

Max von Moos

Die Aufschlüsselung

The painting *Aufschlüsselung* (1936; → 1) is as enigmatic in its impact as it is fascinating. Its title is a play on the words “Schlüssel” (key) and “aufschlüsseln” (to decode), and we see here how a root-like structure winds its way out of a keyhole in the centre while two deformed key bits push their way into the picture from the margins. But we don’t learn what lies behind the door.

This enigmatic work is the starting point for our eponymous exhibition devoted to Max von Moos (1903–1979), one of the most significant Swiss surrealists. The elusive nature of both Von Moos’s works and his personality were recognised early on, and by the mid-1980s, it was already evident that his œuvre resists any definitive interpretation and would continue to be a subject of debate.

This exhibition aims to contribute to this open debate. It approaches the œuvre of Max von Moos from three interlinked perspectives: (1) a formal “decoding” that reveals his ongoing process of varying, consolidating and re-forming his chosen motifs; (2) placing his work in the broader context of art history, thereby providing insights into his environment, his role models and colleagues; and (3) his own self-analysis that reveals itself not least through his many self-portraits, themselves an expression of an intense process of self-interrogation.

Max von Moos was an artist whose works reflect not only his own sensibility but also the artistic trends of his time and the major events of contemporary world history.

Intro

Max von Moos was born in Lucerne in 1903. Today, his work occupies a core position in the collection of the Kunsthaus Zug. Its holdings have been significantly expanded thanks to generous donations from the Max von Moos Foundation and Peter Thali's collection. Since it was founded, the Zug Art Society has made Swiss Surrealism one of the defining focus areas of its collection, which has grown steadily ever since.

Today, the Kunsthaus Zug holds groups of works from all phases of Max von Moos's creative career, from childhood drawings to works with felt-tip pen that he made shortly before he passed away. This extraordinary concentration of works allows us to trace central themes across the decades and to see how he developed them.

The pen-and-ink drawing from 1956 (→ 2) shows more than just two keys. It is like a mental map in how it brings together core motifs from Max von Moos's oeuvre that we shall observe time and again throughout this exhibition: his practice of dissection and fragmentation; landscapes reminiscent of a lost civilisation; a figure that references images of parades; and elemental forces, here embodied by the volcano in the background. But let's go back and start at the beginning.

Note: All artworks marked with a circle are not by Max von Moos, but by other artists.

- 1 Max von Moos (hereinafter "MvM"), *Aufschlüsselung*, ca 1936, tempera on cardboard, lacquered, donated by Peter Thali
- 2 MvM, untitled, 1956, ink on paper, Max von Moos Foundation

The beginnings

An early self-portrait (→ 1) depicts Max von Moos as a boy with a critical, alert gaze. He is observing himself keenly, and places himself in the picture with a self-controlled air. The exhibition room entitled "Anfänge" ("The beginnings") is devoted to von Moos's origins and early years, from his days at school via his studies at the State School of Applied Arts in Munich in 1922/23 to his appointment to teach at the School of Applied Arts in Lucerne in 1929.

Max von Moos grew up in a bourgeois environment that was both creative and strictly Catholic. His father, Joseph von Moos, was a painter, an admirer of Ferdinand Hodler and an art teacher who was appointed the director of the Lucerne School of Applied Arts in 1919. It was he who painted *Meine zwei Buben* (My two boys, ca 1911; → 3), depicting Max with his older brother Xaver. Von Moos regarded his father as his most important teacher. His mother, Helene von Moos, was also artistically gifted. A drawing by her can similarly be seen here (display case → 2).

Max von Moos's early drawings of objects reveal a steady hand and an ability to engage in sober, precise observation (→ 8, 9). He enrolled at the Lucerne School of Applied Arts in 1919, where he made works with ornamental and archaic features that show the influence of Art Nouveau and of his early interest in non-European cultures – an interest that he continued to develop during his studies (→ 11–14).

After encountering the works of the Old Masters in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, von Moos lost all confidence in his talent. He abandoned his studies and embarked on an apprenticeship as an antiquarian bookseller in Basel. In 1929, he returned to the family home – the Villa Heimbach – which now became his place of permanent residence. His drawing of a wine bottle (→ 10) was reputedly one of the reasons his father Joseph helped him to get a temporary post at the Lucerne School of Applied Arts. In 1933, it was made into a permanent position.

- 1 MvM, untitled (self-portrait), undated, pencil on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 2 MvM, untitled, ca 1913, pencil on paper, Max von Moos Foundation
- ③ Joseph von Moos (1859–1939), *Meine zwei Buben* (My two boys), ca 1911, oil on canvas on a wooden panel, Stanislaus von Moos
- 4 MvM, *Gedächtnis-Zeichnung. Vor dem Schulhaus* (Drawing from memory. In front of the schoolhouse), undated, pencil on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 5 MvM, untitled, undated, pencil on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 6 MvM, untitled, undated, watercolour on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 7 MvM, untitled, ca 1913/14, pencil on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 8 MvM, *Fliederblatt* (Lilac leaf), undated, watercolour and pencil on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 9 MvM, untitled, undated, 8 object drawings, pencil on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 10 MvM, untitled, 1929, pencil on paper, on cardboard, donated by Peter Thali
- 11 MvM, untitled, between 1917 and 1923, 2 gouaches on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 12 MvM, untitled, undated, 2 ink drawings on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 13 MvM, untitled, undated, ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 14 MvM, untitled, undated, ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali

Anatomy & masks

The topics "anatomy" and "masks" are closely interwoven in our exhibition. Already during his studies in Munich (1922–23), Max von Moos took additional courses in anatomy because he was determined to supplement his regular classes with a systematic exploration of the human body. These years in Munich laid the foundation for his lifelong interest in anatomy. What began for him as an academic exercise developed into a core motif in his creative thought.

Von Moos's anatomical studies are notable for their high degree of precision. Anatomical atlases and textbooks provided him not just with a starting point for his artistic explorations, but also served as teaching materials for his classes at the Lucerne School of Applied Arts. At the same time, bones, skulls, muscles and organs found their way into his own artworks. Von Moos developed a visual language of dissection and reassembly: he takes formal elements from anatomy and translates them into surrealist imagery, combining them with other motifs.

The painting *Das Lächeln* (The smile, 1966; → 8) offers us a prime example. This is not some neutral, anatomical illustration for teaching purposes. Its exposed teeth are shaped in a grin that comes across as neither friendly nor inviting, but as something ambivalent and confusing, situated somewhere between liveliness and rigidity. An anatomical study here becomes an independent work of art.

In this juxtaposition of anatomical studies and images of masks, two seemingly contradictory principles enter into dialogue with each other: that of revealing, and that of concealing. When we take a closer look, however, we can observe clear parallels between them.

Let's take another look at *Das Lächeln*. The radicalism of its anatomical depictions is directly confrontational and evokes associations with traditional images of Death – especially of the dance of death. In that pictorial tradition, Death appears grinning, jeering, or as a Fool. The dance of death and the Fool accordingly belong to the core motifs of von Moos's oeuvre.

These pictorial topics are situated in a long tradition in art history – such as in the works of Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Giuseppe Arcimboldo or Francisco de Goya. Their works were among the models to which von Moos referred. And at the same time, von Moos passed on his interests to his students, such as André Thomkins (display case → 17) and Franz Anatol Wyss (display case → 15).

- 1 MvM, untitled, 1948, ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 2 MvM, untitled, 1970, felt pen and ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 3 MvM, untitled, 1970, felt pen and ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 4 MvM, untitled, 1956, ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 5 MvM, untitled, 1954, ink on paper, donated by Ursula Röthlin
- 6 MvM, untitled, 1954, ink on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 7 MvM, untitled, 1954, ink on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 8 MvM, *Das Lächeln* (The smile), 1966, oil and ink on paper on cardboard, donated by Peter Thali
- 9 MvM, untitled, undated, 18 ink drawings on paper, Max von Moos Foundation
- 10 MvM, untitled (self-portrait), 1958, ink on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 11 MvM, untitled, 1942, tempera and oil on paper, varnished, mounted on cardboard, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 12 MvM, untitled, 1942, tempera and oil on paper, varnished, mounted on cardboard, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 13 MvM, untitled, ca 1942, ink on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 14 MvM, *Je sais tout* (I know everything), 1959, tempera on paper, mounted on cardboard, archive of Peter Thali
- 15 MvM, *Maske* (Mask), undated, chalk on paper, donation from the estate of Annemarie and Eugen Hotz
- 16 MvM, untitled, 1949, crayon on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 17 MvM, *Harlekin* (Harlequin), 1960, gouache and ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 18 MvM, untitled, 1976, felt pen on paper, donated by Pia and Carl Frei
- 19 MvM, untitled, 1936, ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 20 MvM, untitled, undated, ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 21 MvM, *Keimlingsgesicht* (Seedling face), 1969, oil and tempera on paper, mounted on cardboard, Kunsthaus Zug
- 22 MvM, untitled, 1935, tempera on paper, Kunsthaus Zug, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 23 MvM, *Gespensterreigen* (Round dance of the ghosts), 1956, oil and tempera on hardboard, donated by Peter Thali
- 24 MvM, *Schlängentrauma* (Snake trauma), 1964, oil and tempera on hardboard, donated by Peter Thali

Abstract – figurative

After returning to Lucerne in 1929, Max von Moos worked briefly at the Laggis advertising agency in Horw, where he got to know the painter Ernst Maass. They both harboured a deep admiration for Paul Klee, as is evident from a letter (display case → 1). Von Moos had abandoned his studies in 1923 and thereafter completed an apprenticeship as an antiquarian bookseller in Basel. But he now resumed his artistic work.

Under the influence of Klee, von Moos began to make a series of poetic, playful paintings. They were small in format, humorous, but at the same time show him searching for his own visual language. His painting *Schlangenfänger* (Snake catcher, 1931; → 5) offers us a prime example. Quite apart from its formal debt to Klee, the snake motif here is one that becomes central to von Moos's work. It is an ambivalent symbol from our cultural history, signifying death and danger, but also healing and renewal.

Like many artists of the Modernist era, von Moos embarked on an intense engagement with abstract art in the 1930s, to which works such as his *Abstract composition* (1935; → 8) bear witness. Whereas in his paintings he adhered to a precise, controlled working method, his drawings reveal spontaneity, humour and a delight in experimentation.

Von Moos's oeuvre manoeuvres between the abstract and the figurative. Many of his forms appear abstract, but are in fact borrowed from the repertoire of human or animal anatomy. This is exemplified in his depictions of crabs, which he drew with scholarly precision, but also incorporated in abstract pictorial contexts (display case, → 2).

A further method that von Moos utilised was the so-called “5-minute drawing”. Working quickly, he would vary, condense, dissolve and then reassemble his motifs. These drawings reveal a formal development that also flowed into von Moos's paintings, and thence back into the drawings. His dynamic structures situated between the organic and the typographical are striking.

From the mid-1930s onwards, von Moos increasingly turned to Surrealism. Artists such as Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger and Max Ernst had a defining impact on him. The last of these in particular impressed him with his works in the 1929 exhibition “Abstract and Surrealist Painting and Sculpture” at the Kunsthaus Zürich. In 1936, von Moos became a founding member of the artists' group “Allianz” (“Alliance”) and participated in the exhibition “Zeitprobleme in der Schweizer Malerei und Plastik” (“Contemporary problems in Swiss painting and sculpture), also at the Kunsthaus Zürich. It was followed in 1937 by a solo exhibition for von Moos at the Kunstmuseum Luzern that was afforded a positive reception by the critics (display case, → 1).

In the late 1940s, Max von Moos began to draw himself repeatedly. He was less concerned about realistic depiction and more about his own sense of self. This was an impressively obsessive process of self-interrogation (→ 26).

- ① Room 1
Paul Klee (1879–1940), *Einiges* (Some), 1926, pen on paper on cardboard, on permanent loan from the Kamm Collection Foundation
- ② Paul Klee (1879–1940), *Zeichnung zu “Der Narr als Prophet”* (Drawing for “The fool as prophet”), 1921, pen on lined paper with dots of glue on cardboard, on permanent loan from the Kamm Collection Foundation
- ③ Paul Klee (1879–1940), *Erinnerung an Tegernsee* (Memory of Tegernsee), 1919, pencil and brush on paper on cardboard, on permanent loan from the Kamm Collection Foundation
- ④ Paul Klee (1879–1940), *Raumarchitektur mit der gelben Pyramide* (Spatial architecture with a yellow pyramid) 1915, watercolour on paper on cardboard, on permanent loan from the Kamm Collection Foundation

- 5 MvM, *Schlangenfänger* (Snake catcher), ca 1931, tempera on paper, donated by Annemarie and Eugen Hotz
- 6 MvM, untitled, 1962, ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 7 MvM, untitled, ca 1930, mixed technique and oil on cardboard, Kunsthaus Zug
- Room 2
- 8 MvM, untitled, undated, 4 drawings, pencil, gouache and ink on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 9 MvM, *Abstrakte Komposition* (Abstract composition), ca 1935, oil and tempera on wood, donated by Peter Thali
- 10 MvM, untitled, undated, 4 drawings, pencil, gouache and crayon on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- Room 3
- 11 MvM, untitled, undated, pencil on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 12 MvM, untitled, ca 1934, oil and tempera on cardboard, donated by Peter Thali
- 13 MvM, untitled, 1946, ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 14 MvM, untitled, 1945, ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 15 MvM, untitled, 1945, ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 16 MvM, *Untier* (Beast), 1952, oil on hardboard, donated by Peter Thali
- 17 MvM, untitled, 1963, 2 ink drawings on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 18 MvM, untitled, 1949, ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 19 MvM, untitled, 1963/1969, 4 ink drawings on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 20 MvM, untitled, 1960/1962, 4 ink drawings on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 21 MvM, untitled, 1968/1969/1972, 6 felt pen drawings on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 22 MvM, untitled, 1971/1972, 2 felt pen drawings on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 23 Fernand Léger (1881–1955), *Composition*, 1931, pencil on paper, on permanent loan from the Kamm Collection Foundation
- 24 Max Ernst (1891–1976), *Les Champs d'honneur les inondations les plantes sismiques* (Fields of honour, flood, seismic plants, original drawing for leaf No. 12 of the series *L'Histoire Naturelle*, Paris, Ed. J. Bucher, 1926), 1925, frottage (pencil) on paper, on permanent loan from the Kamm Collection Foundation
- 25 Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), *Sitzende Frau* (Seated woman), 1942, ink on paper, on permanent loan from the Kamm Collection Foundation
- 26 MvM, untitled (self-portraits), 1948, 3 ink drawings on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation

Parades & confrontations

Max von Moos reached maturity with his parades and confrontations. From the 1940s onwards, unsettled by the impact of world events, von Moos created the sombre pictorial worlds for which he is best known today.

Von Moos had already become politically active in the 1930s. Lucerne was home to the publishing house Vita Nova, founded in 1934, which supported Christian resistance to the Nazis in the German-speaking world, and von Moos designed numerous book covers for them until 1938 (display case → 1). Like many other artists of his time, it was first the Spanish Civil War, then the outbreak of the Second World War that confronted von Moos with political issues and the role of art in them. “I never deviated from my principle that the situation of humankind in the world had to be reflected in my work“, said von Moos. All the same, he did not place his iconographic programme at the service of any political ideology. Instead, he developed an independent visual and formal language aligned with Surrealism.

The fact that von Moos espoused a political commitment to Marxism nevertheless made him suspicious in Lucerne, which was a conservative city. In 1947, legal proceedings were initiated against him for allegedly having abused his teaching post at the School

of Applied Arts by promoting propaganda. All charges were subsequently dropped, but they resulted in von Moos withdrawing from any active role in politics.

In 1961, the Kunstmuseum Luzern held a major retrospective for von Moos, featuring some 200 of his works. This brought his oeuvre national attention in Switzerland for the first-ever time (display case → 2). The weekly newspaper *Zürcher Woche* wrote of an “artistic sensation“, praising von Moos as an artist of “international stature“. A series of exhibitions now followed, including a dual exhibition together with Otto Tschumi at the Kunstmuseum Winterthur in 1967 (display case → 4).

In the year after his Lucerne retrospective, von Moos created one of the core works of his later period, namely *Totenparade* (Parade of the dead, → 6). It also forms the culmination of his decades-long engagement with the motif of the “parade“. Its group of figures, all lined up rigidly, is reminiscent of Ferdinand Hodler’s concept of parallelism, though at the same time it is situated in the Christian tradition of the dance of death. Its figures all consistently face forwards, meaning that any relationships between them recede into the background. This painting comes across as a closed unit to the viewer. We can find a similar arrangement in von Moos’s *Die Priesterinnen der Astarte* (The Priestesses of Astarte, 1964; → 4).

With *Die Unversöhnlichen* (The irreconcilables, 1951; → 13) and later *Konfrontation* (Confrontation, 1970; → 12), von Moos shifts the conflict to the interior of the image. Now, two figures or forces are juxtaposed in the image space, and we observe how – as in his parades – a tension arises between dynamism and rigidity. Even when his figures are in motion, they appear as if turned to stone. These works testify to the artist’s ongoing engagement with his time – a time he experienced as dominated by threats, violence and existential uncertainty.

- ① Otto Tschumi (1904–1985), *Monsieur A–Z*, 1949, gouache, tempera and pastel on paper, Kunsthaus Zug
- ② Walter Johannes Moeschlin (1902–1961), *Dämonenreigen* (Demon round dance), 1952, oil on canvas, Kunsthaus Zug
- 3 MvM, *Duo*, 1968, oil and tempera on paper on cardboard, donated by Peter Thali
- 4 MvM, *Priesterinnen der Astarte* (Priestesses of Astarte), 1964, oil on cardboard, Kunsthaus Zug
- ⑤ Serge Brignoni (1903–2002), *Figure embryonnaire* (Embryonic figure), 1931, limestone, Kunsthaus Zug
- 6 MvM, *Totenparade* (Parade of the dead), 1962, oil on hardboard, on permanent loan from the Wandeler Collection
- 7 MvM, *Magisches Zwiegespräch* (Magical dialogue), 1950, oil and tempera on cardboard, donated by Peter Thali
- 8 MvM, untitled, undated, 2 pencil drawings on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 9 MvM, *Duett*, 1968, oil pastel, tempera and ink on paper on canvas, Kunsthaus Zug
- 10 MvM, *Grimmige Auseinandersetzung* (Fierce confrontation), 1968, oil pastel, tempera and ink on paper on canvas, Kunsthaus Zug
- 11 MvM, *Verwüstetes Leben* (La vie ravagée/Ravaged life), 1941, oil and tempera on cardboard, donated by Peter Thali
- 12 MvM, *Konfrontation* (Confrontation), 1970, oil on hardboard, donated by Peter Thali
- 13 MvM, *Die Unversöhnlichen* (The irreconcilable ones), 1951, oil and tempera on hardboard, Kunsthaus Zug
- 14 MvM, untitled, 1973/1974, 12 drawings, felt pen and ballpoint on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation

Antiquity

Max von Moos's interest in Antiquity was awakened during his studies in Munich. His visits to the Glyptothek, Munich's museum of Graeco-Roman sculpture, exerted an especially formative influence on him because it enabled him to encounter Classical sculpture at first-hand. Travels to Italy and Greece served to deepen von Moos's interest in artworks of Antiquity, and on these journeys he also produced realistic, graphically precise drawings of the landscapes and cities he saw (→ 3, display case → 1).

In his own creative work, however, Antiquity rarely appears as any kind of harmonious ideal. Instead, von Moos depicts a fragile, crumbling world. Classical figures and motifs appear in fragmentary form, displaced, or embedded in unstable image spaces. This perspective has to be understood in the context of the cultural pessimism that was typical of the time, such as we find in Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* – a book we know Max von Moos to have owned (display case, → 6).

Narrative elements are characteristic of von Moos's pen-and-ink drawings. We can follow recurring figures across several sheets, some of whom seem to be literary in origin – there are obvious allusions to Homer and the epic tradition. The core theme here is transience: there are vanitas motifs, fragile bodies and architectural ruins that all point to the passing away of cultures, knowledge and humanistic ideals (→ 6).

Von Moos was committed to the ideals of a humanistic education, and his works articulate all the more clearly his worries about their potential decay, along with his concern at the dwindling interest in history that he felt was typical of younger generations. We can observe just how much he himself identified with these issues in his drawing of a group of people in which he also depicted himself; it's a hidden self-portrait (1949; → 7).

The principal work in this exhibition room devoted to von Moos and Antiquity is his painting *Polyphemus's Childhood* (also: Cyclops) (1960; → 13). Von Moos takes the Odyssey as his starting point for a painting of the one-eyed giant Polyphemus in a block-like composition with three figures where a graphically depicted single eye, placed at the centre, stands out clearly from the other elements of the picture. The impact of this is unusual – both beautiful and disturbing.

This themed room concludes with three paintings by Ernst Maass (→ 14–16), who exhibited his work together with Max von Moos (display case → 4). They were lifelong friends. Placing their work side by side highlights their similar approach to exploring Antiquity in their art, engaging with both humanistic traditions and surreal fragmentation.

- 1 MvM, untitled, undated, ink on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 2 MvM, untitled, 1941, ink on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 3 MvM, untitled (Rome, view of the city from the Palatine Hill), 1952, ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 4 MvM, untitled (self-portrait), 1965, ink on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 5 MvM, untitled, 1947, 2 ink drawings on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 6 MvM, untitled, 1942/1948/1962, 12 ink drawings on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 7 MvM, untitled, 1949, ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 8 MvM, untitled, 1949, ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 9 MvM, untitled, 1964, ink on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation

- 10 MvM, untitled, 1965, ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 11 MvM, untitled, 1964, ink on paper, Kunsthhaus Zug, donated by Peter Thali
- 12 MvM, *Astarte*, 1968, oil and tempera on paper and cardboard, donated by Peter Thali
- 13 MvM, *Polyphems Kindheit* (auch: *Kyklop*) (Polyphemus's childhood, also Cyclops), 1960, oil on hardboard, on permanent loan from the Wandeler Collection Ernst Maass (1904–1971), untitled (*Und es bleibt die Hoffnung – And hope remains*), 1969, oil on canvas, Kunsthhaus Zug
- 14 Ernst Maass (1904–1971), *Ende mit Schrecken* (*A terrible end*), undated, oil on canvas, Kunsthhaus Zug
- 15 Ernst Maass (1904–1971), *Stilleben für einen Naturwissenschaftler* (*Still life for a natural scientist*), ca 1942, oil on canvas, Kunsthhaus Zug

Elemental forces

The exhibition room entitled “Elemental forces” gathers together examples from von Moos's clearly defined group of works in which he engaged in an intensive exploration of the Tachists' visual language from the mid-1950s onwards. Von Moos received an important stimulus in 1955 when he visited the exhibition “Tendances actuelles III” (“Current tendencies III”) at the Kunsthalle Bern, where works by Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Tobey and Sam Francis were being shown for the first time in Switzerland. Their gestural style of painting, their open approach to the image field and the unmediated energy of their works had a stimulating impact on von Moos, offering confirmation to him in his search for new forms of expression.

For von Moos, however, these paintings acquired meaning primarily against the intellectual backdrop of the atomic age. The bombing of Hiroshima, the threat of the nuclear arms race, and contemporary knowledge of the internal structure of matter served to bring about a permanent shift in von Moos's view of the world. These scientific findings were also communicated through popular science books such as *Das Atom – endlich verständlich* (*The atom – understandable at last*) by Fritz Kahn (1949; display case → 2).

Here, “elemental forces” refers to those basic energies that are beyond human control: the destructive power of nuclear fission, or the cosmic forces that bring about the birth of stars and their explosive deaths in supernovae. Atomic theory, nuclear energy and cosmic processes were revealed as different manifestations of nuclear fission or fusion such as occurs inside stars such as our own Sun. Seen from this perspective, the atom became not just a symbol of a technological threat, but also a model for a radically dynamic world in which becoming and decaying are inextricably interlinked.

We can observe the results of this broad range of ideas in exemplary form in specific works by von Moos. *Werdende Gestirne* (*Emerging stars*, 1959; → 3) opens up a view into the cosmos: bright zones of light emerge from dark fields, hinting at the processes in which matter is created, moves and is restructured. In contrast, *Atomexplosion* (*Nuclear explosion*, 1960; → 6) presents the self-destructive side of human action. Its eruptive burst of colours and its absence of stable forms translate the experience of nuclear fission into a picture of radical dynamism.

The painting *Nietzsche* (1960; → 8) links the Tachist style of painting with an intellectual reference point that had been important to von Moos since the 1920s. Nietzsche's ideas of transformation, destruction and new

beginnings are reflected here both in a dissolution of fixed forms and in the eruptive energy of the image. This exhibition room “Elemental forces” closes a circle, taking us from the atomic structure of matter via cosmic processes to a philosophical reflection on becoming and decaying as a fundamental condition of human existence.

- 1 MvM, *Die Erschaffung von Sonne, Mond und Sternen* (The creation of Sun, Moon and stars), undated, ink on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 2 MvM, *Gewittergeist* (Storm spirit), ca 1937, oil and tempera on cardboard, Kunsthhaus Zug
- 3 MvM, *Werdende Gestirne* (Emerging stars), 1959, tempera and oil on Pavatex, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 4 MvM, *Kosmische Explosion* (Cosmic explosion), 1961, tempera and oil on Pavatex, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 5 MvM, *Kosmos* (Cosmos), 1962, tempera and oil on Pavatex, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 6 MvM, *Atomexplosion* (Nuclear explosion), 1964, acrylics and tempera on Pavatex, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 7 MvM, *Tumoria*, 1960, tempera and oil on Pavatex, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 8 MvM, *Nietzsche*, 1960, tempera and oil on Pavatex, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- ⑨ Franz Fedier (1922–2005), untitled, 1964, acrylics on hardboard, donated by Marian von Castelberg
- 10 MvM, *Strömung isländisch Moos* (Flow of Icelandic moss), 1957, tempera and oil on cardboard, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- ⑪ Meret Oppenheim (1913–1985), *Nuages* (Clouds), 1953, oil on canvas, Kunsthhaus Zug

Self-encounters

The six felt-tip pen drawings exhibited here (→ 1), some of which have been made by a shaky, tremulous hand, are among the last works by Max von Moos before his death in 1979. His switch from painting and pen-and-ink drawing to the felt-tip pen had a medical reason. Von Moos had suffered from glaucoma since 1942 and underwent several eye operations – first on his right eye, later his left – and his vision became increasingly limited. Further operations in the early 1970s did not bring about the improvements he’d hoped for. As a result, he resorted to using broad felt pens from 1972 onwards. But he continued to develop his repertoire of forms, varying familiar motifs and finding a new means of expression. Even in old age, he never stayed still as an artist.

This is especially evident in the many self-portraits in which von Moos incessantly interrogated himself. The Kunsthhaus Zug holds over 1,000 of these drawings, just 49 of which are on display here (→ 11 + 12). We can here observe a wide variety of techniques and styles, and also a broad spectrum of inner states. Von Moos seems to have been less interested in naturalistic representation and more in expressing his perceived self-image. Sometimes he appears youthful, at others almost like a skeleton, close to death; sometimes he is fearful or contrite, then confident again, with a hint of a smile. It is striking how he depicts his right eye, as this area is increasingly left blank – as if it were a visual echo of his progressive loss of sight.

Von Moos’s late felt-tip pen drawings also include two featuring keys. This brings us full circle, back to the beginning of our exhibition and its core question: Who was Max von Moos? How are we to understand his work? And how have people assessed its relevance?

His self-portraits illustrate the different facets of a personality that wouldn’t let itself be pinned down. And the gifts on display in the showcases that were given to him by former students and artist friends offer testimony to his importance to those in his immediate circle (display case → 1–10). These items are supplemented by exhibition catalogues and reviews that document the reception of his work until 1984 (display case → 11–29).

Since 1984, von Moos has been the subject of two starkly contrasting interpretations: Hans-Jörg Heusser has conducted a psychological depth analysis of his work, while Martin Kunz has situated him in the broader context of art history. The debate about whether the inspiration for his images was “inner” or “outer” remains topical today. In many cases, von Moos’s work refers quite obviously to other artists and to images from the natural sciences, but at the same time he also drew on Surrealist techniques and modes of depiction, as, for example, in his “5-minute drawings”, where he varied and recombined elements of his formal repertoire.

Whoever engages intensively with the work of Max von Moos will find new doors opening constantly onto what is a complex oeuvre, created by a multifaceted artistic personality. Von Moos’s works have often been read as resulting from how he dealt with his numerous fears – though in fact, he has left us a body of work that is remarkable in its dauntlessness. Here, seriousness and playfulness, the fantastical and the scientific are to be found alongside both introspective self-interrogation and a critical perspective on the world, with all these seemingly contradictory elements existing in a state of productive tension with each other.

This exhibition concludes with *Modèle pour l'enfilade* (Model for a sequence of rooms) by Christian Kathriner (2026; → 15), which was created especially for this exhibition. Kathriner here refers in an associative manner to von Moos’s painting *Aufschlüsselung*, with door after door opening in a seemingly endless sequence.

- 1 MvM, untitled, 1977–1979, 6 felt pen drawings on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- ② Margaretha Dubach (*1938), untitled (Herz/Heart), undated, ink collage on paper, Stricker private collection
- ③ Josephine Troller (1908–2004), untitled, 1973/1982, ballpoint on paper, donated by her estate
- ④ Irma Ineichen (*1929), untitled (Christmas/New Year 1975/76), 1975, lithograph on paper, Stricker private collection
- ⑤ André Thomkins (1930–1985), *Textualiter*, 1974, watercolour and ink on paper, donated by Zuger Kulturstiftung Landis & Gyr
- ⑥ André Thomkins (1930–1985), *Alportjodle*, 1979, watercolour on paper, donated by Zuger Kulturstiftung Landis & Gyr
- ⑦ Werner Meier (*1943), *UBU Roi*, 1970, ballpoint on paper, Stricker private collection
- ⑧ Roman Signer (*1938), *Übertragung* (Transfer), 1979, ink-pencil on paper, donated by Peter and Christine Kamm
- ⑨ Philippe Schibig (1940–2013), *Goldberg*, 1981, collage and ballpoint on paper, Kunsthhaus Zug
- ⑩ Emil Steinberger (*1933) & Niccel Steinberger (*1965), *Wochenblatt 17/2001* (Weekly paper 17/2001), 29.04.2001, watercolour on paper, Niccel and Emil Steinberger
- 11 MvM, untitled (self-portrait), 1964, ballpoint and ink on paper, donated by Peter Thali
- 12 MvM, untitled (self-portraits), 1947–1977, 48 drawings, ink, felt pen and ballpoint on paper, donated by the Max von Moos Foundation
- 13 MvM, untitled, 1970, felt pen on paper, Max von Moos Foundation
- 14 MvM, *Die Heiligen Schlüssel* (The holy keys), 1970, felt pen on paper, Max von Moos Foundation
- ⑮ Christian Kathriner (*1974), *Modèle pour l'enfilade*, 2026, MDF amaranth, varnished, 3D-print (multi-jet fusion), blackened

Biography

Max von Moos was born in Lucerne on 6 December 1903 in Lucerne, the second son of Helene von Moos-von Schmid (1871–1958) and Joseph von Moos (1859–1939). Helene had painted in her younger years and later worked as a librarian; Joseph worked as an artist and craftsman. The family von Moos lived in “Heimbach“, a house-cum-studio that Joseph had commissioned to be built on the outskirts of Lucerne in 1899.

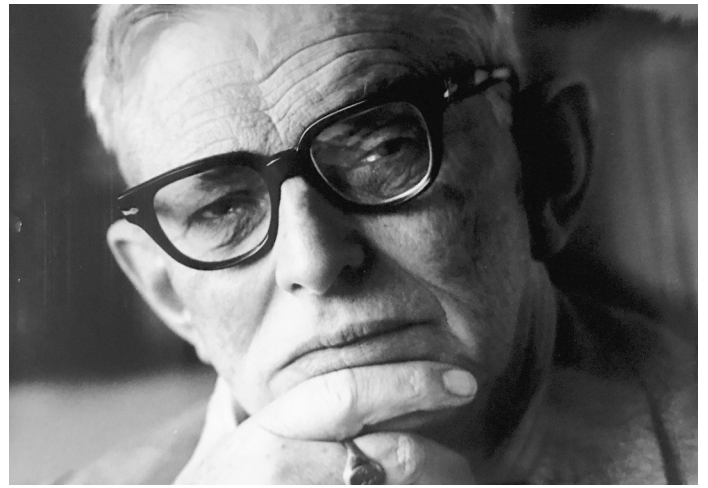
In 1917, Max von Moos fell ill with tuberculosis. He was initially sent to the French Riviera, then spent a year convalescing in Arosa. It was here that he made his first watercolours. After Joseph von Moos was appointed the director of the Lucerne School of Applied Arts, he taught his son there from 1919 until 1922, after which Max moved to Munich, where he studied at the State School of Applied Arts in 1922/23. But seeing the works of the Old Masters in the Munich Pinakothek triggered a crisis of self-doubt, and ultimately led him to abandon his studies.

In 1924, Max von Moos began an apprenticeship as an antiquarian bookseller in Basel, then worked briefly in Geneva. At this time, he remained in close contact with Konrad Farner (1903–1974). In 1929, Max returned to the family home, where he remained permanently. He got work with an advertising agency and began an intensive study of contemporary art.

Max von Moos began teaching at the Lucerne School of Applied Arts in 1929, initially as a substitute and later as a specialist lecturer. He made his first Surrealist works in the mid-1930s, and until 1938 he also designed many book covers for the anti-fascist publishing house Vita Nova.



Max von Moos im Atelier, um 1961,
Foto: Lisa Meyerlist



Max von Moos, ca. 1966,
Foto: Illustrations and Fotopress, Zurich (Fritz Grunder)

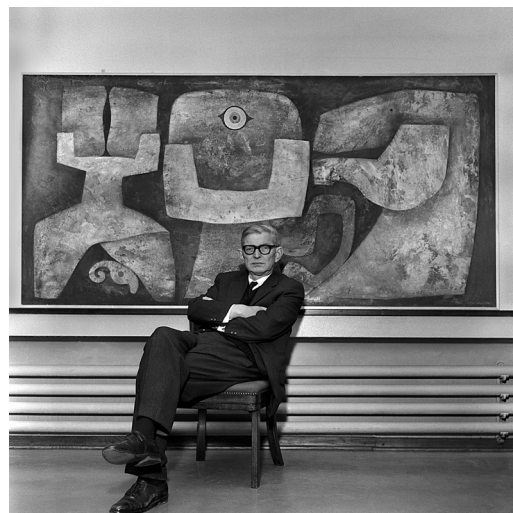
In 1936, von Moos participated alongside 41 other modern Swiss artists in the exhibition “Zeitprobleme in der Schweizer Malerei und Plastik” (“Contemporary problems in Swiss painting and sculpture”), and a year later he was given his first solo exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Luzern. He participated in three of the four exhibitions organised by the artists’ group Allianz that was founded in 1937, and published several essays on art theory.

In the 1940s, von Moos became increasingly involved in politics and was active in re-establishing the “Workers’ Party“. In 1947, von Moos was accused of abusing his teaching position for purposes of political propaganda, which led him to withdraw from active politics.

In the 1950s, von Moos visited Italy and Greece. His first Tachist works also date from this time.

In 1961, the Kunstmuseum Luzern held a major retrospective of his work. In 1966, he was awarded the Art Prize of the City of Lucerne, with Max Bill giving the laudatory speech at the ceremony.

In 1969, von Moos retired from the Lucerne School of Applied Arts. In 1971, he suffered severe hallucinations after an operation. He had suffered from an eye condition for several decades and this, too, now worsened, forcing him to give up painting with oils and tempera in 1973. Max von Moos died in Lucerne on 28 May 1979 at the age of 75.



Max von Moos vor *Polyphems Kindheit* (1960),
Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1961, Foto: Lisa Meyerlist

Information

Kunsthaus Bar

A self-service station is available offering coffee, tea and further drinks. You can pay at the desk using Twint, cash or card. Enjoy your visit!

Shop

Publications relevant to the exhibition are available at Reception, offering deeper insights into the works of Max von Moos. You can also buy these publications at Reception in order to expand your knowledge or as a souvenir of the exhibition. All the publications of Kunsthaus Zug are also listed on our website and can be ordered direct from the publishers.

Events

There is a multifaceted accompanying programme for this exhibition that encompasses different event formats variously in German and/or English, including a "Walk & Talk with Experts", Guided Tours, Art at Lunch-time events, Open Ateliers and Family Sundays.

On the last Thursday of every month, our "Art in the Evening" format offers extended opening hours until 8 pm. Our exhibition flyer, available at the Reception, offers a comprehensive overview of all our events. Alternatively, you can check out our complete programme by consulting our online events calendar, which allows you to enter your favourites directly into your own online calendar.



Art education

Why not come and discover the art education programme at Kunsthaus Zug and engage creatively with art yourself? In our age-appropriate workshops and dialogue-based guided tours, children and young people alike can explore our exhibition together with our art education team and then use their own creativity to record their impressions in our workshop. These offerings are free of charge to state schools of Canton Zug. If you are interested, please contact our art education team, or book directly online.



Become a member!



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Jana Bruggmann – Artistic Director & Curator
Andrea Del Greco – Events Manager
Silvano Frei – Research Associate
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Stefanie Kasper – Art Educator
Fabienne Loosli – Head of Partnerships
Daniela Noser – Communications, Marketing & PR
Susanne Stucky – Art Educator
Barbara Tresch-Stuppan – Art Educator
Adrien Hall – Civil Defence Volunteer
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Severin Villiger, Linda Voorwinde

Art handling team

Hyosi Becker, JB Beovardi, Manuel Hebeisen (restorer),
Daniel Marti, Zef Prekaj, Thomas Ruch, Eveline Stauffer,
Severin Villiger, Christian Vontobel, Linda Voorwinde

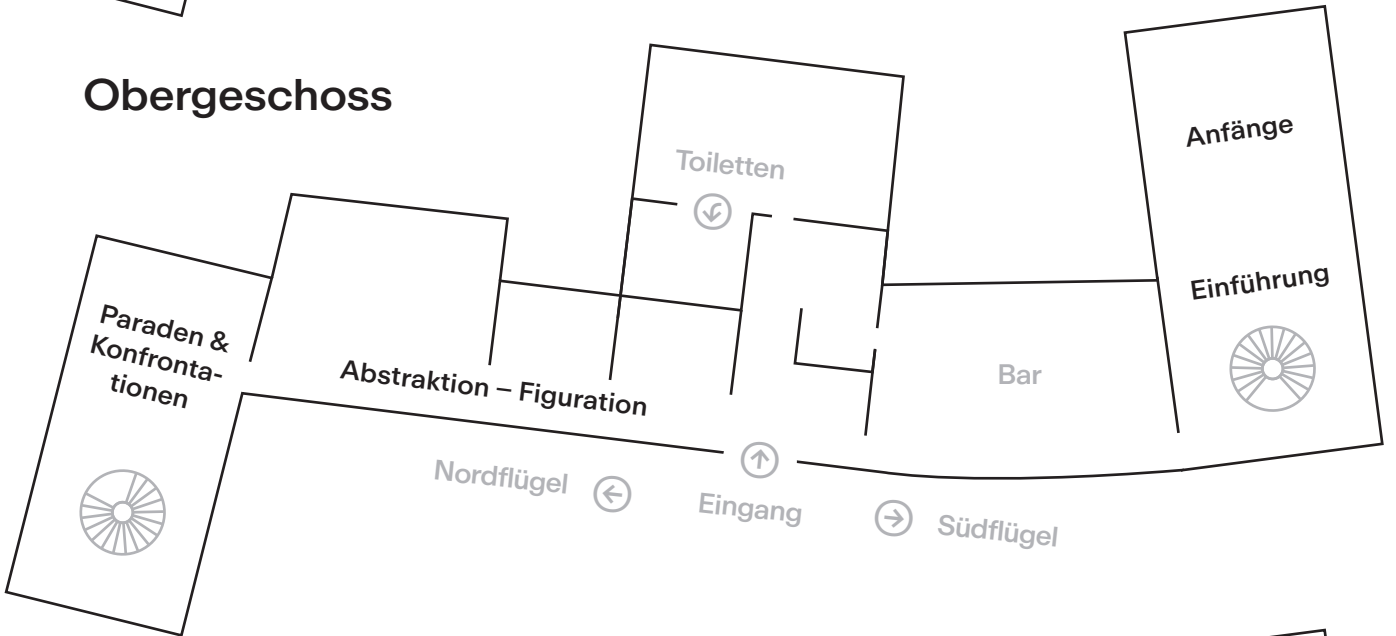
External partners

Alpha Sign (signage), Patrik Meier (carpentry),
Studio Christen (typographic scenography)

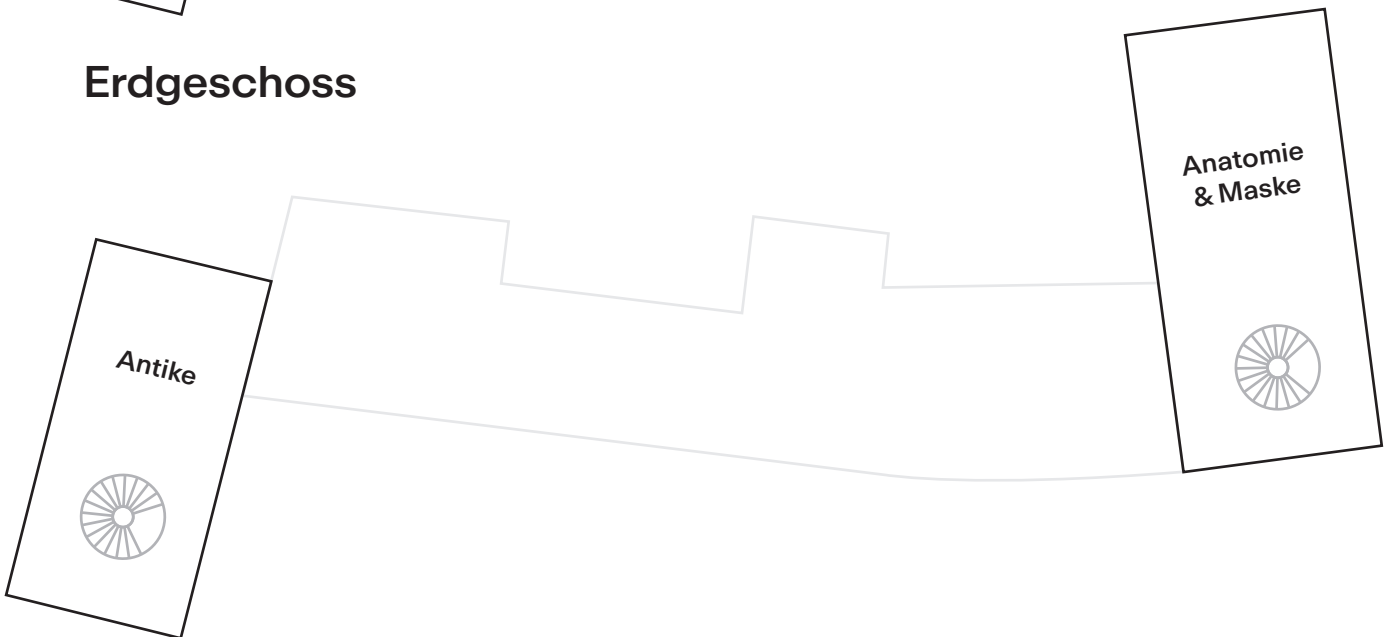
Raumplan



Obergeschoss



Erdgeschoss



Untergeschoss