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Press Release

Collecting Clouds: Catches from Heaven on Paper
December 6, 2023 – March 10, 2024

Constant movement and ever-changing form are of the essence of clouds. Their mobility and variety make them impossible to pin down—yet by the same token, clouds can be anything: from the sublime embodiment of longing and an ominous portent, to the dwelling of the gods, to a mere accumulation of condensed water. But if the essence of clouds is perpetual motion and formal metamorphosis, how can they be captured in an image? Is a cloud on paper or canvas inherently a trapped, or even dead cloud? This exhibition of the Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich shows how clouds can survive and even thrive in this change of location from sky to paper.

Long before modern aviation made it possible to rise comfortably above the clouds and gaze down upon them, artists were already creating bird's-eye views of that inaccessible realm. Cloudscapes, however, were shown not simply for their own sake, but as the dwelling of supernatural inhabitants. In the exhibition, inhabited clouds are represented by images from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The section opens with an engraving by **Jacopo Francia** (before 1486–1557). The famous couple, Cupid and Psyche, recline on the soft whiteness, nude and nonchalant; upon closer examination, however, we see that the cloud beneath Cupid's arm is a folded pillow. Francia's pillow exemplifies a constant of this genre of cloud pictures: the cloud is always a weightless solid that serves chiefly as a seat or habitation for mythological, Christian, and allegorical figures.

The inhabited clouds of the Old Masters are joined in the exhibition by the cloud images of modern and contemporary artists. Also included are photographs by traveling researchers such as **Arnold Heim** (1882–1965), **Leo Wehrli** (1870–1954), or the aviation pioneer **Walter Mittelholzer** (1894–1937) from the nearly inexhaustible holdings of the Image Archive of the ETH Library. In this section, we find clouds of which the Old Masters knew nothing. **Félix Bracquemond** (1833–1914) and **Henri Rivière** (1864–1951), for example, celebrate the cloudlike masses ascending from steamer smokestacks like a divine gift of modernity, while **Stefan Altenburger** (b. 1968) shows a blue sky perfectly bisected by a straight white strip of condensation: now, it is human beings who make clouds!

Three smaller groups of works address questions that have always inspired and challenged artists in their cloud images: What figures are concealed within the clouds? Can a cloudscape serve as a mirror of the human soul? And how is it possible, especially in a black-and-white medium, to show clouds in raking light or moonlight?

An interest in the technical aspects of the representation of clouds runs like a red thread through the whole exhibition. For indeed, clouds are among the motifs best suited to demonstrate the uniqueness of printmaking in comparison to other media, especially painting. The selection of works exemplifies the way in which over the centuries, various printmaking processes have been intentionally used to highlight very different qualities of clouds.

The brilliant moiré effects of the engraved clouds of **Hendrick Goltzius** (1558–1617), for example, imitate the flickering, shimmering sensation of gazing into the heavens and thus also evoke the dynamic character of clouds. The mezzotint clouds of **John Martin** (1789–1854), on the other hand, use the subtle shades of gray that only this medium can achieve to suggest raking light illuminating the clouds, tracing even the smallest curvature with seismographic precision. **Markus Raetz** (1941–2020), in turn, uses brush etching to highlight the processual, random nature of clouds, showing how the acid-based technique is perfectly suited to suggest hazy clouds flowing into one another. And how better to render the delicate play of color and light in a veil of clouds than in pastel drawings like those of **Georges Wenger** (b. 1947)? In the ink drawings of **Harald Naegeli** (b. 1939), countless small and even tiny dots swarm together into mystical entities that reveal the structure of the artist's "primeval clouds." And how does the visual magician **Meret Oppenheim** (1913–1985) respond to the challenge of clouds in printmaking? She hides them in the paper: only when we hold the pages up to the light do we suddenly discover the clouds as watermarks.

The exhibition thus not only pays homage to clouds as a motif, but also celebrates them as a genuinely graphic event.

Exhibition information

Curated by	Susanne Pollack, Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich, and Nicole Graf, Image Archive, ETH Library
Events	For details on the program of events, visit: www.gs.ethz.ch/agenda/
Opening hours	10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. daily Closed Saturday, December 23, 2023 – Tuesday, January 2, 2024
Admission	Free
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