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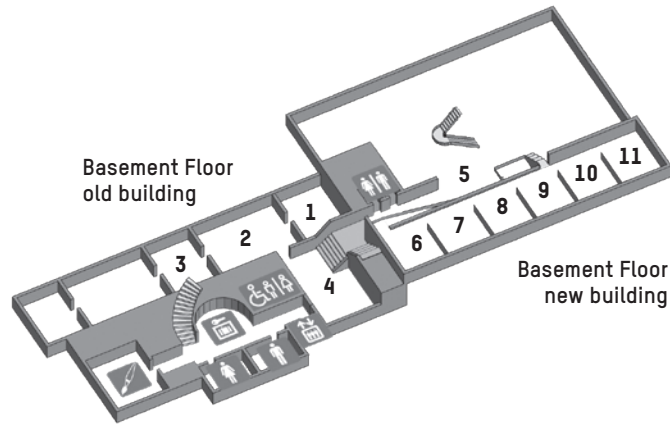
Ricco Wassmer 1915 – 1972

His Centenary Birthday

**KUNST
MUSEUM
BERN**

EXHIBITION GUIDE

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Biography of Ricco Wassmer 1915–1972

A Forgotten Artist Border Crosser

The Kunstmuseum Bern is mounting a comprehensive retrospective on Ricco Wassmer (whose real name was Erich Hans Wassmer, 1915–1972) on the occasion of this Swiss painter and photographer's 100th birthday. With seemingly surreal arrangements he produced a unique oeuvre that can be roughly classified as somewhere between naive painting, new objectivity, and magic realism. Key themes in the artist's work are loss of the carefree years of childhood, slender youths, sailors, sailing ships, still-lives, and a yearning for far-off places.

His artistic career is closely linked to the «heroic years» of Bernese art, but even from the very beginning he stood out as an artist who crossed borders and deviated from the usual paths in modern art and found a voice in enigmatic pictures. He was self-taught as an artist and pursued a representational form of conceptual art, which laid the foundation for allegorical compositions in which he explored the existential issues he was faced with. Ricco, the artist's name he adopted from 1937 onwards, was a profoundly melancholy person, who pursued a unique artistic approach that veered away from the beaten track of abstraction and the avant-garde. His pictures were his means of asserting himself, of expressing his homoerotic inclinations. In his isolation he found an artistic counterworld in the aesthetic where he could retire from public life. Driven by a yearning for youth as the embodiment of the ideal world he experienced in his childhood and adolescence as well as objects, numbers, texts, and references from the visual arts. He only seldom painted after nature and preferred highly diverse kinds of models and sources of imagery. In pictures that appear to be crystallized daydreams of the uncon-

scious, the various layers of reality and time seem interwoven. Sensuality and escape from the realities of life, intimacy and distance combine in his painted fantasies to form a brittle unity.

With over 200 loans, especially from private collectors, the show is providing a broad overview of Ricco's entire oeuvre. Many of the artworks were never before shown in public—and newly discovered pieces are among them too. As the camera was not only important for the painter as a substitute for studies of live models and also acquired increasing significance for the artist from the 1950s onwards, the exhibition focuses especially on reciprocity between painting and photography in his work. Moreover, we will be exhibiting objects that belonged to the passionate collector and were utilized as sources of imagery in his art. The show has been sub-divided within chronological order, and was preceded by a research project lasting over eight years for the catalogue raisonné of the artist's paintings and objects (*Catalogue raisonné der Gemälde und Objekte*). The publication of this richly illustrated volume with a biography and critical catalogue of his oeuvre coincides with the exhibition. The tour begins in the basement of the old building of the Kunstmuseum Bern.

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Bremgarten—Munich—Paris 1929–1939

The first room of the exhibition features the early work of the self-taught artist. As the son of an industrialist, Ricco Wassmer spent his childhood and youth in art-oriented circles in Bremgarten castle near Bern, where his parents, Max and Tilly Wassmer-Zurlinden, fostered a kind of hub for the muses, attracting artists, poets, and musicians, among them Louis Moilliet, Hermann Hesse, and Othmar Schoeck.

Ricco's first artistic endeavors tentatively explore a great diversity of styles. The show kicks off with a self-portrait of the artist at the age of thirteen, *Selbstbildnis mit dreizehn Jahren* (1929). It depicts the youth as lost in melancholy thought in the pose adopted by Friedrich Nietzsche, a philosopher the artist much admired. *Markt* (Market, 1931) is his first painting based on a photograph, which in this instance was taken by Gotthard Schuh. Later he was to develop the principle of appropriation and transformation of other image sources into an artistic method of his own. After several experiments in abstraction, such as the post-cubistic *Komposition mit Geige* (Composition with Violin, 1933), which can be understood as the artist asserting his autonomy toward his parents in matters of taste, in 1934 Ricco chose to pursue naive painting following the example of Henri Rousseau. The key topics he addressed in his art were childhood, but also cultivated notions of family unity, such as we find in *Votivbild* (Votive Painting, 1935) and in *Fest auf Schloss Bremgarten* (Party at Bremgarten Castle, 1937), which was inspired by Hermann Hesse's short novel *Journey to the East* (1932), or in *Calendarium anno 1938* (1937). The latter is a family altar, which, together with twelve pictures portraying the months of the year,

was executed during the period in which his parents were getting a divorce and presents the patron family under the protection of the Virgin Mary. In *Reiterrast vor der Schenke* (Horseman Taking a Break at an Inn, 1936) we can discern leanings toward a distinct, codified visual language. For example, the fact that the boots of the two men are touching under the table is not an arbitrary detail.

Ricco's world view spans the poles of Hesse's post-romantic denial of reality and Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilism. *Die Strasse* (The Street), *Composition macabre*, and *Alle Lust will Ewigkeit* (Joys All Want Eternity), three works painted in Paris in 1937, stand in contrast to what came before. Together with several drawings, they point out the melancholy side of the artist: throughout his life grief, loneliness, mortality, and death were uppermost in his mind. The morbid allegories can be interpreted as a reaction to the threatening international political situation in the sense of the fear of a pending "catastrophe" prior to the war. They likewise reveal an intuitively felt anxiety about Western civilization, which possibly reveals the influence of Nietzsche's philosophy. Thus the title of the work *Alle Lust will Ewigkeit* (Joys All Want Eternity) references "The Drunken Song 12" in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

Return to Confined Circumstances 1940–1947

After returning from Paris in 1939—when World War II began—Ricco executed a number of works evidencing that he was undergoing a profound identity crisis and the change in the family situation: after his parents divorced, Ricco's father officially recognized his illegitimate son Hubert and married Margaritha Ruffi, his second wife. With *Der Totengräber* (The Gravediggers, 1940) and *Moderner Sebastian* (Modern Sebastian, 1942), Ricco seems to be examining his role as an outsider in society, identifying himself with the Christian martyr in the latter work. This is also articulated in his *Selbstportrait mit Bart* (Self-Portrait with Beard) and his *Selbstbildnis mit blauer Blume* (Self-Portrait with a Blue Flower), in which he illustrates a symbol of romanticism and praises friendship in a banderole. He executed the first one in the May of 1942 during a painting course under the tuition of Cuno Amiet. The group of works of this period culminates in strongly allusive self-portrayals, such as *Ricco sui ipsius* (1942) and *Das Schiff* (*The Boat*, 1945). In both pieces the artist addresses his conflicting feelings toward the opposite sex. He presents himself in the one painting—surrounded by his works of art and antiques—as an erudite musician dressed in the fashion of the Renaissance, raising his glass to Death wrapped in black cloth and his own reflection in a mirror while ignoring the naked Cinderella languishing behind his back. In the other work we can discern the outline of the artist's shadow on a curtain hanging in the archway as he paints his «castle in the air».

Ricco escaped his inner conflicts by imagining a counter-reality of things, sea travel and far-off places, or withdrawal and solitude. In a

personal crisis in 1945 he even pondered on entering a monastery. In the dark and dim ambience of *Selbstbildnis als Mönch* (*Self-Portrait as a Monk*, 1946), he staged himself as Capuchin monk wearing their typical habit, here accompanied by an altar boy looking up at him. The questioning look directed at the beholder and the gesture of his hand in seemingly pointing to himself can be interpreted as signs of insecurity. His relationship to boys was already then no less problematic than his relationship to women. In *Blumen vor Selbstporträt* (*Self-Portrait Behind Flowers*, 1946) the same subject is tellingly hidden by a “bleeding” vase.

Gradually Ricco developed his own “individual mythology” (Harald Szeemann), with which he investigated his homophile inclinations and his fascination for adolescence using allegorical motifs. *Figurines* (1943) is a very personal artwork, one he kept to himself until his death. It depicts three strange figures: on the left a skeleton embodying Death (Thanatos) with an upside-down church as a symbol of impiety, in the middle stands the artist as an anatomical figure with the skeleton of his dog. This figure turns toward a likeness of himself, which, donned with a cocked hat or tricorne and wearing boots (Eros), points to an empty bottle as a symbol of intoxication and sensuality. *Hommage à Pablo* (1947), executed in honor of Picasso, and *Oh Mensch* (*Oh Man*, 1947), which alludes to Nietzsche's aforementioned *Drunken Song*, are additional harbingers of his later allegories executed during the 1950s.

Still-Lifes 1943–1948

Ricco painted still-lives ever since he was a teenager. From 1940 onwards he concentrated on this genre and developed a style reminiscent of that of the Basle artist Niklaus Stoecklin with minute attention to detail in arrangements with surrealist overtones. By means of a painting style resembling that of the old masters, he combined objects that awaken manifold associations. Two early examples are on view in the second room of the exhibition: *Stilleben Krug und Gliederpuppe* (Still-Life with Jug and Artist Manikin, 1940), which is perhaps a reaction to the outbreak of World War II, and *Stilleben Forget me not 1826* (1941), in which the artist has experimented with creating various levels of reality by resorting to a montage principle in using a picture from an old calendar. A pipe and tobacco tin serve as a secret signature, just as did later packets of cigarettes, wine glasses, and other personal items.

All the still-lives that Ricco painted from 1942, mainly during his seclusion in Oberramsern in the canton of Solothurn, are assembled together in the third room of the show. In this period he brought his proficiency in the realism of the old masters to perfection and sought to earn money with his painting. Viktor Kleinert, friend of his youth and aspiring businessman, purchased the old mill in 1942 and allowed Ricco to live there without paying rent as «janitor». In return he was to transform the building into a cultural oasis and fit it out with old furniture and pictures. Here the artist could do his own thing over the summer months and experienced a surge of creativity.

The motifs he represented in his art reveal the world around him in the shape of bizarre things and devices and are combined with mul-

tifarious quotes from other artworks. In the isolation of his hermit's retreat, Ricco was able to reflect on the issues that he was faced with in life and present answers in concealed way. A number of themes evolved at this stage that were important for his later work, and he plumbed ways of depicting the simultaneity of different levels of reality in a formally convincing manner. Just as the title *Stilleben trompe l'œil* (1944) of his still-life using trompe l'œil suggests, Ricco here pushes the means of deceiving the eye to extremes. The hummingbird on the painted lower frame seems to be preparing to fly out of the picture. Fiction seamlessly merges with reality.

Ricco's tributes to two poets, whom he considered to be kindred spirits, should be understood as programmatic. They are *Kolibri mit Bildnis Rimbaud* (Hummingbird with a Picture of Rimbaud, 1944) featuring a photograph of the Frenchman and a book in Ricco's favorite color, which he called "framboise," and *Stilleben Der grüne Vogel* (Still-Life of Green Birds, 1945) with a portrait of the romantic writer Novalis. The painting *Taube und Zigaretten* (Dove and Cigarettes, 1944) makes it clear that life is not just sunshine and roses, as does also *Stilleben mit Kerze* (Still-Life with Candle, 1946), which quotes Henri Rousseau's composition *Der Krieg* (War) in black and white. At this period of his career the artist suffered from drastic mood swings.

New Horizons 1946–1950

After overcoming a period of personal crisis, Ricco had a yacht built in 1946, which he named after Paul Gauguin's Tahiti painting *Nave Nave Mahana* and had moored on Lake Geneva. In the boat he sketched his first nudes of boys using live models and from then on added an anchor to his signature. For two whole summers he lived in his floating studio enjoying a state of relative freedom. He created a genre in which slender youths play a pivotal role. *La gendarmerie* (1946) depicts a chance meeting on a hot summer's day against a backdrop of the police office and the nearby ancient castle of Morges. The cyclist in the shade of a small tree peers curiously out of the painting as if he sought a silent dialogue with the beholder in the person of the artist. In later paintings Ricco recurred to this constellation in a more direct manner.

After years of isolation during the war, Ricco was again able to travel to France from 1947 onwards. His inclinations took him to the Côte d'Azur, where he found material for new motifs on the docks. Attractive sailors and ugly prostitutes fascinated the artist, and he secretly observed men as well as teenage boys fooling around, who, in seemingly innocent situations, dream of the adventures enjoyed by grownups, such as in *Passage interdit* (1947). *La Gazette* (1945) anticipated this subject matter through the artist portraying himself as a dandy dressed in the garb of a sailor. The scene in the foreground is rather puzzling. A sailor leans nonchalantly against a wall while, on the other side of the composition, a woman sits in a provocative pose, with her red dress revealingly slid up, and reads the newspaper *La Gazette*. Between these two figures, two boys wrestle with

one another. They are possibly fighting because of the sailor, as, while the blond boy brutally presses his dark-haired opponent to the ground, the latter points with his forefinger to the sailor wearing elegant Swiss shoes. This group of works culminates in *Le yacht américain* (1948), in which Ricco depicts an erotically charged encounter between two young men. Ricco poses in front of this painting in the staged portrait photograph exhibited in this room.

At the age of 32 in the summer of 1948, Ricco fulfills the dream of his childhood and travels to Tahiti via the US. There, he painted everyday scenes on a dozen canvases and interpreted motifs from old postcards of Tahitian women in the style of Paul Gauguin. At this point in his life he would have liked to end his futile career as an artist: he wished to train as a wireless operator for seafaring after working for several months as assistant chef on the freighter MS Tureby, on which he traveled around the world one-and-a-half times. However, the immigration department refused him entry into the country, so he decided, by force of circumstances, to continue the unprofitable work of an artist.

In 1950, Ricco attempted a fresh start in Cannes. There he painted subject matter he found in the travel photographs he took in Tahiti and during the stopovers at the different harbors, as for example *Garçon et cheval* or *Le marchand de cigarettes Bombay* (both 1950). He likewise pursued new painting styles: Instead of a naive treating of the subjects, he increasingly resorted to the realistic representation of motifs in the manner of photo reportage.

Cabinet of Curiosities

The junction to the second section of the exhibition presents several facets of Ricco as collector. To start with, the display cupboard on the left offers a view of his «Musée sentimental». Driven by a manic desire to purchase things he liked and his fascination for beautiful and bizarre things, Ricco already in his adolescent years amassed objects with which he decorated his room. Later, with an exceptional eye for detail, he fitted out the places he lived in with selected items. Hierarchy according to the value of the items had no place in these cabinets of curiosities. Precious and cheap things were treated as equals. The only prerequisite was that they trigger ideas in the artist and visually open a window to the realm of fantasy. He combined these objects and devices into enigmatic arrangements in his works of art, mostly in connection with representations of daydreaming adolescent boys. Some of these objects recur in a number of paintings, as was typical for 17th-century Netherlandish still-lives. The items had a profound symbolic and autobiographical meaning for the artist, they were valuable as mementos or awakened unconscious associations.

The painting *Marché aux puces* (1956) on the opposite wall gives us a good idea of Ricco's «store of imagery», as does also the enlarged photograph of a studio wall in Château de Bompré (1962) in which we can recognize Ricco's collection of items, reproductions, and photographs: a plaster hand, fragments of a doll, a spoke wheel, a white toy horse, the waltz Henri Rousseau composed for his wife with the title *Clémence*, an anatomical model made of papier-mâché, and other paraphernalia. They constitute the leitmotifs of his mature work.

The reality of the montage of objects is, so to speak, highlighted by Gotthard Schuh's famous poster of a boy playing, who here seems to reach out to the wheel.

Ricco struggled with his calling as an artist his lifelong. But with heart and soul he was a sailor. Indeed, a tattoo decorated his upper arm on returning from his trip around the world in 1949. He spent his summers on sailing yachts. Often he copied for himself and his friends portrayals of old ships, which are grouped close together here in the way he would have hung them in the places where he lived.

In keeping with this context, the ramp to the mezzanine level is evocative of a ship's rail. Along it some of Ricco's scanty written comments on art are displayed, such as: «I don't believe that I can avoid the narrative and illustrative as they suit my temperament and character. The motif is my starting point. I am just a bastard caught between being a writer and an artist!» Or: «Currently I have no clear evidence to prove that I am not an artist.» These statements reveal that he continually struggled against complying with modern art trends, and chose the path of a loner in both the way he lived and in his work. Or in the words of the curator Harald Szeemann: «I have always admired Ricco's pictures as the painted narratives of someone who was unassuming in the way he lived but claimed the extravagance of fantasy for himself.»

6 Bompré—a Castle to Himself 1950–1963

A photograph from 1957 hangs at the entrance to the mezzanine level: it is of the idyllic Château de Bompré at Barberier near Vichy in the heart of France, with the artist in his streamlined Ford Thunderbird in the foreground. From September 1950, Ricco lived there for over a decade during the spring and fall and painted pictures, when the sun did not distract him from his art. The stately building with its characteristic silhouette was built in the 15th century. It resembled a small version of Bremgarten castle and is featured in a number of his works.

The following exhibition rooms show the wealth of art—or that part of his oeuvre for which we largely know the artist today—in six chapters of the artist's history during this time. The new work situation with sufficient distance to his parental home left Ricco free to develop his creative potential to a much greater extent than before. It made it possible for him to tackle subject matter and themes that had obviously been fermenting in his thoughts over a long period of time. Within a few weeks he executed the codified works that marked the beginning of a new orientation in art: *Le marin menteur*, *Nine twentyseven (Tankstelle)*, *M. Y. W.* (all 1950), and *Die Jahreszeiten*, the large-format painting in the exhibition depicting the four seasons and containing the score of Joseph Haydn's *Oratorium*. The group of three boys at the bottom left in this painting deserves special notice; Ricco probably used a picture by the photographer Wilhelm von Gloeden as his model for it.

After 1950 we can observe how the artist very abruptly turned to surrealism or magic realism. The new orientation in his work was

facilitated by the artist's friendship with the artist Meret Oppenheim. In the works of this period, references to contemporary figurative art can be clearly discerned, for example to Max Ernst, Leonor Fini, Man Ray, Giorgio de Chirico, René Magritte, Balthus, Paul Delvaux, and Hans Bellmer. However, when inspired by the work of other artists, Ricco interpreted it in his own unique way, transforming it into his own visual language, and added variations of motifs he had already often used. From this time onwards, Ricco's thematic focus was mainly on childhood and adolescence, based on the melancholy of an irrevocably lost paradise. By conflating various genres of painting, the sophisticated compositions acquired the character of painted riddles, which are in part very difficult to solve. At the same time, Ricco continued producing genre paintings, as for example *La fin de l'escalier* and *St. Pourçain* (both 1951) or *La galerie du port* (1952). They are laden with innuendo, and he engages with human relationships in these compositions recalling film stills. When we see this subject matter we can better understand what Ricco meant with being a «bastard between a writer and a painter». In a way his pictures are really narratives with hidden meanings.

The Sorrow of Transience — François Mignon 1952–1954

Literature frequently inspired Ricco in his art. He often resorted to French authors for ideas. Alain-Fournier was a key figure for the artist. Ricco did not exactly provide illustrations for this author's only novel *Le Grand Meaulnes* (*The Lost Domain*), which was first published in 1913. But he was receptive for the melancholy mood of the book, suspended between dream and reality, as can be observed in the painting *Der Erzähler* (The Narrator, 1952) with Château de Bompré as the backdrop, or in the drawing from the spring of 1952 with his ideal portrait of a boy.

For a long time Ricco preferred Arthur Rimbaud above all the other authors. Ricco illustrated this writer's almost psychedelic prose poem «Enfance» in *Les Illuminations* (1873–1875), by depicting various episodes simultaneously in the manner of medieval painters. Ricco literally said of this 1952 painting that it was «epoch making»: in this assertion he confirmed his artistic intentions of conclusively rejecting a feminine world and, from then on, devoting his art to the underworld of childhood and his yearning for a lost paradise. He identified himself with the lyrical «I» of the narrator seated at a table who observes the «balls of sapphire» (boules de saphir), suspended in the sky, symbolic of fantasy and imagination, as the only means of his solitary escape from reality.

It was only by chance that Ricco's life was fundamentally transformed at a private art showing in Zurich at the close of 1951. Standing in front of him was the 17-year-old Frenchman François Mignon, the perfect embodiment of the secret ideal he longed for. The spontaneous encounter turned into a lasting friendship that was nurtured

by mutual respect. As a muse and model, Mignon contributed to furthering Ricco's development as an artist. For the very first time, Ricco had an exclusive opportunity of not only drawing male nudes but also taking photographs and selecting the best ones as his models for paintings. Only a few of his numerous photographic prints have survived. But they reveal how important this readily implemented medium was to become for the artist. *Intérieur*, *Le ballon*, and *Vive la marine* from October 1952 are major works that pick up from where his experiments of the 1940s left off and, beyond this, mark the beginning of a distinctive series with motifs addressing the transiency of beauty. As magic elements, so to speak, the plaster hand and the anatomical torso now find a home in his visual vocabulary. Ricco discovered the latter item in Paris and it embodies the second «I» of the artist in his pictures. In keeping with surrealist methods, the objects are associatively linked to the young protagonists in the paintings. From 1950, Ricco's work comprised two profoundly different categories: On the one hand it was increasingly based on an individual symbolic language, tending toward a codified, confessional art based on allegorical figurative compositions of adolescents. On the other it constituted still-lives, which the artist saw as his means of earning a living. The allegories are medium-sized formats in old ornate frames. However, the much hoped for success of these paintings failed to materialize. The codified and simultaneously realistic style, together with the homoerotic elements in Ricco's painting, were too out of the ordinary for public taste.

In the Beginning was the Camera

For a long period Ricco was only known for his painting. But in the meantime it is well-known that his work also comprised other art techniques. For example, many of his drawings have survived. Above all photography comprises a second pillar in Ricco's oeuvre and it is fundamental for a profounder understanding of his notions about art. The earliest are souvenir photographs from the 1930s and have been pasted into albums. Ricco did not own up to the fact that he later used the camera systematically as an artistic tool and produced many artworks by using photographic studies as a basis. He was self-taught as a photographer and his prints, varying considerably in quality, were intended for private use.

On the long wall, a selection of photographs and drawings has been mounted. They help illustrate the close interaction between the various media and the artist's working methods. During his trip around the world in 1948/49, Ricco took pictures in Tahiti or in the harbors of the cities he visited for the sake of using them later. They were snapshots in the style of the-then popular photojournalism. Otherwise he purchased picture postcards. In the fall of 1952, for the first time he had the opportunity of taking posed photographs with François Mignon in his studio. For example, we still have the photographic study today of a kneeling model for the painting *Intérieur* (1952)—somewhat blurred due to the poor lighting conditions. The face of the daydreaming boy in combination with the plaster hand from a glove store is one of the best photographs taken by the artist. The print from 1952 on exhibition here formerly decorated his own studio wall. Twice Ricco took recourse to it: In *Vive la marine*

(1952) the still-life and the allegorical figurative composition have been merged into a memento mori, a meditation on the mortality of life. And in *Nature morte au crayon* (1953), the white, seemingly real fragment of a body provides the basis for the damaged doll's head without eyes. Due to the pencil and kerosene lamp and due to the enhanced illusionistic effects by the cast of the shadows, the painted photograph as a picture within a picture acquires a downright magical and plastic forcefulness.

Photography actually evolved into tool for Ricco, being a much more intimate form of expression than painting, which for its part is more customized to suit the tastes of an audience. He used photographs as study material for paintings and drawings. And he also knew how to exploit the medium for experimenting with new subject matter. From 1955, several farm boys from the Vichy district posed as models for a number of series. The photographs of Jean Baudet are carefully orchestrated in black and white, and articulate a high degree of familiarity between the photographer and the model. But they likewise unveil the increasingly problematic nature of Ricco's relationship to adolescent boys. When Ricco was arrested by the French police in 1963, a box of pornographic motifs was confiscated and later destroyed. Thus only a few photographic prints from this period still exist today, and several photographic studies from 1958 of the former Bibliothèque Roger Peyrefitte, which were only recently rediscovered, provide a missing link to the lost group of works. Most of the photographs here are on show for the very first time.

The Eternal Charm of Youth— Jean Baudet 1955–1958

There are many reasons that could explain why Ricco so uncompromisingly focused on boys as a motif. During another acute period of personal crisis in 1954, the psychoanalyst Fritz Morgenthaler encouraged him, instead of beginning therapy, to creatively use painting as a means of asserting himself, to communicate the questions vital to him in pictures regardless of social prejudices towards homosexuality. Ricco at the same time nurtured his specialization in subject matter by reading contemporary authors, to whom he then paid tribute with painted homages. For example, *Roger Peyrefitte* (1954) illustrates episodes out of various novels by the Frenchman, such as *Les Amitiés particulières* (1944), which is about the tragic love of two boarding school boys, and *Les Amours singulières* (1949). The segment second from the top on the left is a humoristic response to Peyrefitte's essay on Wilhelm von Gloeden, who after 1880 took pictures of Sicilian boys in poses of ancient statues.

And, finally, subject matter also presented itself in shape of the four Baudet brothers living in the neighborhood. Initially it was the 14-year-old Jean who was rendered immortal in impressive drawings, photographs, and paintings. The vintage prints fit the description of staged photography, such as we know from famous artists such as Man Ray or Herbert List. At the same time the prints reveal the traces of excessive handling. Jean is conceived as a personification of thirst and hunger in the pendant pieces *La soif (pendant)* and *La faim (pendant)* (both 1955). In the cryptic composition *Das Bildnis* (Portrait, 1955) with Caravaggio's androgynous angel and the self-portrait of the artist at the bottom left, Ricco represents Jean for

the first time after a photographic study as a picture within a picture, with two roses symbolizing love. In the works following this Jean becomes the focal point of the compositions, in which he stands alone surrounded by diverse objects and quotes from other works of art. He is portrayed in *Jean des voiliers* (1956) amidst Ricco's paintings of boats (Room 5). The painter won the City of Bern art prize with *Jean du carrousel* (1955).

Ephebus is the core topic of his mature work: the term designates the turning point between male adolescence and maturity in the phase of emerging sexuality, it was something that was already worshipped in ancient Greece. Otto Meyer-Amden's earlier depiction of the subject in the shape of the individual merging with society and ritual processes as if he were of ether or Karl Geiser's classicistic statues contrasted Ricco's approach; the latter painted the slender adolescent in the realistic style of the old masters, very true to life as if he were an idol that could be grabbed hold of, comparable to the female counterpart in Balthus' *Lolitas*. It is more than difficult to classify Ricco's montages, which are charged with symbols and allusions, according to traditional categories of style. If any, then Jean Cocteau's concept of «réalisme dans l'irréel» would apply, of realism in the unreal. Following the example of the surrealists, fantasy and reality, dream and memory are united simultaneously into enigmatic constructs. In this way, Ricco created his unmistakable pictorial vocabulary, which equates with Harald Szeemann's notion of «individual mythology».

We will never know 1958–1963

In the years following, Ricco focused even more intensely on adolescent models as vehicles for carrying symbolic meaning and drawing on his photographs. Equally important remained his arrangement of objects in pictorial space, which for its part is stagelike and has a clearly organized, geometrical structure. Like in a wax museum or in portrait photographs with painted backdrops, the figure and the objects are transported into a mutual dream world as elements of various levels of reality. The motifs in the background are to be understood as projections of emotional states. A constricting, oppressive silence and disconnectedness overshadows everything.

In *Fig. 89 à 93* (1957), the boy on the rusty car seat is rendered only in the outlines of the preliminary watercolor sketch in part and thus formally blends in with the swimming techniques illustrated on the information board. At the same time, this reveals the artist's technique in executing the work. The blank spaces in the painting trigger fantasies, although ultimately the painting remains nothing other than an internal image of latent yearning. In a complex way, the painting *Peintre et modèle* (1958) interweaves the different gradations of make-believe and reality. While the artist appears to be pondering on the conflicting feelings of forbidden intimacy and the sublimated adulation of an ideal, the painted Harlequin consolingly places his hand on his shoulder. The artist sits facing an empty frame with the unattainable dream image hovering before him. Dressed in farm workwear and boots, the boy points almost indifferently to the artist's signature. *Cimetière d'automobiles* (1958) is a genre painting in the traditional sense, portraying the same boy and his friends

playing cards in an old car overgrown by plants. It is left to beholders to read a story into the picture for themselves.

In the foreground of *Tableau d'un inconnu en hommage à Jean Cocteau* (1958) we find the easily deciphered—at least for insiders—signature CRCOI in the shape of letters strewn on the floor. The first letters of RI(CCO) and COC(TEAU) have been mixed together. This important work is a further affirmation of his life plan, and the painter had someone hand it over anonymously to this momentous figure of the age. To confirm his elective affinity with the addressee, he included a note that the boy on the left holds in his hand. It quotes from Cocteau's text «On Invisibility» (1953), which at the same time is to be understood as the essence of what Ricco says on the role of the artist as investigator of the depths of the unconscious: «GROTTE DANGEREUSE / SI LES TRÉSORS NOUS / FONT OUBLIER LE / SÉSAME» (The cave becomes dangerous if its treasures make us forget the open sesame).

Ricco's «Essais» from 1959/60 highlight a brief episode in his career. Again we find the familiar arrangements in the style of his cool realism, but the protagonists in this group of works are the objects alone. By omitting the figures, the objects take over the roles they hitherto filled and act as surrogates. Ricco apparently did not find this compromise satisfactory. After a few months he again embraced his former tried-and-tested principles. *On ne saura jamais* (1960) must be classified in a new hybrid genre with its figures illustrating chakras from the German mystic Johann Georg Gichtel.

Ropraz—Paradise Unchanged 1964–1966

Anthropotomie (1961), and *Et au fond Pradoline* (1962), with one of Ricco's four vintage Citroëns in the background, are variations of his familiar scheme of things, and the same is true for *Afrika II (Djerba)* (1962), which features a postcard motif combined with a photograph from his trip to Tunisia. In contrast, *Les mains* (1962) repeats the illusionistic effects of his early still-lives. The arrangement, evocative of a theater prompt box, depicts Jean Baudet in combination with five artificial hands from the artist's collection. Diverging from the photograph of the boy with a spoke wheel (1955) that it was modeled after, the figure now holds the wax arm of a shop manikin that already had its appearance in *Essai no 7 oder Der Pfiff* (Essai No 7 or The Whistle, 1960). This painting is possibly an attempt at artistic sublimation of illicit desire. Displaying a poker face in the style of Buster Keaton, the adolescent boy caresses the arm with a tenderness befitting an erotic fetish. Although the idol is close at hand he remains unattainable for the artist; while the latter is the other person present at the Château de Bompré studio, his presence in the painting is only indirect as a reflection on the bottle with a hand on the left. The glazing bars of the window frame make it appear prison-like, transforming the space into a dark cage as if it were a harbinger of bad times to come.

The composition of *Magic Niki* (1962) resembles a collage and is an autonomous answer to pop art and nouveau réalisme. It is a homage to Niki de Saint Phalle. This «magical» daughter of a banker, famous for provocatively breaking taboos in defiance of the upper-middle-class milieu she grew up in, is represented in Ricco's painting with

a rifle in one of her so-called *Tirs* or shooting performances, and next to her is her astrological birth chart. Ricco used one of his own staged photographs as a source for the figure of the boy with blood-red paint poured over him; it is of a reclining adolescent nude with the bust of a woman between his splayed-out legs (1962). It is the last painting he completed before he was arrested on January 12, 1963. Accused of a morals offense involving minors and possession of erotic photographs, Ricco was sentenced to imprisonment for several months in Vichy.

After his release he moved to a grand country residence in Ropraz near Lausanne. Imprisonment left a caesura in his life, but he nevertheless took his art up again where he had left off. At first he had to make do with the meager supply of visual material that by chance had not been confiscated like the rest. The kneeling sailor in *Grapeshot* (1964) is an adaptation of a 1955 photograph with slight changes. He used photographs from 1962 for the figures of the boys in *Il ballo* and in the large-format homage *Il est midi, Docteur Tinguely* (both 1964). However, Ricco soon had the opportunity of taking photographs of the two sons of the postmaster Gilliéron on several occasions and of utilizing them for new subject matter, such as in *Vieni qui* and *Forio* (both 1965). The two scenes, reminiscent of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, take place on the island of Ischia, where Ricco spent a curative holiday subsequent to taking the photographs.

The Final Dreams 1966–1972

The tour of the exhibition ends with the artist's late work. Despite the fact that Ricco was suffering from pulmonary emphysema from smoking, he still painted a number of key works. Without reserves, he now mustered up the courage to express his inclinations in art too. He painted the compositions for himself only, based on newly made photographs that have been passed down to us in Ricco's photographic legacy. The interior decorator Emanuel Martin was nevertheless able to purchase some of these now valuable artworks. He accrued a representative collection of Ricco's work, which he handed over as a legacy to the Aargauer Kunsthhaus and the Kunstmuseum Bern in equal parts in 2003.

Within the confines of his choice of his subject matter, the artist remained true to his notion of narrative [literal?] art and he painted pictures that, in a style somewhere between pop art and photo-realism, are distinctly unique. Remarkable examples of this phase are *Les chevaliers* (1965), *Sir David Scott* (1966), *Von-Wattenwyl-Bild* (Painting from Wattenwyl, 1967), and the large-format composition *Der Gieu u d'Iffle* (The boy and the monkeys) (1966). The over-painting reveals that Ricco first conceived the boy wearing shorts and a tanktop, but then decided to dress him in more fashionable clothes. The background, which he adapted from a zoological manual, possibly alludes to the ascent of man according to Darwin's theory of evolution. Through the homogeneity of color used for the figure and background, we are reminded of the similarities of humans and animals, of civilization and animal instincts, and even of a passage from Nietzsche in «Zarathustra's Prologue»: «Ye have made your way

from worm to man, and much within you is still worm. Once were ye apes, and even yet man is more of an ape than any of the apes.» In *L'amie du lévrier* and *Zizi* (both 1967) we have two variant versions of the same subject. In the one a boy, accompanied by Ricco's dog Nardi, is staged as pistolero in the framework of a small theater with the goddess of the hunt, Diana. In the other he stands naked against a tropical evening sky.

In the winter of 1966/67, Ricco went on a journey with two friends to East Asia. The color photographs he made there served as models for the paintings *Prisza* (1967), *Les coquillages* (1968), and *Le beau rouge* (1969), while also inspiring him to play with striking color combinations. *L'autre rêve de l'autre marin* (1968) is a late example of Ricco's composite art. The two figureheads and the frigate in the background can be found in Hans Jürgen Hansen's book *L'Art dans la Marine* (1966), from which the artist borrowed additional motifs for other paintings, too. The sailor sleeping in the dunes was painted after a photograph of a nude by Wilhelm von Gloeden and in the painting wears clothes. *Widu Gallery* (1969) is Ricco's last allegorical painting. He got the idea to paint the objects of his collection from his friend Willy Weber. In only two weeks the artist completed a gallery picture true to the traditional genre of this kind as a presentation of a last performance: adolescent youths, his favorite mementos, and his pets are united into a kind of résumé of his work in a single composition. When it was finished, it seemed that all had been said, and Ricco laid down his brush for the remaining years of his life.

Biography of Ricco Wassmer 1915–1972

1915

Born as Erich Hans Wassmer on October 13 in Allschwil near Basel, as the second of four children of chemist, industrialist, and patron of the arts Max Wassmer and his first wife Tilly, née Zurlinden.

1918

The family moved to Bremgarten Castle near Bern, where artists, poets, and musicians were frequent visitors. Hermann Hesse idealized the ambience there as a «magic circle» in the novel *Journey to the East* (1932).

1935

He passed his university entry examinations in Bern; in Munich he visited lectures on art history and Julius Hütter's drawing course. He decided on becoming a painter.

1936–39

In summer military training school as a medical orderly. During the winter months studied in Paris at the Académie Ranson under the tuition of Roger Bissière.

1937

Decided on the artist's name Ricco; solo exhibition and participated for the first time in the Kunsthalle Bern Christmas exhibition. His parents divorced.

1939

When World War II broke out he returned to Bremgarten and military service.

1940–45

In winter and in the ensuing years attended Max von Mühlenen's painting school in Bern.

1942

In May visited a painting course given by Cuno Amiet in Oschwand. In Oberramsern near Solothurn, decorated the mill purchased by Viktor Kleinert, where Ricco lived and worked during the summer months. Specialized in still-lifes.

1945

On the invitation of Arnold Rüdlinger, he participated in the exhibition *Junge Berner Künstler* (young Bernese artists) at the Kunsthalle Bern. Member of the GSMBA. During a grave existential crisis he wanted to enter a monastery.

1946

Resided for two summers in the newly built sailing yacht Nave Nave Mahana moored at Morges on Lake Geneva. Nude drawings of the Baschmakoff brothers on the boat. Added an anchor to his signature.

1947

In Paris and on the Côte d'Azur; executed first paintings of sailors.

1948/49

Trip to Tahiti, then assistant chef on a freighter, which traveled from Hawaii to Bombay, Arabia, Sicily, Japan, and Canada. Returned home with a sailor's tattoo on his upper arm.

1950

In spring in Cannes, executed paintings after travel photographs; from September on rented Château de Bompré in Barberier near Vichy, where he spent spring and autumn each year. Maintained contacts to the art scene in Bern. Friendship with Meret Oppenheim, whom he had already met prior to 1939 in Paris.

1951

Encounter with François Mignon, who was to become his model. From 1952 used self-staged photographs as image sources and material for his paintings.

1955

The son of a farmer Jean Baudet posed as a model, later his brothers Alain, Michel, and Daniel did too. Received the City of Bern art prize for the painting *Jean du carrousel*.

1962

Trip to Tunisia, subsequently rehabilitation for asthma.

1963

On January 12 arrested in Bompré. Prison sentence for organizing so-called «ballets bleus», morals offense involving minors, and possession of erotic photographs. After his release in October he moved to a grand country residence in Ropraz in the French part of Switzerland. Suffered from chronic pulmonary emphysema.

1965

Stéphan and Alain Gilliéron posed as models. First trip to Thailand.

1966/67

Trips to Thailand, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka.

1969

Retrospective at the Kunsthalle Bern together with M. C. Escher. Publication of a small monograph. Executed his last painting.

1971

Short film *Der Vogel Fleming* (The bird Fleming) by Anton Grieb, film script by Ricco who has the role of the narrator.

1972

Ricco died on March 27 in Ropraz.

Agenda

Catalogue raisonné

Public guided tours:

Sunday, 11:00 a.m.: November 29,
December 20, January 10*/24,
February 14, March 13

Tuesday, 7:00 p.m.: December
8/29, January 19, February 2/23

* with the curator Marc-Joachim
Wasmer

Introductory events for teachers

Tuesday, December 1, 6:00 p.m.

Fees: CHF 10.00 per person

Bookings/Information: Kunstmu-
seum Bern, Tel.: +41 31 328 09 11,
vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch

Workshops for school classes with design activities in the studio

Duration: 90 minutes. Fees: CHF
140.00

Bookings/Information: Kunstmu-
seum Bern, Tel.: +41 31 328 09 11,
vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch

Marc-Joachim Wasmer, **Ricco**

**Wassmer 1915–1972. Catalogue
raisonné der Gemälde und Objekte,**

published by Kunstmuseum Bern,
layout Guido Widmer, bound volume,
464 pages, ca. 700 color and
black-and-white prints, 24 × 30 cm,
ISBN 978-3-85881-481-9,
Publisher Scheidegger & Spiess,
Zurich, CHF 99.00 (after March 14,
2016: CHF 120.00)

Exhibition

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| Duration | 27.11.2015 – 13.03.2016 |
| Opening | Thursday, November 26, 2015, 6:30 p.m. |
| Entrance Fee | CHF 14.00/red. CHF 10.00 |
| Opening hours | Monday, closed Tuesday, 10:00 a.m. – 9:00 p.m. Wednesday – Sunday, 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. |
| Public holidays | 25.12.2015: closed 24./31.12.2015, 01./02.01.2016: 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. |
| Curator | Marc-Joachim Wasmer |
| Private guided tours | During the regular opening hours as well as Thursday evening on request (beginning 7:30 p.m. at the latest), T +41 31 328 09 11, vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch |
| With the support of | Ruedi A. Wassmer, Zürich Franz Wassmer, Ennetbaden |

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