

Searching for Meaning

Gallery texts in large-format letters

If you can place yourself in the mind of someone who was able to see lemons and interpret them for us in such a way, then you will enjoy art because from it you feel that, despite everything, there is something in the world that we are always seeking and for which we should always have respect.

– Helene Kröller-Müller, March 1909

Searching for meaning is a timeless endeavour. When, at the age of fifteen, Helene Kröller-Müller (1869–1939) encounters the literature of German philosophers and writers such as Lessing, Goethe and Schiller, who advocate thinking for oneself, it leads her to doubt her faith. This is the start of a search for other forms of spirituality and meaning in her life. And Helene is not alone in this. From the late nineteenth century onwards, there is a great revival of numerous spiritual movements, including occultism, spiritualism and Spinozism.

ART AS A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

When Helene is introduced to the charismatic art teacher H.P. Bremmer in 1905, she discovers that art can provide a spiritual experience. Bremmer had broken with the church as a young man and in Spinozism – which is based on the ideas of Dutch philosopher Spinoza – he found the key to the realm of the soul through art. The core of Spinoza's teachings, the search for God in all that is earthly,

dovetailed perfectly with his need for a new spirituality that transcends existing religions. This search for the higher, for the Absolute, is one of the most important foundations upon which Helene Kröller-Müller's collection is built.

CENTRE FOR SPIRITUAL LIFE

In her museum, which opens in 1938 as a 'centre for spiritual life' in the tranquillity of nature, Helene shows the development of modern art from the realism of 1860 to the most abstract art of her own time. She has the greatest admiration for those artists whose soul 'was too strongly expressed in them' through their inclination towards philosophy and spirituality. These artists are the main focus of *Searching for Meaning*. After her death, successive museum directors acquired many works of art for the collection in the same vein. Examples of these are also on display in the exhibition.

CONTEMPORARY EYES

What happens when we look at this art with contemporary eyes? For seven works in the exhibition, philosopher and writer Désanne van Brederode offers different perspectives on how to experience art through conversations. She also discussed the work with her neighbour's girls. The family tour takes you through their discoveries and observations. You can listen to both tours with the podcatcher or via the app.

In the small walk-through room behind it hangs my devout art, an Italian Madonna, the new work by frère Angèle, a drawing by Saenredam etc.

– Helene Kröller-Müller, January 1913

In Museum Kröller, the precursor to the Kröller-Müller Museum which opens on Lange Voorhout in The Hague in 1913, Helene makes room for works by old masters alongside her growing collection of modern art. She places the works in a small room where she combines religious representations with the serene church interior of seventeenth-century artist Pieter Saenredam. It must have felt like entering a small chapel.

According to Helene's mentor Bremmer, the presence of older art in a modern collection is necessary to show that art which can provide a spiritual experience has always existed. Helene is particularly fond of Renaissance art. Unfortunately, Italian paintings are unaffordable, even for the Kröllers, and they mainly purchase works on paper. Her personal favourite, a print by one of the most important Italian Renaissance artists Andrea Mantegna, hangs above her writing desk. Thanks to the beauty of these works, Helene experiences the inner silence she misses in her everyday life.

Attributed to Pseudo Pier Francesco Fiorentino

Helene acquires this painting of a woman's head in Cologne in 1912. In a letter to her confidant Sam van Deventer, she writes that the painting stands like a 'festive dedication' on one of the chairs when it is delivered to her. The depiction does not reveal who the woman is and Helene gives it her own interpretation. At the time, she is reading *La Divina Commedia* (The Divine Comedy) by Italian poet Dante Alighieri, in which he describes an imaginary journey through the three realms of the afterlife. The woman reminds her of Beatrice, Dante's muse and his guide in heaven in the *Commedia*. Like Beatrice, the woman in the painting is very approachable, Helene writes. It feels as though she has gained a 'trusted friend', a friend she had difficulty finding in real life.

Ossip Zadkine

Bram Hammacher, director of the Kröller-Müller Museum between 1947 and 1963, purchases *Rebecca* in Paris in 1952 on a visit to Jewish artist Ossip Zadkine. The sculpture is given a permanent place in the sculpture gallery that was completed in 1953. Hammacher embarks on a new course by collecting sculpture but, in keeping with Helene Kröller-Müller, he continues to select art with a spiritual or philosophical slant. He himself saw art as an expression of an outlook on life.

The pitcher-bearing Rebecca is a Biblical figure from the Old Testament. The pitcher refers to the moment when Rebecca arrives at a well. There she meets Abraham's servant, who has been sent to Nachor to find a suitable wife for his son Isaac. The servant puts her to the test by asking her for water. When she also gives water to all his camels, he is convinced of her goodness. Rebecca marries Isaac.

Vincent van Gogh

Vincent van Gogh paints *Olive Grove* in the southern French town of Saint-Rémy after being admitted to the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole hospital. When his health permits, he goes out to paint in the surrounding area. This work is part of a series of fifteen paintings of olive groves, in which he aims to express the comforting feelings of eternity and connection that he experiences in nature. For Van Gogh, trees contain 'expression and a soul, as it were'. Furthermore, Van Gogh, the son of a pastor, identified olive trees with Gethsemane. In this garden at the foot of the Mount of Olives, Jesus is overwhelmed by grief and fear the day before his crucifixion, but he also accepts his fate there. According to Van Gogh, the olive tree, which can thrive in high temperatures, drought and wind, symbolises the endurance of adversity in life.

Maurice Denis

French artist Maurice Denis was one of the founders of the artist group Les Nabis (Hebrew for 'the prophets') around 1890. This group of young artists seeks 'beauty beyond the visible reality'. In their paintings, an important role is reserved for religion and spirituality. They strive to capture these in a modern neo-impressionist painting style. At first glance, *Mystère catholique* looks like a traditional annunciation, the moment when the angel Gabriel appears to Mary to tell her that she will have a son. The replacement of Gabriel by a deacon and choirboys in contemporary clothing, the view of the French countryside through the window and, above all, the use of the pointillist technique (dotted brushwork) and bright colour contrasts place the work in Denis' own time.

Charley Toorop

As the daughter of artist Jan Toorop and draughtswoman Annie Hall, Charley Toorop is raised in a family where the arts and the Catholic faith dominate everyday life. Through Piet Mondriaan, she is introduced to theosophical and anthroposophical ideas in art, whereby colours and shapes express the non-visible in humanity and nature. Thus, *Lighthouse at Night* acquires a mystical connotation through the colours of blue-grey and glowing red and the undulating forms. Toorop does not embrace abstraction like Mondriaan, but instead opts for realism, out of the need 'to give life its full shape', because 'God can be seen in all matter'. After suffering two strokes, in 1946 and 1947 respectively, she reflects on the finite nature of life in her work. *Skulls and Leaves* is a vanitas, a genre in art where a collection of objects symbolises the inevitability of death.

Odilon Redon

In *Le Sacré Coeur (Le Boudha)*, Odilon Redon brings together two spiritual leaders, Jesus and Buddha, in a single figure. Redon believes that an important task for art is to unite religions, although he refutes that he is a 'spiritualist' who believes that the spirit lives on after death. His inspiration is the book *Les grands initiés* (1889), in which French philosopher Edouard Schuré explores the similarities between religions. Schuré finds these in the view that the soul is immortal, that the mind is greater than the body and that humans are capable of spiritual growth. Thus, in *L'apparition*, the primitive hunter is inspired by the vision of the divine to rise above the earthly realm. *Le temps* shows the precarious balance between life and death. Life, in the form of an hourglass, must occasionally be turned over to prevent Death from emerging from the darkness.

Piet Mondriaan

Piet Mondriaan's interest in theosophy is crucial to the development of his work. According to this religious philosophy, the observable chaotic world is based on a divine or universal order in which the relationship between humanity and the cosmos, between the earthly and the sacred, the material and the spiritual is in perfect harmony. Initially, Mondriaan seeks spirituality in his landscapes. But gradually he becomes convinced that abstract art, through the interplay of rhythm and proportions of lines, colours and shapes, can provide a spiritual experience. His aim is to deconstruct the natural and reconstruct it according to the spirit to 'make the beauty of life visual, tangible and perceptible'. On 3 October 1915, Bremmer purchases *Composition 10 in Black and White* for Helene. In the acquisitions book, the work is given the title *Kerststemming* (Christmas Mood). A letter to Bremmer reveals that the artist found this interpretation agreeable.

William Degouve de Nuncques

Belgian artist William Degouve de Nuncques evokes a mysterious and otherworldly atmosphere in his paintings and pastels. Many of his works are serene, melancholic winter landscapes or nocturnal, fairy-tale worlds. Sometimes these are inhabited by animals or beings, like the angels in *Les anges de la nuit*. An exception is the painting in which Mary, the mother of Jesus, takes centre stage. Degouve, who according to his biographers was not religious, is not concerned with a literal representation of the Madonna, but with the depiction of a feeling. According to Bremmer, Mary symbolises 'a consoling revival from all the misery and suffering in the world'. So apart from the biblical message, the work can also be meaningful to non-believers through the emotions that are central to the scene.

George Minne

Through his interest in mysticism, sculptor and graphic artist George Minne comes into contact with symbolist poets and writers. They commission him to create illustrations for their poetry, from which he derives motifs for his sculpture. The inspiration for *Praying Nun* is the poem 'Oraison' (Prayer) by Maurice Maeterlinck from 1889. There are several versions of this sculpture with different titles, including *Mourning Woman* and *Devotion*. Minne's aim is to depict a mental state and not to create a portrait of a nun. There are also multiple versions of *Kneeling Youth*, of which the museum owns a plaster and a bronze version. The bowed head and arms folded in front of the chest give the sculpture a devout character. The fountain designed by Henry Van de Velde in 1905 at the Folkwang Museum in Essen consists of five kneeling youth figures. This group, entitled *Fountain with Kneeling Youths*, is Minne's best-known work.

Jean Arp

With this work, Jean Arp questions the origins of humanity and life. *Torse préadamite* is a reference to the first Bible critique written by Isaac La Peyrère in 1655. In the seventeenth century, partly due to the rise of the exact sciences, people began to test the Bible. Because of the ancient chronologies of the Pharaohs, Chinese and Aztecs, there would have to be life prior to the creation described in the Bible. La Peyrère called the people who lived before Adam preadamites. Usually, Arp gives his work a title after completion. During the creation process, he has no specific subject in mind: 'I only have to move my hands.... The forms that then take shape offer access to mysteries and reveal to us the profound sources of life'. He relates the organic forms thus created to growth, impermanence, evolution and metamorphosis, which govern the cycle of life on earth.

Nam June Paik

In *Zen for Film*, pioneer of video art Nam June Paik chooses a medium that normally makes something visible: film. But Paik projects an empty film resulting in a rectangle of colourless light, which changes constantly due to the accumulation of scratches, dust and dirt on the film strip. The image is simultaneously empty and full. This non-duality, the notion that all is one, is important in Zen meditation, in which the mind is emptied by being aware of its fullness. In this work, Paik connects Eastern philosophy and spirituality with Western technology and mass media. *Zen for Film* was shown at the Arnhem art festival *Sonsbeek buiten de perken* in 1971, which was co-organised by Rudi Oxenaar, director of the Kröller-Müller Museum from 1963 to 1990.

Jan Toorop

From 1890 to 1898, the Catholic Jan Toorop focuses on symbolism. In this reaction to realism, the emphasis lies on the depiction of feelings, the subconscious and the inexplicable. Toorop's symbolist work is characterised by the stylistic influence of his native Indonesia. The interplay of lines is reminiscent of batik fabric designs and some figures of *wajang* shadow puppets. 'Someone who does not see me in my Eastern way of thinking and does not understand the incantatory signs I have sensed in that art cannot comprehend my work.' His drawings are full of meaning and often refer to Biblical stories. For example, *Les rôdeurs* is his own version of the Fall of Man. A young woman lies in a cemetery, as a symbol of virginal innocence. She is assailed by sensuality, in the form of aggressive men. The naked man on the bottom left, reaching for her scarf, is a reference to Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel.

China

Scholars' rocks are naturally formed stones or pieces of petrified wood. Exposure to the elements has given them unusual shapes, colours and textures. The stones are presented as they were found. Only the underside of the stone is flattened to allow it to be placed on a specially made wooden pedestal. The collecting of scholars' rocks began in China during the Song dynasty (960–1279) when Chinese scholars discovered the aesthetic and spiritual qualities of these stones. Aspects that determine the individual character of the stone, such as shape, colour, texture and material, are the guiding factors when selecting a stone. Once personally chosen, the stone is given a place in the study room where it serves as a source for meditation and inspiration.

Shirazeh Houshiary

The lunar cycle, on which the Islamic calendar is based, is central to this monumental work by Iranian artist Houshiary. The gold-accented crescent of the waxing or new moon represents a new beginning, the coming of light after darkness. The use of such ancient symbols is part of Islamic tradition, as it is forbidden to depict God or the Divine. Houshiary deliberately chooses universal forms and symbols which also appear in other traditions such as those of ancient Greece, Judaism and Christianity. The title is an excerpt from a poem by the thirteenth-century Persian poet and philosopher Jalal ad-Din Rumi. Rumi's poetry often forms the starting point for Houshiary's work: 'We are both praising life'. This work was acquired in 1991 by Evert van Straaten, director from 1990 to 2012.

James Lee Byars

American sculptor and performance artist James Lee Byars draws inspiration from the Western and Eastern worlds. *The Path of Luck* is one of Byars' rare small sculptures in blue African granite and was acquired for the collection in 2018 by Lisette Pelsers, director from 2012 to 2023. In both East and West, blue is the colour of the celestial and the divine. The sphere is the quintessential primal form, an ancient symbol of infinity and of perfection and purity. At the same time, it is a modern abstract sculpture: a concentrated form reduced to its essence. The text THE PATH OF LUCK is engraved precisely across the centreline. These words refer to the Buddhist concept of the path that leads to happiness and spiritual freedom.

Theo van Doesburg

Theo van Doesburg's inspiration for these *Dancers* is an Indian sculpture of a flute-playing Krishna, one of the most important deities in Hinduism. He abstracts the sculpture and shows it from two sides: from the front on the right panel and from the back on the left. In his quest for a pure, harmonious art in which colour and shape are symbols of the inner realm, one of his sources of inspiration is Indian art. Therein, colours and shapes are not used to imitate nature, but to express a spiritual state. According to Van Doesburg, it is precisely through abstraction that a work of art can 'more than ever satisfy a spiritual need'. In his opinion, the task of modern painting is to allow us to experience the universe, and even God.