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Catalogue of chaos

By Rachel Spence

One of America's superstar artists turns curator: Ed Ruscha talks about making a big show in Vienna



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Ed Ruscha stands between Rubens portraits and bezoar stones (from animals' stomachs) at the Kunsthistorisches Museum

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In 1961, 24-year-old Ed Ruscha climbed into a 2CV with his mother and his brother and set off on a Grand Tour that encompassed Paris, Venice, Madrid and Vienna. He does not remember the Old World “as a great discovery”: rather than masterpiece-filled museums, what snared his heart was an Austrian girl who referred to him lovingly as “*wanse*” (bug).

Back in the US Ruscha made his beloved a drawing of a winding ribbon of paper that spells the word “Wanse”. A tiny cup and saucer in the corner is a nod to the gilt-dripping coffee-houses that were another of Ruscha’s favourite memories of Austria’s capital. Now “Wanse”, as the drawing is known, has come home. Alongside a display of objects ranging from paintings by Brueghel, Rubens and Arcimboldo to kidney stones and trays of ladybirds, it is part of *The Ancients Stole All Our Great Ideas*, an exhibition at Vienna’s Kunsthistorisches Museum drawn from the institution’s own collection and curated by Ruscha himself.

The marriage between institution and artist is unlikely. Ruscha is famed for his scrupulously [laconic hymns to US culture](#) at its most downbeat and vernacular: the gas station on the highway, the humdrum words – OOF, BOSS, MINT – whose poetry resides in the minimalist choreography to which this former layout artist set them dancing across the canvas. The Kunsthistorisches, on the other hand, is a high monument to Old World culture, a cupola-crowned palace built in 1891 by Emperor Franz-Joseph I to house the art collections accumulated by successive Habsburg dynasties.

Those perplexed at the notion of LA’s less-is-more master roaming these stucco-dripping galleries should know that no one was more astonished than Ruscha himself. “I was very surprised because I’ve never done this before,” he remarks, his frost-blue eyes and cactus-dry, Californian purr leaving one in no doubt about the famous magnetism that recently saw him asked to model for a US casualwear label.

All around us curators and workmen engage in the tense, skilful ballet of installing to a deadline. A Rubens is held aloft for inspection; a stuffed coyote is placed on a shelf. The archetype of West Coast cool in combat trousers, white-soled sneakers and button-down shirt, Ruscha is a tranquil island in the storm. He ambles about the room with the unhurried poise of a man who has not only sold a painting – “Burning Gas Station” (1965-66) – for nearly \$7m, but also has work in Obama’s White House.

Yet do not mistake calm for indifference. “He made four visits here over the past 18 months and looked at everything we had, including the storage rooms,” testifies Jasper Sharp, curator of modern and contemporary

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art at the Kunsthistorisches. Ruscha also demanded to be let loose in the Natural History museum on the other side of the square.

Why forage farther afield? “It’s my animal, vegetable, mineral approach to art,” is the wry response of a man who has made work out of vegetables, gunpowder, chocolate and Vaseline.

Sharp, previously at the Guggenheim in Venice, has been tasked with revitalising the Kunsthistorisches for the 21st century. It is no small challenge: the museum’s collection ceases in 1840. So far, events have included small shows by Ugo Rondinone and Chris Martin. But Ruscha’s project, the first of a series of shows curated by contemporary masters, is the most ambitious yet.

Born in Omaha to an auditor father – “a stoic, a devout Catholic” – and a poetry-reading mother – who “was a lot more fun” – he was raised on a diet of “comic books and cartoons”. An adolescent job as a signmaker provoked the revelation that “painting a hamburger sign could be a route to heaven”. That flair for layout brought work in the advertising trade after art school in LA. But encounters with groundbreaking mid-century canvases, such as “Target with Four Faces” by Jasper Johns, persuaded him a passion for humble motifs was compatible with loftier ambitions.

By the early 1960s, he was showing at LA’s prestigious Ferus Gallery in the company of John McCracken and Edward Kienholz. Only then, as his own vision crystallised, did he hear the past masters calling. “I realised I had to grow [and] historical paintings became more attractive to me.”

Nevertheless, surely the task of culling just 35 objects from the hundreds of thousands in Vienna must have been a near-impossible challenge?

Ruscha’s approach was methodical. “First, I had to do a walk-through of the museum.” The painting he desired most was the “Tower of Babel”, but restoration made the transfer of Brueghel’s piteous chronicle of hubris



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'Dodecahedron: Human Heads and Heads of Animals' (late 16th century)

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impossible. Instead, two other Brueghels – “The Fight between Carnival and Lent” (1560), and “Children’s Games” (1560) – became, he says, “the anchor” of the show.



Ruscha's 'Wanse' (1967)

The quietly astonishing final display casts both the antique pieces and Ruscha’s own vision in a new light. From the panorama of children as they leapfrog and bowl hoops across a town square to the confrontation between gorging revellers and the starving pious, the two Brueghels are taxonomies of human folly.

The works that Ruscha has gathered around them range from Arcimboldo’s “Summer” (1563), a face built from fruits and vegetables, to a book of 16th-century calligraphic templates. There is a stuffed coyote (“I wanted something from my native land”); crystal balls for cooling the hands of

17th-century aristocrats; and a chunk of meteorite discovered in 19th-century Arizona. The result is a cabinet of curiosities that testifies to the fundamental human urge to classify a world as it spirals beyond human or divine control. Suddenly Brueghel looks orderly, Arcimboldo less surreal, and miscellaneous treasures take on a metaphysical portent.

“There’s an absurdity in being specific about things that I like,” explains Ruscha, when pressed to say why he chose, for example, four trays of ladybirds over Caravaggio’s “Madonna of the Rosary”. In tune with his generation, for whom artistic hierarchies were there to be toppled, he perceives an “artistic device” in “the idea that you would select 1,342 ladybugs and make a point of announcing 1,342”.

As we talk, it becomes clear that Ruscha visualises the world as both order and chaos. Although abstraction is “the skeleton of his thinking”, he admits he requires “something recognisable” as an image. Bashfully, he confesses: “I’ll put a word on the canvas and it’s usually spelled correctly.”

Is he, I ask, someone who experiences the world through his eyes rather than his mind? But he has been distracted by the sight of the coyote, which is now caged in its vitrine. “Too bad he has to be inside that little box there,” he murmurs. After a few days cooped up in the Old World, the painter too may be feeling the call of the wild.

The Ancients Stole All Our Great Ideas, Kunsthistorisches Museum, September 25-December 2. www.khm.at