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# MARTHA STETTLER

An impressionist  
between Bern and Paris

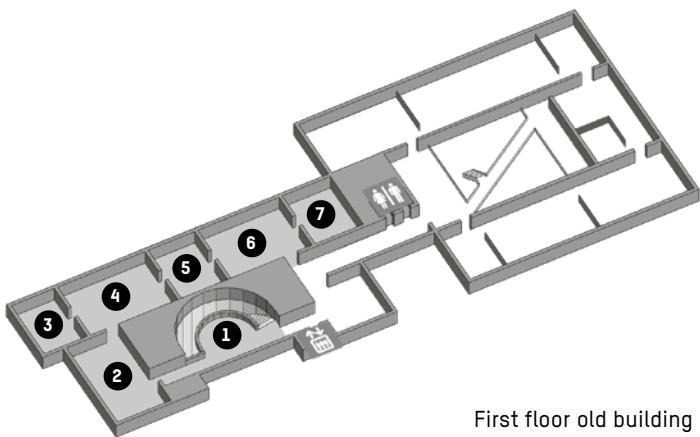
04.05. – 29.07.2018

KUNST  
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BERN

EXHIBITION GUIDE



# Floorplan



First floor old building

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# 1 introduction

The exhibition 'Martha Stettler. An Impressionist between Bern and Paris' presents the first complete retrospective of the life and work of the Bern painter Martha Stettler (1870–1945). Her father, who supported her, was the architect Eugen Stettler, built Kunstmuseum Bern. From 1893 until her death in 1945 Martha Stettler lived in Paris, where she had a successful career as a painter, and co-founded the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, which still exists today. As a director of the Academy, she ran it together with her lifelong companion Alice Dannenberg (1861–1948), originally from the Baltics. Martha Stettler did a great deal to encourage women artists and worked actively for exhibition opportunities for women in both Paris and Switzerland. Even though Stettler was very much an established figure in the art world, she fell largely into oblivion.

Martha Stettler's main work was produced in the years between 1900 and about 1920. During that time she painted her large compositions in oil, which made her name, which were also shown overseas, and for which she received awards. Her late work from the mid-1920s onwards consists of rather private, smaller-format paintings. Stettler painted still lifes, landscapes and the human figure, often combining the different genres in a single painting. Her oeuvre can be divided into two large groups of works: landscape paintings showing the world of the Swiss mountains, produced in Switzerland, and the paintings of the human figure, predominantly set in public parks and private gardens in Paris, and which Stettler made in her Paris studio. This group can also be considered to contain the interiors and still lifes.

In the 1910s Martha Stettler was able to establish herself in both the Swiss and French art worlds with her moderately modern paintings which built on the achievements of Impressionism. In terms of content she concentrated on a few themes and developed a painting style that was contemporary but not necessarily avant-garde. This put her in line with the bourgeois artistic taste of her time.

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### Training and early work

From 1886, Martha Stettler, who was encouraged by her artistically minded father from early in her youth, attended Bern College of Art, which at the time occupied the basement of Kunstmuseum Bern. Here she was taught by Wilhelm Benteli and Paul Volmar. The course included landscape drawing and the painting of still lifes as well as academic drawing, along with the copying of plaster casts of antique statues, originals from the painting collection and graphic models (*Baumstudie nach Alexander Calame*, 1891). At the end of her training in Bern Martha Stettler painted the *Stilleben mit Nyontasse* (1891) – a typical academic painting in the tradition of the Dutch still life with precious objects from her haut-bourgeois parental home. The work testifies to both her skill and her artistic abilities, and is one of the few dated paintings. After further studies in Geneva, in 1893 Stettler moved to Paris, to the master studio of the academic painter Luc-Olivier Merson (1846-1920), whose training emphasized the deep study of drawing. At last Stettler had the opportunity to take a comprehensive course in life studies (*Stehender männlicher Akt*, ca. 1895).

In 1898 Stettler moved for four years to the studio of the French painter Lucien Simon (1861-1945), who became her most important mentor. He introduced her to free, Impressionist oil painting. Thanks to him she was able to free herself from academicism, and experiment with colour and its lighting effects. She observed about this new artistic perspective: 'It was like coming out of a gloomy room into sunshine'. While the painting *Mädchen am Ofen*, with its dark tones, still owes much to the realism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the painting *Im Grünen*, made at around the same time, represents a move towards a lighter painting. She was able to exhibit this painting in the Turnus Exhibition in Switzerland in 1900, and sell it to the Lugano Museum of Art. Around the turn of the century Martha

Stettler moved towards genre themes in her studio paintings, but soon found her way towards the Parisian figure paintings that made her name. In 1896 Martha had her debut at the Paris Salon, and two years later she exhibited for the first time at a National Art Exhibition in Switzerland. Participation in these exhibitions brought her into the public eye and marked the beginning of an intense exhibition activity both at home and abroad.

## From Bern to the Alps – paintings from Switzerland

Martha Stettler always maintained a regular correspondence with her family. The artist spent several weeks in Switzerland every summer, staying in her family home in Bern or at the family house Ortbühl near Steffisburg, the country seat of her mother's family from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. During these stays Martha Stettler always also found inspiration for her painting. In these paintings she also refers to French models: she chooses exciting details, combining steep frontal views with steep downward perspectives and chooses complementary colour contrasts (*Ortbühl von Osten*, 1907–1915). She also painted the alleys of Bern old town, precisely reproducing their topography, but her rather random view of dynamic events recalls compositions by famous models such as Edouard Manet or Claude Monet (*Schützenfest*, 1910).

In the depiction of figures in alpine landscapes (*Tanz auf der Alp*, 1905–1911), Martha Stettler took her compositional bearings from the works she had made in Paris. She chooses the bird's eye perspective to create overviews: she grants the topography, assembled from large planes, on equal terms with the crowd of people. Countless studies were produced in the mountains. These are studies in oils produced on handy wooden panels of different formats. Martha Stettler took a particular interest in subjects that allowed her to vary her styles of composition. She always sought a similar perspective for her picture details: grassy hills from above, sometimes with mountain streams or rock formations in the lower part of the painting, a view of distant peaks with fields of snow, beneath a dramatic sky with sun, clouds, a stormy atmosphere, fog or an alpine glow. She staggers the individual mountain ranges formulaically over one another, so that the colour planes enter the foreground in favour of a perspectival spatial depth



(*Berglandschaft bei Lauenen II*, 1904–1923). By renouncing any symbolic intensification of the landscape, Martha Stettler finds her personal approach to alpine painting that is independent of earlier models. Stylistically, in engaging with the mountain world she achieves a simplification of her subjects that tends towards abstraction.

## In the gardens of Paris

Martha Stettler often sought her subjects in the city parks of Paris, particularly the Jardin du Luxembourg, the Jardin des Tuileries and the gardens at Versailles. There she painted children and their carers. While the women sit together and chat, the children enjoy themselves playing with hoops, playing catch or dancing in circles, or playing with model sailing boats on the ponds (*Spielende Kinder im Jardin du Luxembourg*, 1912).

Stettler is interested in the generous lines of the garden architecture. She often chooses an elevated viewpoint from which she can look out over her subject (*Le parc*, ca. 1910). She combines this elevated perspective with a frontal view of buildings or flatly painted backdrops of trees, which appear in the upper part of the painting (*Soleil de mars*, 1908).

The agitated surface of the water with its reflections is a subject that appears frequently in her paintings. The artist often includes the bare, unprimed canvas as a pictorial element: this 'informal' style reveals a picture surface that tends towards the abstract (*Aux Tuileries*, ca. 1910). The details of her park views are often structured by tree trunks. These provide a vertical rhythm for the composition and link the different levels of the painting (*Le Jardin du Luxembourg*, 1907–1915).

Entirely committed to Impressionist plein-air painting, the artist focused her attention on the painterly elaboration of the different lighting conditions. She also captures the fleeting effects of light piercing the tree-tops. Her scenes are punctuated by patches of sunlight with nuanced accents of colour on the shady paths, the tree trunks and the visitors to the park strolling around among them. However the faces of the figures are never individually developed (*Les petites*

*mamans*, ca. 1908]. Martha Stettler places particular importance on the relationship between people and objects. Glances cross the scenes of the paintings, providing a reading orientation that goes beyond the actions depicted. Sometimes the pictorial space defined by the artist is so tight that the figures are cropped, and the depiction is given something random and fleeting (*Der Kreisel*, 1907–1916).

## In domestic comfort

Martha Stettler's still lifes are mostly paintings of interiors. They show quiet, peaceful scenes (*Stilleben mit Katze*, 1907–1916) and everyday, unspectacular events (*Enfant et poupée*, ca. 1905). She often paints children's toys. A large doll with a floral dress and a porcelain face becomes a favourite prop for the artist (*La poupée*, 1906). One stylistic feature of Martha Stettler's painting lies in the relationships between the figures within the picture, as in the painting *Intimité* (ca. 1912), in which the relationship between two girls and their dog is reflected in the triangular composition.

The painter likes to interleave the spatial expanse of her painting with mirrors, curtains and furniture. Sometimes she employs the compositional element of a painting within a painting, by introducing a painting or a mirror (*Interieur mit schwarzer Katze auf einer Bank*, before 1917). This makes the mirror both a picture and a reflection surface. The painter stresses the use of different surfaces and textiles: in the painting *Intimité*, mentioned above, the texture of the floral wallpaper contrasts with the linear structure of the sofa cover. This in turn is additionally shaped by individual thick impasto brushstrokes. Here we can clearly see the influence of the Nabis group of artists and their love of the consistency of different materials. This is particularly apparent in the minute structures of the dress of a girl in the painting *La petite déguisée* (1910–1913). Even though girls often pose in front of mirrors in Stettler's paintings (*Kinderakt*, 1906–1916), she is not concerned with the representation of female vanity and its possible reference to the art-historical tradition. Instead she stresses painterly effects and a refined focus for the eye.

## The private garden as paradise and retreat

In the autumn of 1906 Martha Stettler moved with her friend Alice Dannenberg to a studio house near the Jardin du Luxembourg. The green and blooming front garden with a view of the conservatory would become a much-loved subject (*Vorgarten der Rue d'Assas*, 1907–1915). In the depiction of the garden Martha Stettler conveys a picture of comfort within the haut-bourgeois world. The garden on the edge of the private sphere serves as a place of retreat from the urban hustle. Here Stettler's models, often children, pursue their activities, play with dolls' prams, sit on swings or read outside (*Véranda*, ca. 1909). In this artist's idyll the children are looked after by adults in the garden in summer after taking a bath (*Après le bain*, ca. 1910). Servants pour afternoon tea, dogs are fed, cats stretch in the sun.

In her garden paintings Stettler examines the vibrant alternation of light and shade. She combines an aerial perspective and a distant view within the same detail of the painting, to create a contrasting tension between the empty patch of gravel in front of the studio and the minute structure of the carefully arranged and precisely tended flower-bed (*Der Garten*, 1907–1915). This juxtaposition of emptiness and fullness can be traced back to Eastern Asian influences which had found their way into European art since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lush vegetation, broken up into dabs of paint, envelops Stettler's garden scenes. The impression is created of immediate immersion in nature. A corner of the garden becomes a quiet snapshot, a tea service an exquisite still life (*Gedeckter Teetisch im Garten*, 1912).

## Family life in Switzerland and Paris

Martha Stettler was born into a family in which art was highly valued. Her father Eugen Stettler remained an important discussion partner in artistic matters. She remained in constant contact with her parents and siblings. So, for example, she repeatedly painted portraits of her nieces and nephews (*Kinderporträt*, 1912; *Die Schaukel*, before 1910). In 1913 the death of her beloved father led to a long break for Martha Stettler. She resumed her artistic activity after an interruption of almost a year with a posthumous portrait of her father (*Porträt des Vaters Eugen Stettler 1840–1913*, 1913).

Stettler's lifelong companion, the painter Alice Dannenberg, also tended towards a post-Impressionist style (*Spielende Kinder am Meer*). The two women, who ran the Académie de la Grande Chaumière together, were interested in similar themes, and often exhibited their work at the same time. They travelled around Europe together, stopping repeatedly in Venice (*San Marco in Venedig*, 1901) or Brittany, principally in Saint Malo (*Saint Malo*, 1894). In Paris Stettler and Dannenberg made friends with artists from Switzerland, including the painter Bertha Züricher. They were close neighbours with other artist friends such as the Spanish painter Claudio Castelucho and Stettler's mentor Lucien Simon. Under Stettler's aegis both became important and influential professors at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. The fact that their esteem was mutual is confirmed by two watercolours which are preserved in Stettler's estate as gifts from Castelucho and Simon (*Bretonische Taufe*, undated). In her late work the artist engaged in thoroughly Fauvist experiments (*Tor zum Ortbühl im Herbst*, 1920–1935). But she did not dissolve her clearly defined forms or liberate the colour from the object. Nor did she take the step towards pure abstraction at this point.



# Martha Stettler and the Académie de la Grande Chaumière

The Académie de la Grande Chaumière was established in Paris in 1904. It was based on a painting circle in Montparnasse which Martha Stettler had set up in 1900. Lucien Simon and Claudio Castelucho had already appeared as mentors and teachers in the painting circle. The Swiss art nouveau painter Eugène Grasset also taught at the Grande Chaumière and was responsible for the graphic presentation of the school, as revealed by its letterhead and posters (*Académie de la Grande Chaumière*, ca. 1904). The painter Emile Delaune was one of the first directors of the school. Martha Stettler held him in very great esteem, as shows her dedication on the painting *Spielende Kinder im Jardin du Luxembourg* (1912, Room 5).

In 1909 Martha Stettler had the opportunity to take over the administrative direction of the Grande Chaumière, at a time when Ferdinand Hodler, with his dictum 'mir wei keener Wyber!' (we don't want any women!) once again prevented access for women to the Swiss professional association of painters and sculptors, GSMBA. Stettler ran the school in parallel with her artistic activity. The proceeds of the Académie ensured that she had an independent living. She was considerably involved in the successful expansion of the Académie until she stepped down as director in 1943.



The artistic tendency of the Académie de la Grande Chaumière was moderately modern. It was an open academy without an entrance exam. Courses could be structured according to the students' own preferences and availabilities. The sketch course featured life models who changed position according to predefined rhythms. These new 'croquis à cinq minutes' were extremely popular, and contributed to the good reputation of the Chaumière. Alumni included Alberto Giacometti, Meret Oppenheim and Louise Bourgeois.

# Martha Stettler biography

## 1870

September 25: birth of Adelheid Fanny Martha in Bern, second daughter of the city building inspector Eugen Stettler (1840–1913) and Clara Stettler-von Fischer (1849–1927). She had six brothers and sisters.

## 1886–1891

Trains at Bern College of Art with Wilhelm Benteli (1839–1924) and Paul Volmar (1832–1906). There, in 1887 she met the German-Baltic painter Alice Dannenberg, who became her companion, and with whom she undertook most of her travels from then on.

## 1892

Studies at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Geneva with Léon Gaud (1844–1908) and Henri Hébert (1849–1917).

## 1893

Moves to Paris, where she lives in an attic apartment at 90 Rue d'Assas. Short stay at the Académie Julian.

## 1894

From the autumn: student of Luc-Olivier Merson. First trip to Brittany and Normandy (another trip in 1899)

## 1896

Beginning of her exhibition activity in Paris. Regular visits to her sister Marie von Steiger-Stettler in Saint-Blaise on the lake of Neuchâtel, where she paints the family children.

## **1898**

Switches to the private studio of Lucien Simon. First participation in a National Art Exhibition in Basel. First trip to Venice.

## **1900**

Founds a painting circle, from which the Académie de la Grande Chaumière emerges in 1904. Regular trips to the Bernese Oberland, to Lauenen to visit the Bern painter Bertha Züricher (1869–1949) and to the Dungalp. The Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris accepts women for the first time. Participation in the World's Fair in Paris.

## **1901**

A stay of several months in Venice. Paints together with the English artist Walter Sickert (1860–1942).

## **1904**

First participation in the Salon of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts.

## **1905**

Membership of the Société des Artistes Indépendants. Participation in the annual exhibition at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, USA, and in the group exhibition of Bern women artists in Kunstmuseum Bern.

## **1906**

Autumn: moves with Alice Dannenberg to a studio house with a front garden at 84 Rue d'Assas. First participation in the Salon d'Automne.

## **1908**

With Dannenberg, first participation in the women's exhibition Les Quelques in Paris, organised by the Union Internationale des Femmes Artistes. Participation in the First Swiss Secession exhibition in Bern.

## **1909**

Officially assumes direction of the Grande Chaumière with Alice Dannenberg (until 1943). Founder member of the Bern section of the Society of Swiss Women Painters and Sculptors GSMB with Hanni Bay (1885–1978), Caroline Müller, Clara von Rappard (1857–1912), Marie Rollé and Bertha Züricher. Participation in the 10<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition in Munich. First purchase by the French state.

## **1910**

World's Fair in Brussels; 1<sup>st</sup> class medal.

## **1911**

Participation in the International Exhibition in Rome.

## **1913**

Death of the artist's father Eugen Stettler. Gold medal at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition in Munich.

## **1914**

Participation in the 12<sup>th</sup> National Art Exhibition, held in Bern along with the Swiss National Exhibition. Outbreak of the First World War: all Germans must leave Paris, which has far-reaching effects on the number of students at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière.

## **1914–1918**

Stays in Paris during the war, enduring great hardship.

## **1916**

Large solo exhibition in the Helmhaus Zürich and Kunstmuseum Bern.

## **1917**

First woman to be elected to the Jury of the 13<sup>th</sup> National Swiss Exhibition. Large exhibition with Ferdinand Hodler, Emile Hornung and Carl Montag in Kunsthalle Basel.

## **1920**

First and only woman in the Swiss delegation (with Cuno Amiet, Ferdinand Hodler and Augusto Giacometti) at the 12th Venice Biennale.

## **1922**

Acquaintance with Alberto Giacometti, who becomes a student of Antoine Bourdelle at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière.

## **1927**

Alice Dannenberg takes French citizenship. Death of the artist's mother Clara Stettler-von Fischer in Bern. The Ortbühl in Steffisburg becomes her home on visits to Switzerland.

## **1928**

Participation in SAFFA, the first Swiss exhibition of women's work in Bern.

**1930**

Moves to the Paris suburb of Fontenay-aux-Roses.

**1939–1945**

Stays in Paris during the Second World War.

**1945**

Dies on December 16 in Châtillon. Buried in the Paris cemetery of Bagneux.

**1946**

Large memorial exhibition in Kunsthalle Bern curated by Arnold Rüdlinger.



# Exhibition

<b>Duration of the exhibition</b>	04.05. – 29.07.2018
<b>Entrance Fee</b>	CHF 18.00 /red. CHF 14.00
<b>Opening hours</b>	Tuesday: 10am – 9pm Wednesday to Sunday 10am – 5pm
<b>Public holidays</b>	Whit Monday 21 May 2018 open: 10am – 5pm
<b>Private guided tours /Schools</b>	T +41 31 328 09 11 vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch
<b>Curator</b>	Corinne Linda Sotzek

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