

Venice, Palazzo Cini
 Campo San Vio, Dorsoduro 864
 20 April – 2 October 2022

The Palazzo Cini Gallery

Joseph Beuys: Fine-limbed

curated by **Luca Massimo Barbero**

On 20 April, the 2022 exhibition season at the Palazzo Cini at San Vio opens with a solo show paying homage to the renowned contemporary artist Joseph Beuys

The Palazzo Cini Gallery – a remarkable house and museum containing masterpieces from the personal collection of the great patron of the arts Vittorio Cini – reopens to the public with *Joseph Beuys: Fine-limbed* a monographic exhibition dedicated to the leading 20th-century artist, whose birth centenary was celebrated in 2021.

Curated by **Luca Massimo Barbero**, director of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini Institute of Art History, and staged in collaboration with **Thaddaeus Ropac gallery**, the exhibition will present key early works from the late 1940s and 1950s, alongside a selection of important sculptures and works on paper by this master of conceptual art.

Focusing on Joseph Beuys' artistic origins, the exhibition not only marks the conclusion of the artist's birth centenary celebrations, but also a new beginning. Presenting Beuys' oeuvre at Palazzo Cini Gallery during the Biennale is an opportunity to introduce the artist's seminal work to new generations and new audiences.
 — Luca Massimo Barbero

Titled after the principal work on view, *Backrest for a fine-limbed person (bare-type) of the 20th century AD* (1972–82), the exhibition will explore two major themes of Joseph Beuys' quest: the body and the human figure; and the important, symbolic role of animals in his visual and conceptual world.

Exploring the symbolic meanings of the human figure and the idea of fertility, as well as the so-called animal figure and its healing powers, Beuys' early works touch upon contemporary issues such as discussions around gender and the power of nature. — Luca Massimo Barbero

Working across media, **Joseph Beuys** was one of the most influential, emblematic and multifaceted artists in the second half of the 20th century, and one of the few who was truly capable of making art and life coincide. He considered art the cure for society's ills, as a positive, healing force capable of awakening individual creativity, fostering political awareness and stimulating social change. His socially engaged artistic practice anticipated themes and approaches that, many years later, still seem contemporary and more urgent than

ever: the relationship between human beings and nature, the desire for peace, and artistic endeavour as social commitment and spiritual quest.

Central to the exhibition, the sculpture *Backrest for a fine-limbed person (hare-type) of the 20th century AD* (1972–82) was cast in iron from an original plaster form that was used as a therapeutic backrest to support an injured body. Completed in 1972 and installed in the vitrine by Beuys for the reopening of the Städtisches Museum Abteiberg in 1982, the sculpture is part of a larger series of works from 1972 that he called ‘Arrested Processes’. Although several versions of this sculpture were produced, this particular work is made unique by its installation as a single piece in the display case. The earthy hue of the iron brings to mind an animal skin, while its shape alludes to the silhouette of a hare. For Beuys, animals such as the hare, horse and stag embodied a lost state of human innocence and an intimate connection with nature. He described the hare as ‘the symbol of incarnation’, which physically re-enacts the cycle of life and death by burrowing itself into the ground. In his view, the hare’s ability to mould the earth into a habitat that conforms to its body is a creative act, akin to humans’ ability to shape the society we live in.

A key early work, *Bleifrau* (Lead Woman) was created in 1949 when Beuys was still a student at the Staatliche Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. The primordial female nude featured in his early sculptures and drawings as a symbol of the natural world and the realm of the spirit. A similar figure appears in *Badewanne für eine Heldin* (Bathtub for a Heroine; 1984), in which he combined two existing sculptural components. For the work’s first showing at Galerie Klüser in Munich, Beuys filled the bathtub with water, which was boiled using the immersion heater to give off steam. Recognising that heating and cooling were the active factors in changes of state or mass, Beuys placed the principle of thermal change at the centre of his theory of sculpture. This was expressed through his use of fat, felt and the implied heat of *Bathtub for a Heroine*. As curator Ann Temkin argues, this ‘doubled as a formulation for the thinking process – opposing dry, dead, “cold” thought with fluid, living, “warm” intuition’. Beuys’ first trial castings for this work form part of Tate’s permanent collection, while other editions belong to the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich and Hamburg Kunsthalle.

Oven (1950) with *Torso* (1948), also on view, is the original wood and concrete sculpture from which the upright element of *Bathtub for a Heroine* was cast. Within his personal iconography, Beuys related women to hares, associating both with the earth, seasonal cycles and fertility. This primal reproductive power is reflected in his female figures’ emphatic hips, turning them into symbols of fertility that glorify under-recognised contributions to society, such as childbearing and rearing. The artist said that ‘the heroic position in my works is generally the female one’, because ‘man has his head buried in the ground, while woman gazes at the spheres’. *Bathtub for a Heroine* spans Beuys’s artistic career, ranging from the original ‘Torso’ element – carved in 1948 while he was still a student – to the casting of the full grouping just a few years before his untimely death in 1986.

For Beuys, ‘sculpture is not fixed or finished’, and he aimed to produce a new kind of mutable object that would ‘provoke thoughts about what sculpture can be and how the

concept of sculpting can be extended'. The wax cast *Junges Pferdchen* (Young Horse, 1955–86), inspired by Rembrandt's *Polish Rider* (1655), remained in his studio and was modified by the artist over the years. The wax model formed the basis for a plaster mould, likely with the aim of creating a metal cast, but this next step remained unrealised and Beuys later opened the mould to create the sculpture. While horses often featured in his drawings, *Young Horse* is a rare sculptural treatment of the subject. As Beuys explained in 1974, 'the horse, the swan and the hare constantly come and go: figures which pass freely from one level of existence to another, which represent the incarnation of the soul or the earthly form of spiritual beings with access to other regions'. By virtue of this flexibility, non-human species could inspire humanity in its efforts to overcome materialism, a process that he sought to foster with his art. These ideas are also evident in the drawings on display, which depict a menagerie of animals including horses, deer, dogs and goats, sometimes in combination with human figures.

The exhibition season has been made possible thanks to Assicurazioni Generali, the Palazzo Cini Gallery's main partner since it reopened in 2014 and a longstanding patron of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini. The collaboration is the result of a fruitful, enduring relationship stemming from a shared commitment to making culture accessible and enjoyable.

On the occasion of the reopening, visitors will be able to admire two masterpieces that have been recently restored. The folding devotional triptych has at its centre the *Crocifissione* (Crucifixion) by the Maestro del Polittico della cappella Medici (Master of the Cappella Medici Polyptych) from the 1320s, which was restored in 2021 thanks to the contribution of Culturespaces, Paris. *Madonna con il Bambino* (Madonna and Child) by the Ferrarese artist Lorenzo Costa has been restored thanks to a significant fundraising campaign by Save Venice Inc., and with contributions from Frank and Phyllis Angello. Over the years, the US non-profit organisation has supported numerous restorations of works at the Cini Foundation, including: *San Pietro Martire* (St. Peter Martyr) by Vecchietta, restored in 2018–19; *Madonna dell'Umiltà* (Madonna of Humility) by Sassetta in 2017–18; *La Maestà* by the Master of Badia a Isola in 2015–16; and the table of *Sacra Famiglia con San Giovannino* (Holy Family with the Young St John the Baptist) by Piero di Cosimo in 2019.

Joseph Beuys (Krefeld, Germany, 1921 – Düsseldorf, Germany, 1986) became a leading figure in avant-garde contemporary art in the early 1960s. He participated in the initial events organised by the Fluxus group and delivered performance-lectures and educational actions that engaged with wide-ranging political, social, humanitarian and economic interests. He used a variety of highly symbolic materials in his works, which were often intimately connected with the forces of nature and spiritual concerns. A founder of social movements such as the Organisation for Direct Democracy and the Free International University, he participated in the Venice Biennale and documenta in Kassel, and was the subject of an extensive retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York in 1979. Beuys's works are included in the permanent collections of major museums worldwide.

In collaboration with:



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