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Big Review: Georg Baselitz: Naked Masters at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna

Bold pairings of paintings by the contemporary German artist with those of the Old Masters are both provocative and elegiac

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Baselitz wallpaper: the exhibition includes, to the right of the doorway, the “bold gesture” of Baselitz’s Without Shirt and House (2018) hanging above Correggio’s The Rape of Ganymede and Jupiter and Io (both around 1530) and Titian’s Danaë (after 1554) Photo: © KHM Museumsverband; Baselitz: © the Artist

Ten years ago, the exhibition *Background Stories* at Dresden’s Residenzschloss paired paintings by the German artist Georg Baselitz with works from the nearby Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister. Rather than the originals, however, paintings such as Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* (1512-13) were shown as giant digital reproductions. It was a bold and thought-provoking solution to the problem of hanging contemporary art alongside Old Masters, putting Baselitz’s paintings into a life-sized *musée imaginaire*.

Baselitz: Naked Masters at the Kunsthistorisches Museum is another pairing with Old Master paintings—this time, however, the encounter is real. Five large galleries and surrounding cabinet spaces have been hung with paintings by Baselitz from the past five decades. Alongside and underneath are 40 or so paintings from the 16th and 17th centuries, including works by Titian and

Correggio, and many by Bartholomeus Spranger, a Flemish artist who worked at the court of Rudolf II in Prague.

It is no surprise to learn that the exhibition was selected and hung for the most part by Baselitz himself. The tone is set in the first gallery by an enormous paint-spattered canvas hung high over a delicate *Adam and Eve* (around 1485) by Hans Memling, the outer wings of an altarpiece, while Albrecht Altdorfer's *Lot and his Daughters* (1537) is flanked by three upside-down Baselitz figure paintings from the early 1970s. At first sight, there seems little correspondence between new and Old Masters, the sequence of galleries proving rather their complete difference and irreconcilability.

The new paintings are light, airy, unframed; the older paintings darkly varnished in ornate surrounds. Traditional narrative images, with more or less familiar stories, form a stark contrast with contemporary paintings that speak of personal desire and trauma. Baselitz paints upside down, dispensing with gravity. The Old Masters keep their feet firmly on the ground. Three great late paintings by Titian, whose surfaces are worked and refined to the highest poetic pitch, are paired with canvases that are almost entirely abstract in effect, with no reference to traditional mythological or biblical sources.



Baselitz's paintings of golden hands hung around Garofalo's Resurrection of Christ (1520), which was too big to be moved © KHM-Museumsverband

Yet, for all this sense of difference, nothing feels out of place: not even the five large paintings of golden hands, like Midas paws, hung around the only painting too large to be moved, Garofalo's *Resurrection of Christ* (1520). What emerges is a dialogue between old and new held not on the level of surface curating or formal likeness, but rather on a deeper level of paint and painting itself, the sort of connections that could only be forged in the eyes and mind of an artist. Even the most shocking combinations, such as Baselitz's inverted naked portrait of his wife, Johanna Elke Kretschmar, alongside Rubens's famous portrait of his wife Helena Fourment, vaguely attempting to cover her body with a fur wrap, have an unexpected and moving affinity.

The theme of “naked masters” unfolds in three galleries at the heart of the exhibition. In the first we see Baselitz’s strange obsession with the idea that Duchamp “stole” the composition of *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) from a Picasso (*Woman in an Armchair*, 1910), occasioning a series of recent paintings in which Duchamp is presented as a sex-mad libertine—the composition of two copulating figures based on an 18th-century pornographic print. With them hangs Spranger’s *Jupiter and Antiope* (around 1596), showing the naked gods encircling one another in a woodland setting.

In this gallery, devoted to decadence and desire, the boldest combination is *Picture-thirty-two* (1994), an image of a woman (Baselitz’s wife Elke), shown upside down and crouching naked, drawn with thick black paint placed on a gold ground, with an inner pictorial frame of burnt sienna. It hangs above two kitsch lounging nudes by Dirck de Quade van Ravesteyn. The weighty golden Elke seems to compress the two polished Ravesteyn bodies into one doubly bad painting. Alongside, Baselitz’s *Ada Nymphen* (1998) shows two pinkish nude females, floating around the edge of the canvas, as if decompressing the Ravesteyns. The Baselitz is a strangely beautiful painting with its garish colours, ungainliness, red lips and earth-coloured genitals, and dirty, coal-grey grounds, starkly punctuated by blank discs (made by the paint tins Baselitz uses to keep his canvas flat while painting).



Baselitz’s *Picture-thirty-two* (1994) above his *Ada Nymphen* (1998) and two paintings by Dirck de Quade van Ravesteyn © Georg Baselitz 2023; © KHM-Museumsverband

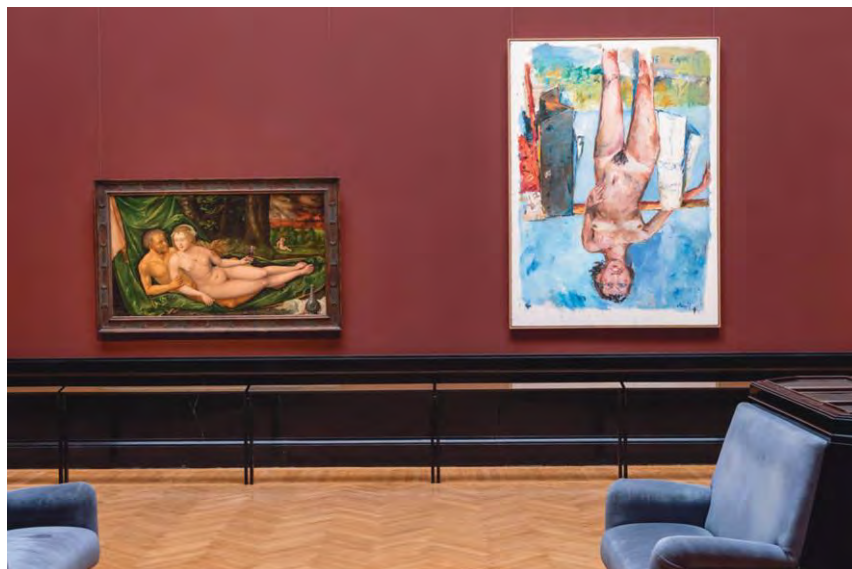
Two further galleries are dominated by the spectral, full-length inverted figure paintings, made with a lustrous, metallic-seeming pigment against a black surface, which have formed Baselitz’s Bildmodell for the past few years. They seem to flash out of the darkness like ethereal deities,

dense constellations of glowing light. It is certainly a bold gesture to hang one of these celestial apparitions, *Without Shirt and House* (2018), above two Correggios (*The Rape of Ganymede* and *Jupiter and Io*, both around 1530) and Titian's *Danaë* (1564), but the effect is rather to throw an unexpected focus on the older paintings: Baselitz's large canvas becomes more like background, connected more with the gallery architecture. As he puts it himself, like "wallpaper" around the Old Masters.

Here the truth of the "naked masters" becomes clear. It is not eroticised nudity, or simply an unclothed human state, that forms the subject, but rather the naked vulnerability of age, and of the predicament of the ageing painter, weighing up the reality of mortality with the urge to create art, and the ever-fraught relationship with the tradition of Western oil painting. Titian's *Nymph and Shepherd* (around 1570), a darkly-glowing poetic homage to bodily love, hangs alongside Parmigianino's *Cupid Making his Bow* (around 1534) and a copy of the same made by Joseph Heintz the Elder in 1603, making a joke rather about where it all—love—began. Above, Baselitz's double celestial figure composition *Wohin* (2017) shows the inverted figures of Georg and Elke, made when the artist was around the same age as Titian painting his *Nymph and Shepherd*. *Wohin*? Where now?

The same question might be asked of the exhibition as a whole, which has a tone both provocative and elegiac. In the grandness of the setting and in a museum unashamedly devoted to the glory of art, it is a coronation of sorts for Baselitz. It is also something more personal—the exploration of an artist dwelling on the origins of his painting in his early experiences of art in museums. But likewise in private life and feelings, in particular his love for Elke, and their growing awareness of mortality in old age. It is provocation with a purpose. We might not always agree with what Baselitz says, both in art and life, but his painting constantly reminds us of the importance of defending the freedom for artists to speak their minds unhindered. *Baselitz: Naked Masters* is that very rare thing—an exhibition that is itself an impressive and memorable work of art.

- Georg Baselitz: *Naked Masters*, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, until 25 June
- Curators: Georg Baselitz and Andreas Zimmermann



Albrecht Altdorfer's Lot and his Daughters alongside Baselitz's Finger Painting – Female Nude (1972) Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. Donation: Georg Baselitz. © Georg Baselitz 2023