ascona

## "... the three most interesting years of my life..."

23 April – 1 August 2023

Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana, Lugano

LAC Venue

Curated by Cristina Sonderegger

PRESS RELEASE

Lugano, 7 April 2023

MASI Lugano presents "Alexej von Jawlensky in Ascona, ... the three most interesting years of my life...." Featuring a selection of more than twenty exceptional paintings from important public and private collections, the exhibition traces the years that the Russian artist Alexej von Jawlensky spent in Ticino. Conceived with the idea of exploring an aspect of the permanent exhibition of MASI's collections entitled "Sentiment and Observation," this in-depth look at von Jawlensky's work offers more insight into one of the key periods in the Canton's artistic history. One of the founders of the *Neue Künstlervereinigung München* and a member of *Der Blaue Reiter*, Alexej von Jawlensky (Toržok, 1864 - Wiesbaden, 1941) left Germany in haste at the outbreak of World War I, arriving in Ascona after spending time in Saint-Prex and Zurich. The period he spent in the Ticino town from 1918 to 1921 was a seminal one for his artistic career: it was on the shores of Lake Maggiore that he consolidated his aesthetic, mingling the bright colours and marked lines of expressionism with the simplified forms and chromatic transparency of abstract art. This new direction was to make a lasting mark on his art: far removed from the paintings of his Munich years and influenced by events unfolding in Europe and in his own life, he began producing series of works that he painted in parallel, switching freely between one series and another. The exhibition highlights this aspect and the more intimate side of the artist's work, as he moved progressively away from representing nature to highly mystical depictions of the human face, and the face of Christ. But the full significance of these works only emerges when they are perceived as a series, rather than single pieces: each series evokes an ongoing process of constant becoming, explored until it runs its course. Over time, the variations get less and less marked and the act of painting becomes more of a meditative exercise, a *modus operandi* that was particularly unique and innovative in modern art, making Jawlensky a forerunner.

### The layout of the exhibition

The show illustrates the line of research the artist pursued while in Ascona and its outcomes, including works produced before and after that time too. The paintings that open the show, "Still Life with Yellow Coffeepot and White Teapot", 1908 and "Head of a Woman", 1913, are still very much

dominated by the vibrant use of colour, which Jawlensky abandoned in favour of subtler, more diluted shades when he arrived in Switzerland. His living conditions and his *innere Notwendigkeit* (inner necessity), as his friend Kandinsky put it, had in fact completely changed. Obligated to work at a table, and with no studio of his own, the artist swapped canvas for a cheaper material - paper - and smaller, more manageable formats. His exile in Switzerland also led to him developing the idea of working in series, putting the uniqueness of the subject in second place. And during his time in Ascona, from 1918, Jawlensky worked on several series in parallel: the "Variations," the "Mystical Heads," the "Saviour's Face," and the "Abstract Heads."

### **The starting point of the series**

The exhibition features the 1914 painting that is the "matrix" for the series "*Variation über ein landschaftliches Thema*" (Variation on a Landscape Theme), inspired by the view from the window in the house in Saint-Prex he stayed in when he first arrived in Switzerland. While at first the natural subject matter is visible, as the series progresses it is gradually reduced to simple forms and areas of colour. As emerges in the "*Variationen*" of later years, also present in the exhibition, in Jawlensky's work the process of stylization and formal synthesis never completely abandons the original subject. These are works that the artist calls *Lieder ohne Worte* (songs without words), that he continued creating after he left Saint-Prex, until 1921, when he finally concluded the series.

"For some years I painted these Variations, and then it became necessary for me to find a form for the face, as I had understood that great art should be only painted with religious sentiment. And I could only convey this on a human face. I had understood that the artist had to express his divine nature in his art, through forms and colours", Jawlensky wrote. The "Mystical Heads" he began working on in 1917 in Zurich, his second Swiss stop, are stylized female faces with necks and shoulders. Although inspired by the features of real people, the faces express a quest for essentiality, which soon became an attempt to arrive at a universal, iconic form of the human face, stripped of all its individuality. While in Zurich, the artist also began working on his "Saviour's Face" series. Initially depicted with their eyes open, then increasingly closed, any differences between these asexual faces gradually fade away.

The most innovative outcome of the direction he explored in Ascona is the geometric synthesis and chromatic harmonies achieved in the "Abstract Heads," also known as "Constructivist Heads". The show includes the "*Uhrform*," the primordial form of 1918, as well as a number of examples from the 1920s. These heads are his most geometric rendering of the human face, in which everything is simplified still further, the areas of colour expand and the lines become even more pared down, thus accentuating the structure of the composition. It is a long way from the portraits he painted prior to WWI, and closer to compositions of pure form and colour, or as he put it, "sets composed of lines that come together towards the bottom and open out moving upwards, meeting in the centre."

### **"Sentiment and Observation. Art in Ticino 1850-1950"**

The exhibition of the work of the Russian artist Alexej von Jawlensky has been conceived to offer insight into a theme explored in the show presenting MASI's collections, thus contributing to a broader overview of the recent history of visual arts in Ticino. Indeed, since the 19th century this history has been shaped not only by the local artistic community, but also by the artists and collectors who have chosen this area as their home. Presenting a selection of pieces linked to the major art movements of the 19th and 20th centuries - from the late Romantic period to the Expressionism current of the 1920s - the exhibition "Sentiment and Observation" shows how art in Ticino evolved dynamically in this specific cultural milieu, highlighting the influences - from both north and south - that have converged in the region over time.

## **Press contacts**

MASI Lugano  
Press office  
+41 (0)58 866 42 40  
comunicazione@masilugano.ch

## For Italy

ddlArts+battage

Alessandra de Antonellis  
+39 339 363 7388  
alessandra.deantonellis@ddlstudio.net

Margherita Baleni  
+39 347 445 2374  
margherita.baleni@battage.net

## **Exhibition venues**

**LAC**  
Piazza Bernardino Luini 6  
CH – 6900 Lugano

**Palazzo Reali**  
Via Canova 10  
CH – 6900 Lugano

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## Founders



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## With the support of



## Press images

01.

Alexej von Jawlensky

The Oy Valley Near Oberstdorf

ca. 1912

Oil on cardboard

Hamburger Kunsthalle, acquistato nel 1949

© Hamburger Kunsthalle / bpk. Photo: Elke Walford



02.

Alexej von Jawlensky

Head of a Woman

ca. 1913

Oil on cardboard

Private collection



03.

Alexej von Jawlensky

Variation: The Road, Mother of All Variations

1914

Oil on paper on cardboard

Private collection

Photo © Roberto Pellegrini, Bellinzona



04.

Alexej von Jawlensky

Stormy Landscape

1915

Oil on linen-finish painting board

Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. Im 1250, Stiftung Im Obersteg,  
extended loan at Kunstmuseum Basel, 2004

Photo © Kunstmuseum Basel - Martin P. Bühler



05.

Alexej von Jawlensky

Large Variation: Thunderstorm

1916

Oil on cardboard on panel

Private collection

Photo © Roberto Pellegrini, Bellinzona



06.

Alexej von Jawlensky

Variation: Ascona

1918

Oil on paper on cardboard

Private collection

Photo © Roberto Pellegrini, Bellinzona



07.

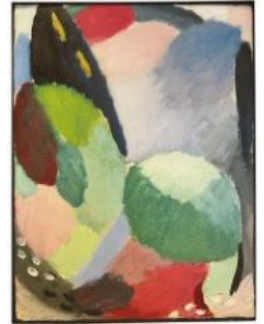
Alexej von Jawlensky

Variation: Sunrise

1918

Oil on linen-finish paper laid down on board

Private collection



08.

Alexej von Jawlensky

Mystical Head: Head of a Girl

ca. 1918

Oil and pencil on paper coated cardboard

Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. Im 1256, Stiftung Im Obersteg, extended

loan at Kunstmuseum Basel, 2004

Photo © Kunstmuseum Basel - Martin P. Bühler



09.

Alexej von Jawlensky

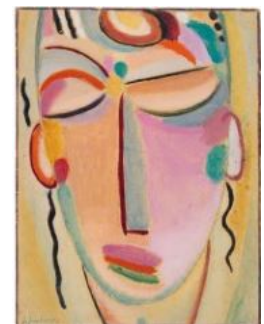
Mystical Head: Meditation

1918

Oil on cardboard

Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München,

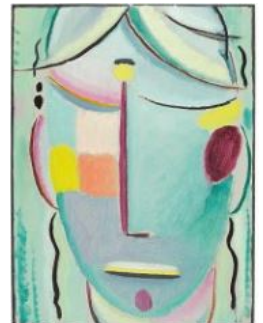
Bernhard und Elly Koehler Stiftung 1965



10.  
Alexej von Jawlensky  
Abstract Head: Original Form  
1918  
Oil on cardboard on panel  
Private collection  
Photo © Roberto Pellegrini, Bellinzona



11.  
Alexej von Jawlensky  
Saviour's Face  
1920  
Oil on preparatory drawing on wove paper  
Private collection  
Courtesy Galerie Kornfeld, Bern



12.  
Alexej von Jawlensky  
Abstract Head: Arabian Fairy Tale  
1925  
Oil on cardboard  
Fondazione Gabriele e Anna Braglia  
Photo © Linda Inconi-Jansen; Courtesy Fondazione  
Gabriele e Anna Braglia

