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Aglow in the Romantic Era of 19th-Century Paintings

■ **Art:** As his swan song at LACMA, Philip Conisbee has curated an exhibition of about 100 works influenced by the Romantic era.

By HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

The romantic sensibilities of the 19th Century seem to have seized the imaginations of artists and their audiences of late. It feels like a collective exhaustion with the demands of the relentlessly postmodern life. Whether it is the drapy, ankle-length dresses in the shop windows or the accolades for "The Age of Innocence," the Romantic era is demonstrating fresh appeal.

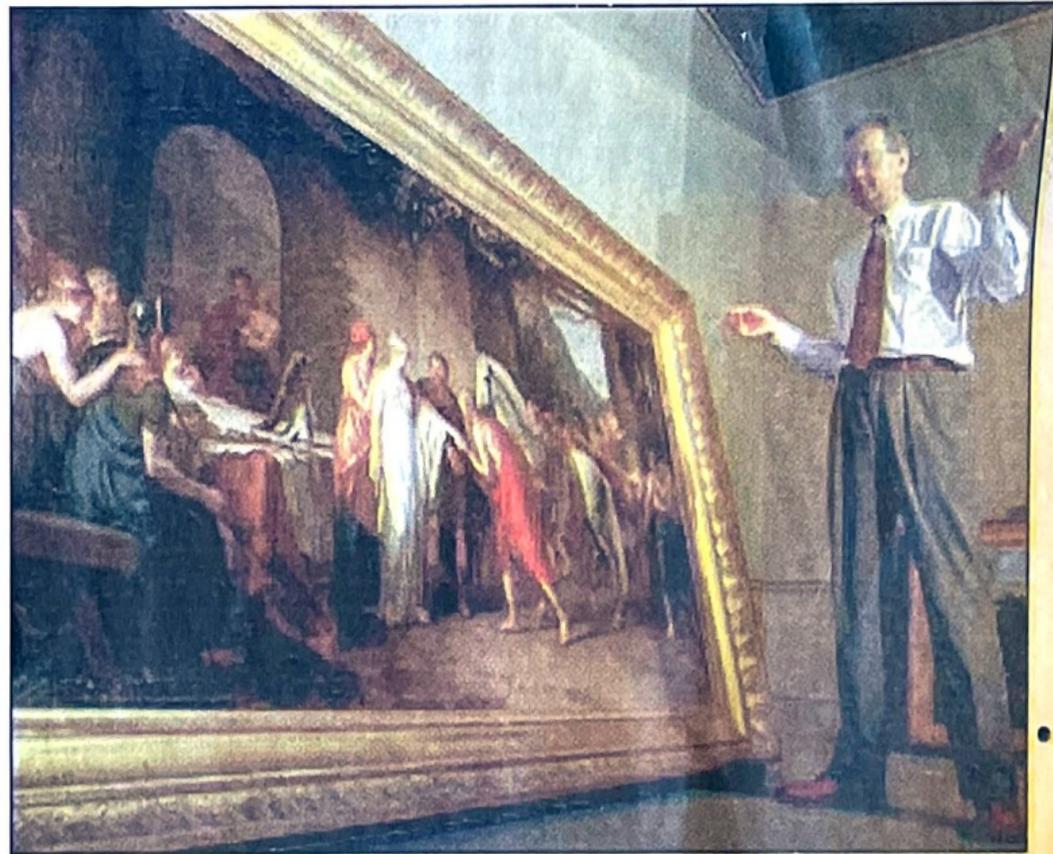
In timely and appropriate fashion, a collection of Swiss, German and Austrian pictures influenced by the Romantic movement opens Sunday at the Los Angeles County Museum in "Caspar David Friedrich to Ferdinand Hodler: A Romantic Tradition." The approximately 100 paint-

ings and drawings, mostly from the 19th Century, are on loan for the first time from the Oskar Reinhart Foundation in Winterthur, Switzerland.

The exhibition is a parting gesture for Philip Conisbee, the county museum's curator of European painting and sculpture, who goes to the National Gallery in Washington to be curator of French painting this month. As the articulate gray-haired Englishman put it: "One of the really interesting aspects for the public is that you just don't see this kind of painting in collections in this country, especially on the West Coast."

A walk through galleries painted in subdued romantic shades of green, burgundy and gold reveals domestically scaled landscapes as well as portraits and interiors, painted for the most part in the

Please see CONISBEE, F7



GERALDINE WILKINS / Los Angeles Times

Philip Conisbee standing by "A Germanic Wedding" at LACMA: A fresh appeal.

CONISBEE

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detailed style and translucent finish associated with Northern Europe. A rocky outcropping over a brilliant blue sea by Alexandre Calame, a serious young girl in a boat painted with graphic intensity by Albert Anker, an interior scene of a man reading alone by Georg Friedrich Kersting, and evocative, moody landscapes by Friedrich.

"In the 19th Century, there was an interest in America in what was done in Germany. On the Grand Tour, American artists went to Dusseldorf, Munich, Dresden and Berlin to study. For obvious social and political reasons, German art of the 19th Century has been out of favor in this country since the First World War," Conisbee says. As this exhibition demonstrates, that trend has been changing in recent years.

Oskar Reinhart was the youngest of four sons, all involved in arts patronage. Their father, also named Oskar, was a wealthy merchant who collected art and supported artists. After his father's death, Oskar Reinhart devoted himself to building two vast collections. His spacious home in Winterthur, known as "Am Romerholz," contains exceptional examples of French Impressionism as well as Old Masters.

The foundation collection was inspired by young Reinhart's visit to the 1906 Exhibition of the Century in Berlin, a show re-evaluating German art of the previous hundred years, emphasizing the Romantic and Realist work. Between 1924 and 1951, Reinhart was inspired to collect nearly 500 works of art documenting the range of Northern European painting from the origins of Swiss Romantic painting in the late-18th Century to the birth of modernism around 1900. The paintings are on loan only because their building in Winterthur, a small town outside of Zurich, is being renovated.

"Reinhart favored a naturalistic kind of painting. He didn't like the bombastic academic painting," Conisbee said. "An important aspect of

the Romantic movement was a specific interest in nature, so there is a strong element of landscape painting in the show. These were painted in the studio but also in open air. A number of works show Man in the landscape, and the majority of those are not cultivated but wild. Especially the mountain scenes.

Conisbee points out that the artists' naturalistic subjects were inspired by the specifics of the Northern German landscape, a world of twilight, pine trees and mists—to paint such scenes was a conscious departure from the classical landscape that had dominated European painting. This Romantic nationalism, wherein artists in England, Germany, Italy and elsewhere celebrated their own identity by representing the landscape, was stimulated by the Napoleonic Wars of 1793-1815.

A haunting picture painted with gemstone clarity by Caspar David Friedrich, "Chalk Cliffs on Rugen," shows two men and a woman gazing down the sheer palisade and out to sea, a scene of mystical splendor. The unprecedented showing here of pictures by Friedrich complement the recent acquisition of the artist's "A Walk at Dusk" to the permanent collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, only the second work by the artist to be acquired by a U.S. museum.

The Reinhart Foundation Collection is considered to be an ideal companion to "The Golden Age of Danish Painting" co-organized by Conisbee, which will come to the county museum on Oct. 24.

Both Friedrich and his peer Philipp Otto Runge studied at the Copenhagen Academy of Art. Danish artist Christen Kobke is included in the Reinhart Collection as well. Conisbee was organizing the Danish show when he met Peter Wegman, curator of the Reinhart Foundation Collection and discovered the pictures would be available for loan. "There are parallels in subject matter and they have a similar technique. The Copenhagen academy taught neo-classical technique but there was no market for history painting so they turned those techniques to everyday life."