

H A M B U R G E R
KUNSTHALLE

**Exhibition *Runge's Cosmos. The Morning of the Romantic Era*
3 December 2010 - 13 March 2011**

**Room 2
The Self-Portraits**

Runge's self-portraits impressively demonstrate his understanding of himself as an artist. Never depicting himself in a representative posture, he focuses on emphatically close compositions and limits himself to a small format. He almost always forgoes showing any attribute that would reveal him to be a painter. This simplicity vividly reflects the artist's pursuit of a fundamental, artistic renewal. It is exactly this restriction to an individual's nature that shows the ethical basis and reformist intent of Runge's art theory.

This intense interest in self-questioning is one he shared with the artist Rembrandt, whom he especially admired as a great painter. The self-portrait in profile was developed during his time as a student in Copenhagen, probably as a study for *The Return of the Sons*, his first large composition.

Self-Portrait at the Drawing Board from 1802 is the only picture in which the artist shows himself at work. Like *Self-Portrait with Brown Collar*, the distribution of light gives special emphasis to the face and neck area. Here, the painter is seen looking openly and directly at the viewer with an expression of youthful self-confidence. This stands in contrast to the painter in *Self-Portrait in Blue Coat* from 1805, where he is portrayed as the thinking artist, a self-description he was fond of. His expression in *Self-Portrait in Brown Cloak* is especially striking and shows him as marked by illness.

**Room 3
The Early Work - From Self-taught to the Academy**

The beginning of Runge's artistic development was entirely devoted to copying artworks. In Hamburg he took daily drawing lessons for one or two hours, first with Heinrich Joachim Herterich, later with Gerdt Hardorff the Elder. The various preserved copies after graphic reproductions from that time depict a variety of significant works, especially of the Renaissance and of the Baroque. Runge's drawn copy of Angelika Kauffmann's *Suffer the Little Children to Come unto Me* (cat. 26) is evidence of his openness toward contemporary positions.

Runge studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen from the autumn of 1799 to the spring of 1801. There, students began by copying two-dimensional artworks - drawings and engravings - before moving on to the plaster class where they made copies after canonized plaster casts of the antiquity. It was only after the successful completion of these two classes that students were admitted to the model class, where they made nude studies from observation of a live model. Various pieces of Runge's work have survived from these three classes. A number of Runge's drawings also show his training in perspective and construction, as the academy's so-called auxiliary sciences at the Academy also included perspective studies.

Room 4

The Weimar Prize Competition – Runge’s Break with Tradition

Implicit in the Weimar Prize Competition – an annual art contest held by Goethe and his art advisor Heinrich Meyer between 1799 and 1805 – was the hope of having a lasting influence on what was then the development of contemporary art in Germany. In obliging artists to paint antiquity-based, primarily Homeric subjects, the two expected a revival of the stagnating history painting tradition. A fallacy, as it would turn out.

Having worked through two designs for the competition in 1800 and not sent them in (cat. 69-70), Runge submitted an entry the following year. Of the two possible subjects out of Homer’s *Iliad*, he settled on “Fight of Achilles with the Rivers”. Runge’s numerous sketches from Dresden in 1801 show the difficult time he had deciding on the final composition. His competition entry shows a frontal view of the armoured Achilles in a duel with the river god Scamander (cat. 74).

Runge’s entry garnered significant criticism, an experience that marked a turning point in his work. Firmly convinced of the unrepeatable nature of ancient Greek and Roman art, he resolved to look ahead and articulated his vision for a new art, the source of which he would place in the inner world of the subject. He set his sights on what he described as “landscape” or “landscapery”, an art form that, without being bound to any specific genre, should contain cosmic dimensions.

Room 4

First Mature Works

Runge’s artistic ambitions were clear even as an apprentice at the Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen (1799-1801). Inspired by a Johann Gottfried Herder poem, the artist painted *The Triumph of Amor* in 1800, an allegorical composition showing the lyre-playing god of love surrounded by putti (cat. 48-49). Runge revisited this subject again in Dresden in 1801/02. The result was a grisaille, a painting in shades of grey that seems like a relief because of its rendering of shadow (cat. 52). The figures of children and couples arranged in a circle around the enthroned Amor symbolise the various manifestations of love over the course of human life; the cycle begins with the reclining boy on the right behind Amor and continues in the union of the sexes on the right side, focuses on the family phase to the left and is closed by the couple behind them, only to begin again with the reclining boy. The concept of a cycle predicts Runge’s masterpiece, the four-part graphics series *The Times of Day*.

Runge tackled another project with his painting *The Return of the Sons* in Copenhagen (1800), though it never went beyond the drafting stage. The artist had originally planned to hang a monumental-sized version of the composition, which shows himself and his brother Daniel arriving at their family home in Wolgast, on the wall in his brother Jakob’s Wolgast house.

A number of genre drawings show the artist using the contour drawing technique for his own compositions, a style he had developed in Denmark under the influence of Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein and John Flaxman.

Room 5

Pictures and Frames - The Principle of the Romantic Arabesque

Runge's typical constellation showing an inner painting and an arabesque frame design forms a structural leitmotif in his pictorial work. *The Nightingale's Lesson* is among the earliest examples of this type of composition. Runge took his inspiration from Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock's ode "Die Lehrstunde" ("The Lesson"), which tells of a how the nightingale teaches her song to her child. And yet within the oval painting (its frame inscribed with the lines of the ode), Runge has replaced the two birds with the figures of Cupid and Psyche sitting in the crown of an oak tree.

In fusing the figure of Psyche with that of Pauline Bassenge, his lover and later spouse, he melds the mythological subject with the realities of his own life.

The structural principle of the Romantic Arabesque is made tangible in Runge's frame design, which gives the visual impression of a relief and thus opens itself to another layer of reality. Like an annotation, individual elements in the inner painting are taken up again in the frame arabesque so that their subject – poetic inspiration through love - can be elevated to a more abstract, symbolic level.

This alternation between image and frame and the shifts between various levels of reality is something Runge also had in mind for his two compositions *The Joys of Wine* and *The Joys of Hunting*, both of which are also devoted to mythological subjects. Shadows cast by the frames lend these arabesques an exceptionally sculptural quality.

Room 6

Between History and Landscape. Runge's Religious Paintings

Runge painted two religious pictures: in 1805 he applied to execute an altarpiece for the Church of St. Mary in Greifswald, and in 1806 Ludwig Gotthard Kosegarten commissioned him to create a painting for the 'Uferkapelle', a waterfront chapel in the fishing village of Vitt on Rügen. Runge chose to depict *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* for the Greifswald altar. In the picture we see the Holy Family before a spacious Egyptian landscape showing the Nile Valley at sunrise. Mary and child, the blooming magnolia tree and angels playing music are illuminated, offset by Runge's distribution of light, while Joseph and the donkey linger in shadows of the night. Preserved drafts show how Runge prepared the composition with contour drawings and light studies. Having started the painting in August 1805, Runge left it unfinished in Hamburg when he travelled to Wolgast. It was never completed.

Runge selected to paint the biblical narrative *Saint Peter on the Sea* for the Uferkapelle in Vitt. His depiction of the miracle rescue on stormy seas at night suggests the perilous work of fishermen off the coast of Rügen. Evangelical symbols adorn the ship's rudder and bow. Thereby, Runge also alludes to the church as a ship that threatens to sink in the storm. This is precisely what Runge thought about the state of religion in his day. Sure enough, the onset of the Napoleonic wars delayed the chapel's construction for another ten years. Runge's devotional image was never finished.

Room 6
Runge's Colour Theory

Friedrich Perthes published Runge's "Farbenkugel" („Colour Sphere“) writings in 1810. The publication included coloured copperplate engravings showing various views and sections of the sphere, along with examples of harmonious and disharmonious colour effects. Runge had been developing his theory of colour in watercolours, articles and letters to Goethe since 1806. With the colour sphere, he succeeded in creating the first three-dimensional model of all possible hues in a single, ideal shape. Runge's model of subtractive colour mixing is based on the primary colors blue, yellow and red, depicting them as the corner points of an equilateral triangle. Secondary colours are arranged over a mixture circle, with the three primary colour triangles creating a hexagon showing their mixture in pairs. Saturated hues of equal brightness are located around the equator at the periphery of the colour sphere. The spatial nature of the colour system is the result of the artist's inclusion of white and black, represented here as the two poles of the globe. Each of these influences the other colours: hues always become lighter through the admixture of white toward the North Pole, becoming darker in the transition to black toward the South Pole. Colours lose saturation towards the interior of the sphere, dissolving to grey in the centre. Runge's colour sphere goes far beyond a simple list of instructions for how to create various hue mixtures, many of which could not be made in his day due to the lack of essential pigments. It is rather an attempt to visualise the harmony of hues and systematise the artist's colour choice as it relates to the circular flow of the cosmos.

Room 7
Plant Studies: Between Imitation of Nature and Geometric Construct

Between 1807 and 1809, Runge produced a group of works taking various flowering plants as their subject. The most well-known example of this is the oil study showing the amaryllis, a plant also found near the edge of his painting *Morning (small version)*. The plant as a whole - including its bulb and roots - becomes the subject of the image. Here, the artist is seen giving a faithful representation of the natural form while at the same time dispensing of its stylized appearance.

As many of the studies show, Runge has examined the flowers and leaves down to the regularities in their structure in the hopes of exposing hidden, geometric laws. This intention is made clear in the construction lines seen in some of the drawings.

The motivations behind the works assembled here point in different directions. On the one hand, they served as preliminary studies for his two key works, the *Small and Large Morning*. At the same time, they also were used as embroidery patterns. This dual function shows that Runge did not believe in a distinction between a decorative arts-and-crafts dimension and his own imaginative art. His pictorial work shows the artist's consistent commitment to the smooth transition between the two fields.

Room 7
The Times of Day

Published in two editions in 1805 and 1807, the four-part graphic cycle *The Times of Day* sealed Runge's reputation and established him as an artist of considerable merit. His conceptual key work is among the most complex expressions of German Romanticism, a fact that already becomes evident in his use of the multi-layered, cyclic dimension in the piece. The four compositions show the progression of times of day, seasons, life phases and eons. A number of emblematic details indicating a universal context make it nearly impossible to come to an exhaustive, overall interpretation.

Elements in the arabesque frame compositions bring the time cycle shown in the interior images to a decidedly Christian level. Each of the illustrations contains a symbol of God in the centre of the upper bar of the frame, forming the focal point for the arabesque.

The abstracting tendency in Runge's work is illustrated by the design drawings he used to form the basic, geometric foundation of his compositions, the first step he took before finally returning to the concrete natural shape.

Runge had planned the cycle as a series of larger paintings from the beginning, an intention seen only in the small-format, gold ground painting *Mother Earth with her Children* and the two painted versions of *Morning*.

Room 8
Small Morning

Runge envisioned painting *The Times of Day* compositions even as he was still working on them as a four-part graphics series. Though he had already started transferring *The Times of Day* to canvas in late 1803, his first attempt at painting them failed. Runge returned to the project in 1807 and decided to begin with *Morning*. *Small Morning* was completed in 1808. It was to be his first, convincing visual representation of his theory of colour as an appearance of light.

Runge's well-planned approach is documented in a number of preparatory studies and sketches. His introduction of Aurora - the goddess of the dawn - as a central figure is one of the key modifications to the *Morning* as a graphic artwork. Suspended between earth and heaven, she heralds the rising of the sun. Another defining characteristic of Runge's understanding of art is his principle of multiple occupations. He described the figure alternately as Venus and Mary.

Apart from this figure, the second major compositional change is the infant lying on a grassy piece of earth in the immediate foreground.

While the interior image appears dominated by cosmological and nature-mystical levels of meaning, the arabesque frame design shows an orientation towards Christian notions of salvation. Runge had already implemented this principle in *The Times of Day* series.

Room 9
Large Morning

Runge set to work on the so-called *Large Morning* soon after finishing the smaller version of the painting in the autumn of 1808.

Once again, a number of preliminary drawings and studies show Runge's thorough preparation for the painting. Light studies executed in black, white and red chalk are a particularly impressive testament to Runge's abilities as a draughtsman (cat. 146-147). These studies helped the artist form a better idea of both the effects of light and the three-dimensional presence of the figures in pictorial space. Here, the appearance of light has also become the subject that at the same time gives form to the bodies of genies in the infinite space of universe.

Though the figure placement in *Large Morning* remained relatively identical to that in the *Small Morning* painting, the overall impression of space has changed. The viewer's now lowered perspective keeps the horizon line out of sight.

Regarding the frame design that Runge was no longer able to complete, he followed the same one used for *Small Morning*. But in order to be able to make the intrinsic value of the inner painting and frame design more clear, he had to decide against the *Small Morning's* principle of an imaginary frame. Instead – according to Runge's brother Daniel – a “real black and gold painting frame” was to enclose the inner painting, while another “very large painting frame” would have supported the composition in its entirety.

Morning (large version) – On the Painting's Condition

How did the unusually fragmented state of Runge's last painting come to be? Dissatisfied with the composition, the artist asked his brother Daniel on his deathbed to destroy it, but changed his mind upon hearing his brother's pleas. *Morning (large version)* remained in his widow Pauline's possession until her death (1881) and later hung in their son Phillip Otto's apartment. His son-in-law, Carl August Ferdinand Meissner, sliced the painting into pieces around 1890. This involved a conscientious act of cutting to free all individual figures from the whole of the composition. The painting stayed divided into nine pieces whereas areas between figures - stretches of sky in particular - were lost forever. Meissner donated the parts to the Kunsthalle in the 1890s. Alfred Lichtwark (director of the Kunsthalle at that time) concealed the circumstances of the painting's destruction out of gratitude for the donation. In 1927/28 his successor Gustav Pauli had all nine parts cleaned and pieced together by art conservator Victor Bauer-Bolton, who filled all of the missing areas with a neutral grey tone. The painting has remained in this condition to this day. Despite its fragmented state, the remaining parts of the painting attest to Runge's mastery of painting near the end of his life. See Room 17 of the exhibition for further information on Runge's painting technique and questions of restoration.

Room 10
The Portraits

Besides his own self-portraits, Runge's likenesses of people focused largely on family and friends. Runge had been close to his family all his life, and even his friends had always been an important source of support. The portraits made for this circle were not paid commissions, but rather documents of friendship and a sign of Runge's admiration and affection. In this way we see how the chalk portraits of his friends in Hamburg, which Runge made in preparation for the Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen in 1799, were less an attempt at technical perfection than an effort to capture the nature of the sitter.

Runge painted the first portrait of his wife Pauline in 1804 after a number of studies. Its special effect comes from the light that seems to illuminate her skin from within, dematerializing the physical. Soon after, he began to paint portraits in which the subjects themselves were arranged in meaningful compositions. Carried by the ethos of filial love, Runge's monumental group portrait *The Artist's Parents* depicts the couple on the path through life, bound in their devotion to one another.

The eyes in Runge's portraits often seem like focal points within the figure. The pupils are barely discernible and cut in a circular shape, suggesting openings one could peer through to see a deeper layer in the painting. Runge's portraits go beyond visible representation.

The Pictures of Children

The figure of the child plays an important role in Runge's concept of art. He saw it closely related to creation itself; its unreflected, naive relationship to the world is expressed by Runge in children's intimate handling with plants and flowers. It is along these lines that the artist shows the purity and authenticity of the two children in his large portrait *The Artist's Parents* by showing their connection to the lily. The children correspond to the blossoms in nature and represent the beginning of life, while the parents symbolise its passing. In *The Hülsenbeck Children*, the full-figure group portrait, Runge created not only individual portraits but shows the epitome of childhood as a distinct stage in the development of human beings. Runge was a devoted father who rejoiced in his children's growth and depicted them with humor. Small oil paintings such as *Otto Sigismund in a High Chair* were painted either for himself or as gifts for members of the family, each of them precisely reflecting qualities characteristic to their age and behaviour.

Runge's portraits of children cast a new perspective on the notion of the child and introduce a naturalness unknown to representation in art at that time, one that showed a relationship to Rousseau's Enlightenment thoughts and Pestalozzi's pedagogical aspirations.

H A M B U R G E R KUNSTHALLE

Raum 11 / 12 / 13

Illustrations and Applied Art

A signature characteristic of Runge's work as an artist is the ease with which he moved between the fields of both fine and applied arts. He thought of room decoration as something like a "lime twig" that he would use as a means of preparing his viewers for his imaginative, arabesque compositions. Paintings such as *Moonrise*, a kind of sofa accessory, *The Nightingale Bushes*, a watercolour meant to serve as a wall frieze and *Arion's Sea Journey*, another watercolor presumably designed for an opera curtain: these works can in no way be reduced to their decorative function alone. On the contrary, they are closely tied to Runge's more programmatic works, including *The Times of Day*.

Runge also designed a number of different title pages for books, as well as cover illustrations for magazines, almanacs and pocket books. The preparatory drawings for his engraving, many of which were made in the last year of the artist's life, are notable for their fine lines and incredible confidence of the pen strokes.

The large-format drawings Runge created to accompany the "Ossian" poems by Scotsman James Macpherson, which were with the mythical bard Ossian and regarded as a kind of Nordic counterpart to Homer's epics, began as an illustration job for the German edition of *Ossian*. The project failed however when Runge dared to interpret the subject independently, and thus departed from the ancillary role of illustration.

Further evidence of the artist's openness to using the applied dimension of art can be seen in his playing card designs.

Room 14 / 15

Silhouettes

Runge showed a particularly strong mastery of cutting silhouettes, which he had practiced from a very early age. Surviving from this period are among others a group of various animal and genre silhouettes, which Runge would sometimes arrange into scenes. In later years, the artist would make exactly these objects for his own children to play with.

The large majority of his cutting work, however, consists of paper silhouettes of plants. Without getting lost in botanical details, Runge gives an accurate visual rendering of each plant's distinctive features while never losing sight of the plants as a whole. This translation of three-dimensional objects into a flat surface is a testament to Runge's remarkable ability to abstract.

Runge also made silhouettes with brush and black ink, a cultural practice that enjoyed an enormous popularity in the 18th century in his adolescence. Almost all of the profile silhouettes, most of which were made in the late 1780s, show people from the artist's family and circle of friends. Besides serving as private mementos, the vogue of silhouette-making is also to be seen against the background of the writings of the Swiss physiognomist Johann Caspar Lavater, who theorised that an individual's character could be read in his or her physical appearance - particularly their profile.