

EN

# Giovanni Giacometti

## Colour in the Light

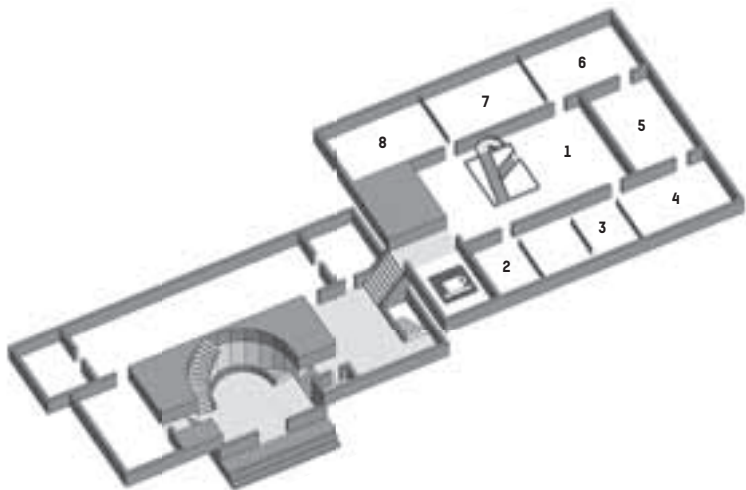
October 30, 2009 – February 21, 2010

KUNST  
MUSEUM  
BERN

EXHIBITION GUIDE

# Exhibition Plan

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# Introduction

The focus of this exhibition, which comprises over one hundred paintings belonging to the museum or private collections, is Giovanni Giacometti's treatment of light. Be it luminous daylight, obscure twilight, or the dark of night broken by the radiance of the moon or the artificial glow of lanterns or lamps – light is constantly a constitutive element in the work of this artist. In some of his letters he mentioned the pivotal significance that light had for his painting. His aim was to «penetrate the essence of colored light», and he stated that «the struggle to capture light» was, to put it in a nutshell, «the driving force» behind his work.

As was the case with Cuno Amiet, Giacometti strived to render changing light conditions and intensify the impact of light and color by means of juxtaposing brushstrokes or dabs of pure, often complementary colors. His goal was ruled by the deep conviction that «for the painter everything exists by virtue of light». And he maintained that color was «more the expression of light than a decorative motif». Color was to be «transformed into light in the painting, and form and life.» Already Ferdinand Hodler, who contemplated his lifelong «on unifying light, color, and painting», expressed, in the quintessential lines of *The Mission of the Artist* (1896/97) the principle that «the universal charm of color and shade is derived from light.»

Giovanni Giacometti was commemorated in Bern at the Kunsthalle in an exhibition in 1934. The last time the Kunstmuseum itself celebrated the artist was in 1968 with the Centenary Exhibition of *Cuno Amiet 1868-1961, Giovanni Giacometti 1868-1933: Works up to 1920,*

on the occasion of the hundredth birthday of the two artists and friends. Now, after the Kunstmuseum Bern presented *Cuno Amiet and Pont-Aven* in 2000, the time has come again to commemorate his companion.

It is an undisputed fact that both Giacometti and Cuno Amiet belong to the leading Swiss artists who, between Impressionism, Postimpressionism, and Fauvism, assimilated and further developed the fundamental innovations of modernism. Both made a significant contribution to innovation in early 20th-century Swiss painting.

## «Color was to become light in painting, and form and life»

The exhibition commences with portraits depicting the two friends Cuno Amiet and Giovanni Giacometti; the artists portrayed one another in their mutual Paris lodgings (cat. 5). They had become acquainted in Munich in 1886. Whereas Amiet managed to finish the portrait of his friend for the Salon exhibition of 1889 as part of the World Exhibition, Giovanni could not participate because he did not finish his work in time.

In the art section of the Paris 1889 World Exhibition, Giacometti made a momentous discovery – he came across three motifs from his native country and wrote home: «[...] there I found the air and light of my mountains depicted with an intensity I have in fact myself experienced, but hitherto have not seen with the same force and truth in painting. The creator behind these pictures is called Giovanni Segantini». For a long period, Giacometti could not escape Segantini's influence and his divisionist method of juxtaposing fine brushstrokes of pure pigment that considerably intensified the luminosity of the image. He became personally acquainted with Segantini first in Maloja, when the latter was working on his famous *Alpentriptychon (Alpine Triptych)*. After Segantini's decease in 1899, Giacometti completed a sketch of him on his deathbed and additionally completed his painting *Le due madri (The Two Mothers)* (cat. 13).

Large-format scenes reminding of Segantini's style hang in the staircase hall. They reveal the impact that the divisionist method of painting had on Giacometti (cat. 11, 14). On the other hand, in 1895 he rather paid homage to conventional naturalism in his monumental painting *Bestie da soma (Women Carrying Rocks)* (cat. 9).

## From the traditional tonal method of painting to the light of the avant-garde

In 1893 Giacometti traveled to Italy. He did not fundamentally change his concept of light and color in southern Rome and Naples, although he brightened up his palette and enriched his nuances of color. In radiant colors, *Knaben am Strand von Torre del Greco (Boys on the Beach at Torre del Greco)* (cat. 6) presents naked boys under the summer Mediterranean sun.

After Segantini's sudden death in 1899, Giacometti gradually succeeded in liberating himself from the older artist's influence. He replaced the sometimes fine, coma-like brushstrokes with more generous dabs of paint. At the same time, his coloration is no longer stipulated by the object to be painted, but increasingly develops a dynamic of its own that exploits coloristic impression.

He also steadily transforms his treatment of light. In the painting *Sonniger Hang mit Ziegen und Schafen (Sunny Slope with Goats and Sheep)* from 1900 (cat. 12), the livestock and the slim tree trunks ornamentally enliven the surface of the ochre-yellow mountainside, casting dark, arabesque shadows.

The divisionist method used in the unusual vertical format of the work *Natale (Christmas)* (cat. 8) still follows the example set by Segantini. In a night scene, Giacometti profanely sets the figures from Bethlehem in the middle of the snow-covered Bergell landscape. The glow of a lantern illuminates the faces. The artist's comments on the work were: «I could only attain the desired effect by generously applying saturated colors and, in this way, succeed in merging forms and colors in a way typical for night and for snow. [...]»

From then on, he primarily concentrated on depicting his immediate surroundings, immersed in the microcosm of his garden and his family. Simultaneously, he began to portray the mountains around him as structured, decoratively organized surfaces.

When Giovanni Giacometti exhibited thirteen artworks side-by-side with those of Segantini in the Zürich Künstlerhaus in 1903, the critic from the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* underscored the difference between the two artists. He emphasized that Giacometti had a «decidedly richer sense of color» than Segantini. He continued by saying that if we, as viewers, «back far enough away from the paintings, then the colors seem to come peculiarly alive and articulate, and we begin to realize that we are observing the works of an artist whose eyes can very subtly orchestrate the color stimuli of the external world.»

## «Our instructors for appreciating van Gogh»

In 1906/07, Cuno Amiet and Giovanni Giacometti extensively studied and drew on Vincent van Gogh's painting in their work. An example for this is Giovanni Giacometti's reinterpretation of the van Gogh painting *Die Brücke von Arles (The Bridge of Arles)* (cat. 33). For its execution he followed the instructions on color that van Gogh had noted down on a pen-and-ink sketch.

Vincent van Gogh's impact was so evident in Cuno Amiet's and Giovanni Giacometti's work that Hans Trog asserted in a 1908 edition of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* that they are not only «van Gogh's artistic fellow believers», but also, with their «pure, loud color tones», they had prepared the Swiss for van Gogh's painting: «They have become our instructors for appreciating van Gogh.» Besides his strong coloration, van Gogh's impact on Giacometti is manifest especially in his vigorous strokes. But, differing from the ecstatic mode of painting we find in van Gogh's work, the brushstrokes rendered by the artist from Bergell always obey a conceptual pattern.

In the work *Der Kanal (The Channel)* (cat. 25), the paint structure adheres primarily to the horizontal impression of the landscape. The still waters of the channel, where it flows near Capolago into Lake Sils, reflect the last rays of the setting sun as they steep the mountains in red.

In this double room of the museum we find further works that, more or less, display van Gogh's impact on Giacometti and which also impress the viewer on account of their contiguity to the Nabis.

On the one hand, we find a series of subtly rendered still lifes and,



on the other, observe how the elements of landscape develop into decorative surface patterns, as can be seen in the picture *Frühling (Piz Duan, Spring)* (cat. 23) from 1905.

Even if Giacometti continues to use motifs in certain paintings that remind us of his former teacher Segantini, the younger artist has replaced the latter's comma-structured, detailed, and densely interwoven pigments with much broader brushstrokes and great dabs or generous streaks of paint. In the work *Abend auf der Alp (Evening in the Alps)* (cat. 28), the brushstrokes making up the sky of yellow and light-blue radiant light point precisely towards their no-longer visible source, the sun that has disappeared behind the horizon, while others are rounded to illustrate the mountains' indwelling power. And on a gray rainy day, as in *Regentag bei Capalago (A Rainy Day near Capalago)* (cat. 31), Giacometti successfully manages to transform drab reality into «a revelation of light».

*Regenbogen (Rainbow)* (cat. 26) is probably his boldest landscape. In this work he takes up the «divisionist principle» while also introducing stylistic elements that Henri Matisse or André Derain developed contemporaneously.

## Children of the sun

Very few artists portrayed themselves and their families again and again to the extent Giacometti did. According to the catalogue raisonné, he painted not only 45 self-portraits but additionally more than 120 paintings that include representations of either his wife Annetta or his children. They are among his most daring creations. Every time he tried out a new style he applied it first in pictures of his family. He once asserted that «my children live in my paintings, and my biography is written in my artwork».

In the winter of 1905/06 he executed the work *Im Schein des Abendrottes (In the Glow of the Sunset)* (cat. 56), in which the illuminated group – the nurse with the artist's three older children – are suffused in evening light, an effect that he attains with a postimpressionistic application of paint. Giacometti's outstanding proficiency in the art of child portraiture is likewise exemplified in *Diego and Ottilia* (cat. 72). Lively brushstrokes cover the pictorial surface and make the whole scene vibrate radiantly. His daughter Ottilia very often posed as a model for him – in a whole series of pictures we can observe how she slowly grew up into adulthood. Her full red hair is very often emphasized, and each time Giacometti had her sit before a specially selected, intensely colored backdrop. At times we recognize a section of one of his own paintings.

The most outstanding artwork in this room hangs next to the more traditional *Veglia* (cat. 54) from 1901: It is the large-format painting *Die Lampe (The Lamp)* (cat. 55). The richness of colors and tones must have inspired Giacometti here, even though the motif seems

quite mundane. The family is gathered around a table. The group has been curiously expanded: several family members have been represented twice – not only for compositional reasons but also because the artist probably wished to emphasize the fact that all are present after having had typhus. The dazzling white half-circle of the petroleum lamp hanging over the table sets the ambience and is the focus of the scene.

Also the three panels of the work *Sonnenkinder (Children of the Sun)* from 1913 (cat. 44) is a homage to his own children. In contrast to a genre-related representation, the artist elevates the motif to an allegory by adopting the form of the triptych and by additionally using gold leaf in the pediment over the central panel. But the artist's main theme is the radiant incandescent light of the sun. He puts his long cherished ambition to paint «nudes out of doors» into effect also in another work titled *Kinder in der Sonne (Children in the Sun)* (cat. 43), in which he depicts his three sons in the shadow of a tree. Indeed, for the artist there was with «certainty nothing more beautiful than a figure in the play of light from the sun», as Giacometti wrote in a letter to Cuno Amiet. Previous to this, Amiet had followed the idea of monochromatic painting to its limits in the work *Die Gelben Mädchen (The Yellow Girls)*. The figures of the children literally dissolve in varying tones of yellow because he has placed them on a background covered with dandelions.

## «My vision of light, my childhood dream»

In this room the artist perpetuates the luminosity of the previous paintings. In certain works, however, the depiction of light in images is, every now and again, transformed to portray the «own radiance» of individuals: In Giacometti's standing *Selbstbildnis (Self-Portrait)* (cat. 63), it is apparent that the light – intensified by the broken style of painting using single brushstrokes – basically doesn't really illuminate but, instead, brings the portrayed persons to seemingly radiate light themselves, giving the paintings an almost magical dimension. Also the painting *Fiammetta* from 1909 (cat. 34) is characterized by a non-naturalistic inner light. Everything is determined by gold, chrome, and bronze-yellow. The motif appears to be a nude woman in the very center of a composition; however, she seems, together with the contours of her body, to be literally almost swallowed up in light by the unbelievable luminous intensity.

The painting *Das Brot (The Bread)* (cat. 35) from 1908 portrays Giovanin da Vöja, a mentally handicapped shepherd who Giacometti often painted, squinting in the merciless light of the sun while he cuts bread. The artist also chose him for his work *Emmaus* (cat. 65) – a modern interpretation of Rembrandt following van Gogh – where Giovanin stood as a model twice for the two apostles next to the figure of Christ. Also here we find a supernatural, diffused light, which Giacometti considered a special challenge. It ceremoniously caresses the group of figures, especially the main one in the center under the arch of the niche. Christ in his light-colored garments together with the white tablecloth enhance the luminosity of the painting as well.

Rollicking patches of light are the actual subject of some of the paintings. They remind the beholder of certain paintings by Frank Buchser, Giacometti's former mentor, who likewise visualized color values issuing from refracted light. This is expressed particularly clearly in the paintings *Sonnenflecken (Patches of Sunlight)* (cat. 44) and *Unter dem Hollunder (Under the Elderberry)* (cat. 78), as well as in the *Selbstbildnis (Self-Portrait)* from 1907 (cat. 1) and in the idyllic *Maternità (Maternity)* (cat. 61) from 1908, in which Annetta breast-feeds little Bruno in the shadow of a tree while Alberto and Diego play at her feet in the grass. The figures are connected by triangular structural lines and the dominating blue color. A circle of sunspots surrounds the represented figures in their radiant worldliness. The artist repeated the same motif with variations in a larger version titled *Die Mutter (The Mother)* (cat. 60).

A group of works that impresses on account of their experimental quality and betrays the artist's preoccupation with expressionistic art concludes this room of the exhibition (cat. 80-84).

## 6 Images of winter – «A warm ray of sun through icy fog»

Giacometti was continually engrossed with the enchanted appearance of snow and painted a large number of remarkable winter landscapes. Although the long winters in Bergell were probably a driving force for this preoccupation, the refraction of light on the surface of the snow were welcome subject matter for an artist who had such an avid interest in light effects and the impact of color.

The character of the early work *Winterlandschaft in Bergell (Vicosoprano, Winter Landscape in Bergell)* from 1903 (cat. 21) still betrays, on the whole, Giacometti's deference toward Segantini. The section of the view selected by the artist does not aim at a panoramic landscape but rather tends to zoom in on the mountains, making a living body of matter out of the snow. He doesn't evoke death-like, frozen rigidity, but, instead, transforms the landscape into a visionary image of a fairy-tale winter paradise.

The painting *Winternebel (Nebbia, Winter Fog)* from 1910 (cat. 38) was executed at the close of Giacometti's response to and experimentation with French pointillism. The artist's primary interest in this work is the colorful, shimmery appearance of the radiant luminosity refracted by the veil of fog and reflected by the expanse of snow. The entire surface of the picture has been painted over with identical, regular strokes. The point of focus is first and foremost the distribution of color and the effect of light. The contours of the house and the barn are mere adumbrations.

In other paintings of snow the element appears downright colorful – pink, yellow, blue, or mauve. This can, for example, be said of the painting *Wintersonne bei Maloja (Winter Sun near Maloja)* (cat. 47). In

this work the viewer looks directly into the rays of the sun – in a way we seldom behold in paintings.

From time to time the trees and houses are outlined by distinct, colored contours or the landscape appears to be a wide, snow-covered plain in which the silhouettes of houses, barns, and sheds can only be vaguely discerned.

The late work *Waldesinnere im Winter (Deep in the Forest in Winter)* (cat. 98) can successfully compete with the experimental and sketchy application of paint that was typical for Edvard Munch's late style. In the work we see the naked trunks of trees standing in the snow with a yellow sky spread out behind them, in a way that the vertical accentuation builds up a tense, abstract area in the composition.

## «Nature awakens with approaching spring»

The works selected for this room are landscapes that were painted after the snow had melted and which invoke the summer. Strongly colored summer landscapes contrast the pastel-colored winter images. The treatment of light is just as apparent as it is in the winter paintings. Whereas Giacometti mainly limited his earlier views of nature by only selecting smaller sections of a landscape and, furthermore, represented them two-dimensionally, as can be seen in the work *Tremolo (Aspen Tree)* (cat. 86), his later landscapes increasingly comprise wide panoramas of very three-dimensionally depicted mountains (cat. 53). He steadily shifts the skyline further downward in his compositions.

The painting *Die Lerche (The Lark)* (cat. 79) is a representative example for summer alpine landscapes in Giovanni Giacometti's late works. In this piece the artist has refrained from incorporating any figures or objects as accessories in the landscape. Even the lark after which the piece has been named is hard to find. The very low-lying horizon, the division of fore-, middle-, and background, and the decreasing color saturation towards the distance achieve a great depth of field. The sky takes up around two-thirds of the pictorial space, spanning over the yellow-green meadows and gently undulating hills nestling between the flanks of the rocky outcrops on either side. The play of light in the halo of clouds and on the alpine meadows creates an animated total impression with a lyrical, atmospheric character. As we have already seen, Giacometti was also fascinated by the idea of depicting flesh-tones bathed in sunlight, an aspect of painting



that likewise preoccupied Amiet at times. We find an example of this in the work *Badende im Cavlocciosee (Bathers in the Cavloccio Lake)* (cat. 88). The artist depicted a group of boys wading in water, whereby the reflection of the figures dissolves into patterns of light on the broken surface of the water.

The large canvas representing a youth playing a flute reveals strong symbolic overtones. It is titled *Erwachen (Awakening)* (cat. 89) and points clearly to Ferdinand Hodler's influence. The latter artist died a year before the work was painted.

## Sun and shadow

The room that concludes the exhibition contains a number of Giacometti's large-format late works. Here again, the actual quest of the artist is to «strive to penetrate the essence of colored light».

In *Sommermorgen in Maloja* (*Summer Morning in Maloja*) from 1927 (cat. 105), the beholder is blinded by the intense glare of the rising sun, while a herd of cows, as dark silhouettes, pass by in the foreground. This everyday scene seems transformed into an almost mystical world.

The play of light and shadow is also the theme of one of the last large-format works painted by the artist: *Die Gant* (*The Public Auction*) (cat. 90) from 1932. In this work he has depicted a village auction in which several of the figures are only visible as silhouettes in the blinding light streaming from both sides of the painting into the almost symmetrical space of the room. It is difficult to pinpoint the light source exactly. The source of light in his earlier work *Wirtshaus* (*The Inn*) (cat. 102) is likewise located outside of the actual frame – it is a snapshot in time in a village inn where Giacometti readily spent an evening with the people there in order to make, as he called it, «studies that he stored in his memory».

He was fascinated by the subject of *Frauen am Brunnen* (*Women at a Well*) (cat. 91) for many years, in 1916 and 1920–26. He repeatedly reworked the theme of washerwomen, whereby the figures dominated the composition in adherence to Hodler's stylistic principles.

Finally, the exhibition also shows a few of the late self-portraits. Often when Giacometti was forced to work indoors and could not set

up his easel out in the open, he preferred to work with natural light falling in through the window rather than that issuing from lamps. He regularly included the studio space or living quarters; the face is partially hidden in shadow by the glare of the light shining in through a window or opening (cat. 103). And in his very last self-portrait (cat. 104), a bust portrait in which he is dressed in a white painter's smock, he proudly focuses with wide open eyes on the viewer. His artistic principle and the «driving force» behind his work is still, as before, «the struggle to capture light».

One of the most spectacular paintings, *Winterlandschaft mit durchbrechender Sonne (Winter Landscape with the Sun Breaking Through)* from 1930 (cat. 49), concludes the exhibition. The light penetrating through the fog is expressively painted in a sketchy style with hurried, generous brushstrokes. Gray, yellow, and white surfaces without any plasticity interlock and overlay one another. As a pioneer of modernism, in this work the artist created a composition of improvised color planes that seems to disdain spatial and figurative orientation.

# A concise biography: Giovanni Giacometti

- 1868 Giovanni Giacometti is born March 7 in Stampa in Bergell, Graubünden.
- 1886 Following the advice of his drawing teacher in Chur, he moves to Munich and enrolls in the arts and crafts school there. During his training there he becomes acquainted with Cuno Amiet (1868 – 1961), who remains a life-long friend.
- 1888 He graduates together with Cuno Amiet from the military training school in Bellinzona. Both then move to Paris, where they are impressed and inspired by the Spring Salon and especially Giovanni Segantini's works.
- 1890 Return to Switzerland in the summer. Stay with Frank Buchser in Solothurn. As of mid-October in Paris again at the Académie Julian.
- 1891 Because his money runs out Giacometti returns to Stampa in spring.
- 1893 His first commission for a painting enables him to go to Rome and Naples in February. Not being able to sell his work and because of illness he returns to Bergell in autumn.

- 1894 In September Giacometti becomes acquainted with Segantini in Maloja. He becomes Giacometti's mentor and friend.
- 1896 Amiet visits him in Stampa. Giacometti's first successful submission to the 4th National Art Exhibition in Genf.
- 1898 Preoccupation with printing, initially focusing mainly on etching.
- 1900 Weds Annetta Stampa (1871– 1964) on October 4. Their honeymoon takes them to Anna and Cuno Amiet in the Oschwand and to Geneva where they meet up with Hodler. In the following years Annetta gives birth to four children: In 1901 to Alberto, 1902 to Diego, 1904 to Ottilia, and 1907 to Bruno. The family lives in Borgonovo until 1904, they then move to Stampa where they stay in the Albergo Piz Duan and move into their own house directly opposite in 1905.
- 1906 Giacometti converts the barn attached to his house into a studio. Exhibition in the Künstlerhaus Zürich.
- 1908 Giacometti participates in a traveling exhibition with the group of artists «Die Brücke».

- 1912 he celebrates his great success with an exhibition in the Kunsthaus Zürich.
- 1920 Retrospectives of his work take place in the Kunsthalle Bern and in the Kunsthalle Basel, where Giacometti is able to sell a substantial number of pictures.
- 1933 He dies on June 25 while taking a cure in Glion (Canton of Vaud).

# Agenda

## **Öffentliche Führungen**

Sonntag,

1./8.\* /15./22.\* /29. November,

6.\* /13./20.\* /27. Dezember,

3./10.\* / 17./31. Januar,

7./ 14.\* /21. Februar, 11h und

Dienstag,

3./10./17./24. November,

1./8. /15./29. Dezember,

5./19. Januar, 2./16. Februar, 19h.

\* mit Kinderworkshop ab 10h30;

**en français:** mardi, 17 novembre,

8 décembre, 19h30;

**in italiano:** martedì, 10 novembre,

19h30

## **Einführungen für Lehrpersonen**

Dienstag, 3. November, 18h und

Mittwoch, 4. November, 14h

## **Literarische Führungen mit Michaela Wendt**

Dienstag, 10. November,

15. Dezember, 2. Februar, 18h,

und Sonntag, 22. November,

13. Dezember, 10. Januar, 13h

## **Lust auf Kunst am Samstag- nachmittag Spot on: Vom Umgang mit Licht in der Kunst bei Giovanni Giacometti und anderen**

Samstag, 5. Dezember, 14h

## **Giovanni Giacometti korrespon- diert - eine Lesung mit den Schauspielern Armin Kopp und Jost Nyffeler. Einführung von Viola Radlach**

Donnerstag, 12. November, 19h

## **Kurs mit der Volkshochschule: Giovanni Giacometti**

Mittwoch, 18./25. November,

2./9. Dezember, 15h

## **Eberhard W. Kornfeld im Gespräch**

Donnerstag, 21. Januar 2010, 19h

## **MORE INFORMATION**

[www.kunstmuseumbern.ch](http://www.kunstmuseumbern.ch)

## **KATALOG**

**Giovanni Giacometti – Farbe im  
Licht.** Textbeiträge von Viola  
Radlach, Beat Stutzer, Therese  
Bhattacharya-Stettler, Matthias  
Frehner. Ca. 140 Abbildungen, ca.  
220 Seiten. Scheidegger und  
Spiess, Zürich  
Preis: CHF 49.-

# Exhibition

|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| Dates                        | 30.10.2009 – 21.02.2010   |
| Opening                      | Thursday, October 29, 2009, 18h30   |
| Curator                      | Therese Bhattacharya-Stettler,<br>Kunstmuseum Bern<br><br>Beat Stutzer, Bündner Kunstmuseum, Chur   |
| Admission                    | CHF 16.- / red. CHF 12.-  |
| The RailAway<br>combo ticket | with a 20% reduction on railway ticket and<br>museum entry is available at all train stations<br>and Rail Service 0900 300 300 (CHF 1.19/min.).                               |
| Opening times                | Tuesday 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.<br>Wednesday-Sunday 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.<br>Mondays closed<br>25. 12. 2009, closed<br>24. 12. and 31. 12. 2009, 10h–17h<br>1. 1. and 2. 1. 2010, 10h–17h |
| Group tours                  | T +41 31 328 09 11, F +41 31 328 09 10<br>vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch  |
| Further venues               | Bündner Kunstmuseum, Chur<br>March 19 – May 24, 2010  |

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Hans Imholz-Stiftung

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