Exhibition Topics

GOETHE
Transformation of the World
Old World.
A Childhood in Frankfurt

When Goethe was born on 28 August 1749 in Frankfurt/Main, the Holy Roman Empire was still a political entity, and Frankfurt, a city shaped by commerce and trade, had approximately 33,000 inhabitants. Since 1562, it had been the city in which the German kings and emperors were crowned. Goethe's parents were prosperous and highly regarded. His father had been granted the title Imperial Councillor; his mother was the eldest daughter of the chief justice of Frankfurt.

Goethe's father set great store by giving his two children, Johann Wolfgang and his younger sister Cornelia, the best possible education and had them taught at home by private tutors. Languages were an important part of their schooling, and the children learned French, Italian, English, Hebrew, Yiddish, Classical Greek and Latin. The extensive library and collection of paintings in their parental home fed and shaped the children's intellectual ambition.

In 1809, Goethe began compiling the memoir of his childhood and youth that was to become his autobiography Poetry and Truth. Even though the book frequently strays into fiction, it remains the most important source of information about Goethe's time in Frankfurt. It attained special significance when his parental home was transformed into a memorial site in the mid 19th century. To this day, the house on Großer Hirschgraben remains a monument to its famous inhabitant.
*World of Sentiment.*

**The Sorrows of Young Werther**

Published in 1774, Goethe’s novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was the first international bestseller in the history of German literature. Within just a few months, Goethe became one of the most-read writers. The epistolary novel polarised public opinion like no other literary work in 18th century. It triggered euphoric reactions and a veritable Werther craze. Critical voices, too, made themselves heard and condemned the empathetic description of the protagonist’s suicide.

The extraordinary success of Werther can be attributed primarily to its singular use of language: Werther’s letters are distinguished by a startling immediacy of expression and by their passionate tone. But readers were not just fascinated by Werther’s emotional language, they also responded to the radicalness with which he rebelled against social norms and expectations. To this day, Goethe’s Werther remains one of the most important romances of the world’s literary canon.
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Arcadian World. The Italian Journey

In 1786, Goethe could look back on a successful career. Not only was he the author of the European bestseller Werther, he also held one of the highest government positions in the duchy of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach and was held in great esteem at the Weimar court. But, as the years went by, he felt increasingly dissatisfied. His plans for political reform were stalling, and he was beginning to chafe under the burden of his relationship with Charlotte von Stein, a married lady-in-waiting to Anna Amalia, Duchess of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach.

In September 1786, Goethe set off for Italy, slipping away from Weimar and its troubles. His plan was to explore the great monuments of antiquity and to study the masterpieces of the Renaissance. Goethe spent almost two years in Italy, during which time he developed a classical aesthetic.

In his Italian Journey, written between 1813 and 1817, Goethe collated his Italian impressions and experiences from a perspective of almost thirty years of hindsight. The idealised picture Goethe painted of Italy is a projection, but it is one that has since shaped the perception of artists, intellectuals and countless tourists. Like the character Mignon from Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister, they long for the land »where the lemons bloom«.
A World in Transition.  
Revolution and Classicism

»It is true, I could be no friend of the French Revolution, for its horrors touched me too closely and incensed me daily and hourly«. Goethe followed the political upheaval that shook France with deep disapproval. Initially in a position to observe the Revolution unfold from a safe distance, he had to accompany Duke Carl August of Saxe-Weimar, who commanded a Prussian regiment in the Battle of Valmy and the Siege of Mainz.

Appalled by the excess of violence in revolutionary France, Goethe and Schiller developed a programmatic classicism. At its heart was the aesthetic education of the individual. Although Goethe was vehemently opposed to the cataclysmic political events in France, he admired Napoleon Bonaparte. He saw the Corsican general and future emperor as the man to have put an end to the French Revolution and as the creator of a new order in Europe. Just as Napoleon shaped the French sense of national identity over the course of the 19th century, Goethe and Schiller came to be seen as the embodiment of the highest expression of German national culture.
World of the Senses.
Theory of Colours

In the years around 1800, appalled by the extreme violence of the French Revolution, Goethe focused on studying nature. He occupied himself with problems of botany and comparative anatomy and investigated the nature of colours and how they are perceived by the human eye.

In his Theory of Colours, published in 1810, Goethe summed up the results of his years of research. The book, which is divided into three sections, made a case against optical theories expounded by Newton a hundred years earlier. But Goethe did not content himself with merely establishing a new physical colour theory, he wanted to explain how the colour-seeing faculty of the eye defines the way we perceive colour. Moreover, he planned to write a history of colour theories and a treatise on the use of colour for artists.

Although his theory was rejected by physicists, it inspired numerous 19th and 20th century artists. Modernist artists, in particular, found inspiration for their work in Goethe’s treatise.
Worlds of Faith.
Romantic Art

In the years around 1800, a new art movement emerged in Germany: Romanticism. Its adherents prized Goethe's early works, among them the Werther novel and the essay On German Architecture, which had sparked a general craze for all things Gothic and medieval. The most important Goethe text for the Romantics, however, was a rather more mature work, the novel Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship, published in 1795/96.

Despite their admiration for works like Wilhelm Meister, the Romantics rejected Goethe's neoclassical aesthetic, which they perceived as a foreign imposition because of its indebtedness to a long-gone Graeco-Roman past. Moreover, they were severely critical of Goethe's art-for-art's-sake stance. Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, whose writings are among the key sources for the early German Romantic discourse, had called for art to serve a religious purpose.

Goethe viewed the Romantics with scepticism and curiosity in equal measure. He promoted the artist Caspar David Friedrich for several years, even though he grew increasingly critical of his allegorical landscape paintings.
Distant World. Dialogues with the Orient

Goethe's interest in the Orient was kindled early. He read the Koran, and, in the early 1770s, he planned a drama about the Prophet Muhammad. Distancing himself from the wholesale condemnation of the Prophet by traditional Christian writers, Goethe sought to form a more differentiated view of the founder of Islam.

The years after 1814 were marked by a renewed engagement with the Orient. Goethe acquired valuable books in Arabic script for the ducal library and – with the help of orientalist friends – practised copying Arabic characters. The best-known result of Goethe's fascination with the Islamic world is his West-Eastern Diwan, which draws on a collection of lyrical poems by the 14th century Persian poet Hafez.

The engagement with Hafez provided Goethe with an opportunity to distance himself from the political upheavals of his time. Published in 1819, the Diwan continues to play an important role in the intercultural dialogue, even though the prism through which Goethe viewed Hafez is unmistakably tinted by the European Orient fantasies of the early 19th century.
Goethe's Faust is the best-known drama in German literature. Written over a period of more than sixty years, it reflects the dramatic change the world had undergone around 1800. This change is particularly evident in the titular character: In the first part of the drama, Faust is cast in the mould of an early modern scholar, by the end of the second part, he directs an ambitious colonisation project. The alchemist becomes an agent of modernity.

The Faust figure is some 300 years older than Goethe's drama. The earliest texts that mention a scholar and miracle healer called Faust date back to the early 16th century. The Faust figure was popularised by the chapbook Historia von D. Johann Fausten, written by an anonymous German author and published in 1587. It describes the adventurous life of a scholar who makes a pact with the devil to gain insight into the God-given order of the world.

Since its publication in the early 19th century, Goethe's drama has challenged and inspired countless stage directors to create spectacular productions. It has been hailed as the summit of German culture and as the German national epic and co-opted for various ideological and political agendas.
Musealised Worlds.
The House on the Frauenplan in Weimar

Goethe lived in the house on the Frauenplan in Weimar for more than fifty years. It was here that he wrote most of his works, received artists, scientists and politicians from all over the world and kept, archived and displayed his steadily growing collections. In 1832, the year of Goethe’s death, these collections comprised approximately 26 000 works of art and more than 20 000 natural history specimens.

In 1886, when Grand Duke Charles Alexander of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach opened the house to the public, he sought to establish Goethe’s home as the birthplace of a classical aesthetic and German High Culture. He musealised the house and converted it into a secular pilgrimage site. Goethe’s home became a tourist attraction. The destruction of several rooms during a bombing raid in February 1945 was a heavy blow. Reconstruction began soon after the end of the war, and the building was reopened to the public in 1949 to mark the bicentenary of the writer’s birth. Today, the atmosphere of the house continues to inspire artists. At the same time, they question the auratisation of the building and its transformation into a quasi-sacred site.