

Media release

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Verso

Tales from the Other Side

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Curator: Bodo Brinkmann

The exhibition *Verso* at the Kunstmuseum Basel reveals what is hiding on the backs of paintings that date from between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. Thirty-six works of art from the museum's collection are displayed in frames especially developed for the occasion that for the first time enable visitors to examine both sides of the paintings. *Verso* shares usually obscured views with the public that can normally be studied only by museum staff and exposes the sometimes unspoken or forgotten social, political, and religious contexts in which the paintings were used. The exhibition thus opens up novel perspectives on even familiar works of art.

In the galleries on the underground level of the Kunstmuseum Basel | Neubau, eight chapters unfold a wealth of observations. Most of the two-sided paintings in the museum's possession were originally Catholic altar wings, and so the presentation opens with two sixteenth-century altarpieces that have been preserved in their entirety and that help explain the nature of this fixture, which was used in church services.

Altarpieces and portraits

The next chapter delves into one of the most important subjects of polyptychs: the saints of the Catholic Church and the various modes of their representation. It also highlights several remarkable artifices that were employed in the design of altar wings. For instance, a wing from the workshop of the artist Konrad Witz with a painted shrine case on the outside indicates the actual shrine that was behind it when the altar was closed.

The interrelation of painting and sculpture in altars is illustrated by an altar wing that was prepared for the mounting of reliefs that have since been lost. The exhibition also showcases examples of different kinds of decorative painting: from a verso decorated with arabesques and the use of marbling to create an illusion of stone to backings with patterns involving letters that carry a religious meaning.

Portraits, too, were often painted on both sides of a panel. In this instance, the verso was typically a suitable place for a coat of arms that helps identify the sitter. The presentation accordingly dedicates another section to heraldry, now a neglected art.

In the examples mentioned so far, the paintings on the recto and verso were executed at the same time. In many other instances, however, we observe that a verso was painted at a later date or that an original verso painting was replaced with another. Among the four examples of this phenomenon in the museum's collection, the twin-panel double portrait of the Mayor of Basel, Jacob Meyer zum Hasen, and his wife is the most spectacular and instructive instance. In Hans Holbein the Younger's composition, dated 1516 in the artist's hand, the perspective works out only when the two panels are mounted closely side by side, as in a single rigid frame with a central molding. Four years later, though, Jacob Meyer hired another artist to paint his coat of arms on the verso, complete with its own date. At this point in time, then, the two portraits must have been hinged together: folded shut, it would have displayed the coat of arms like the cover of a book to signal what was concealed inside.

Inscriptions and extraordinary cases

An artist putting his touch on a verso need not mean painting it; inscriptions, too, can raise the value of a work or change its meaning. Consider, for example, the portrait of an unknown Dutch master with an inscription on the back added at a later date. The sitter, purportedly a nobleman by the name of Johann von Bruck, had arrived in Basel from the Netherlands in 1544 because he was being persecuted for his religious beliefs. The true identity of the nobleman was not revealed until two years after his death in 1556: the heretic David Joris, an anabaptist and sect leader, who had long been sought in vain by the authorities of the Holy Roman Empire. After the posthumous revelations about the double life of von Bruck/Joris, the council of the City of Basel had the portrait confiscated in 1559 and the inscription added to transform it into a monument of warning. The text even relates the posthumous trial for heresy during which Joris's body was exhumed and burned at the stake.

The exhibition concludes with three instances in which artists deliberately address the relation between recto and verso:

- In the early eighteenth century, the painter of still lifes Pieters Snyers repurposed a century-old copper printing plate as support medium for a painting. The plate was damaged, so no more prints could be taken from it. However, the smooth back was perfect for Snyers' fine painting.

- In 1516, the Holbein brothers Ambrosius and Hans collaborated on a mock shop sign that looked like it was meant to be hung outside a teacher's schoolhouse. The work was probably an erudite gag meant as a farewell gift for their friend and teacher Oswald Geisshüsler, known as Myconius.
- And in 1517, Niklaus Manuel Deutsch created a trompe l'oeil (a 'deception of the eye'), a thin panel that resembles a chiaroscuro drawing on colored paper, a characteristic format of the period. And just as graphic artists often use both sides of a sheet of paper, the painter produced a second work on the verso that is even more spectacular than the recto.

The exhibition *Verso. Tales from the Other Side* gathers works by Hans Baldung (Grien), Hans Bock the Elder, Jacob Cornelisz. van Oostanen, Lucas Cranach the Elder, Hans Fries, Hans Holbein the Younger, Ambrosius Holbein, Wolfgang Katzheimer the Elder, Niklaus Manuel (Deutsch), Hans Pleydenwurff, Jan Polack, Pieter Snyers, Tobias Stimmer, Konrad Witz, and others from the collection of the Kunstmuseum Basel.

Media dossier and imagery

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