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Painting by Joseph Anton Koch returns to the Städel



Joseph Anton Koch (1768–1839), *Landscape with the Prophet Balaam and his donkey*, ca. 1832. Oil on canvas, 74 x 102 cm. Photo: Städel Museum.

FRANKFURT.- The painting *Landscape with the Prophet Balaam and his donkey* (ca. 1832) by the artist Joseph Anton Koch (1768–1839) is returning to the [Städel Museum](#). The work from the museum's collection was considered lost in 1945 and was recently rediscovered in a private collection. Thanks to the generous gesture of returning the work from private ownership, it is now once again on view in the Städel. For its presentation within the collection of nineteenth century art, the painting was carefully restored and newly framed by the museum. It is thus once again part of the Städel's extensive collection of works by Joseph Anton Koch. A total of three paintings, thirteen drawings and forty-nine prints provide profound insight into the oeuvre of the artist, whose impact on German art in the nineteenth century cannot be overestimated.

"We are indebted to the former owner for the extraordinary gesture and generosity in returning the painting

to the Städel Museum. Since the founding of the Städel in 1815, this work has been one of the early, impressive acquisitions of contemporary art. With the return of the work, it will once again be possible to show the full spectrum of Joseph Anton Koch's oeuvre in the museum", says Philipp Demandt, Director of the Städel Museum.

"Joseph Anton Koch was one of the outstanding landscape painters of the early nineteenth century. His paintings are characterised by clear contours, bright colours and a strict pictorial structure based on the rules of classical composition. With his style of painting and above all his biblical motifs, Koch exerted a lasting influence on German artists in Rome, especially on the members of the Catholic Brotherhood of St. Luke, who are known worldwide to this day as the Nazarenes", explains Alexander Eiling, Head of Modern Art at the Städel Museum.

The early years of the Städel and the structure of its collection were significantly influenced by the art and ideas of the Nazarenes. The museum acquired the painting – together with another work from the same period, *Landscape with the rape of Hylas* – directly from Joseph Anton Koch in Rome shortly after it was created in 1832. The purchase of the two paintings was arranged by the diplomat and art collector August Kestner (1777–1853) from Hanover, who was living in Rome at the time. Together with Philipp Veit (1793–1877), head of the painting school and director of the Städel Gallery, Kestner's brother Theodor (1779–1847), founding member of the committee responsible for building up and administering the collection of the Städel, paved the way for the extraordinary double acquisition of the two landscapes. As companion pieces, the paintings of nearly the same format were intended to represent the thematic focal points of Koch's work in the gallery as prototypes.

From 1939 on the Museum began to evacuate its holdings. The painting – along with other works from the collections of the Städel – was first moved to a bank vault in Frankfurt, then later eventually to Palais Amorbach in the Odenwald. This depot was one of several places where works of art were stored during the war. Responsible for the initiative were the museum directors Ernst Holzinger (1901–1972) and Alfred Wolters (1884–1973). All traces of the painting were lost in the early days of the American occupation. A 'Report on the Inspection of the Evacuated Inventory' from April 1945 reveals that the depot rooms at Amorbach Palais had been opened and plundered. How and when exactly the painting by Joseph Anton Koch was lost can no longer be reconstructed in detail. Nevertheless, thanks to active provenance research at the Städel, the trusting cooperation with the owner and documentation in the museum's own archives, as well as in the National Archives in Washington, D.C., the loss of altogether twenty-five paintings stored at Palais Amorbach could be partially reconstructed. Three of these paintings have meanwhile been restituted to the museum's collection: *The Courtyard of the Orphanage in Amsterdam: Free Period in the Amsterdam Orphanage (1881/82)* by Max Liebermann, *Nymphs and River God (Fragment of a Depiction of the Fall of Phaeton)* (ca. 1640–1662), a copy after Peter Paul Rubens, and *View of Rossmarkt in Frankfurt (1862)* by Philipp Winterwerb. In the course of its provenance research, the Städel has registered all paintings that are still missing as search reports in the lostart.de database of the German Lost Art Foundation, including the painting by Joseph Anton Koch *Landscape with the Prophet Balaam and his donkey*. In search of the identity of the artist who signed the painting with the monogram 'I.K.', the American owner and art historian who inherited the work also searched the database, where she came across the search report and contacted the Städel.

Originally from Tyrol, Joseph Anton Koch (1768–1839) had been living in Rome since 1795 and was the leader of the German artists' colony there. His compositions with mostly biblical and mythological scenes were based on the heroic landscapes of Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665) and Claude Lorrain (1604/05–1682). The painting shows Koch at the height of his art, which combed the seen with the invented. He transformed his numerous

sketches of the Roman Campagna into an ideally composed landscape, which forms the setting for the Old Testament story of the prophet Balaam and his donkey. Against the will of God, Balaam sets out to curse the people of Israel in exchange for money. On the way to the city, the prophet is met by an angel who is, however, only visible to the donkey. The ostensibly stubborn animal is beaten by Balaam until God gives it the gift of language and it brings his master to his senses. The scene, popular with history painters since the seventeenth century, was depicted several times by Koch. One version burned in an exhibition in the Glaspalast in Munich in 1931, another is now in the collection of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg.