

**GERTIE FRÖHLICH**  
**(In)Visible Pioneer**

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MAK – Press and Public  
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**Press Release**

Vienna, 12.9.2023

presse@MAK.at

**Press Conference**

Tuesday, 12.9.2023, 10 am

It is hard to think of someone who singlehandedly did more to influence the Viennese post-war avant-garde movement than Gertie Fröhlich (1930–2020). While studying at the Academy of Fine Arts, she met other young students who would become part of the Viennese art scene and played a key role at Galerie Sankt Stephan, albeit under the shadow of gallery owner Otto Mauer. In little time, her Viennese apartment became a creative hub and springboard for many of her fellow artists' careers. Gertie Fröhlich left an extensive oeuvre encompassing a wide range of disciplines. The MAK's exhibition is the first comprehensive retrospective of Fröhlich's work, delving into her Gesamtkunstwerk as an artist, graphic designer, creator of edible art, and advocate of Viennese post-war modernism.

Over five sections, the exhibition will offer visitors an insight into the critical periods and themes of Fröhlich's life and display the whole gamut of her work on paper, canvas, and fabric, from poster designs and paintings to tapestries. The exhibition consists mainly of loans from The Estate of Gertie Fröhlich, with others from public and private collections.

Gertie Fröhlich tells her story through her work regardless of the medium. Born into a strict Catholic, bourgeois household in Slovakia, her early youth was interrupted by the family's escape to Upper Austria towards the end of the Second World War: a dramatic event that would shape the rest of her life in her ceaseless traveling as well as her artistic output. Her extensive training in history and classicism enabled her to use allegory to retell ancient myths—and even Hollywood's modern fairytales—from the female protagonist's perspective.

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Fröhlich pursued a career as an artist against her father's wishes. She first studied at the Graz School of Arts and Crafts under Rudolf Szyszkowitz before moving to the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna to study under Albert Paris Gütersloh, the father of fantastic realism. Both professors recognized that her figurative style served her quest to go beyond mere objectivity, which was part of the poetic world that evolved from her work.

Unlike many of her art colleagues, Gertie Fröhlich followed a path that deviated from the dominant styles of the time, such as abstract or pop art. She developed her unique visual language inspired by mythology, history, folk art, and artisan iconography. Using symbolic and lyrical imagery, she created a new form of metaphysical painting to, in the words of Giorgio de Chirico, "paint that which cannot be seen."

Fröhlich also recognized the quality of her fellow artists, whom she worked tirelessly to promote. When Otto Kallir's Neue Galerie in the center of Vienna came up for sale, her plans to become gallery director got thwarted due to her young age of 23. This incident led her to put Kallir into contact with Otto Mauer, who opened Galerie St. Stephan in the available space in 1954. During the first few years, although officially Mauer's secretary, she worked as the curator and event organizer. One of her many events was the 1955 Christmas exhibition, which was the first to exhibit Markus Prachensky, Arnulf Rainer, Josef Mikl, and Wolfgang Hollegha together—names that would go on to become synonymous with Austria's post-war modernism.

In 1956, Fröhlich moved into her legendary apartment, which also served as her workshop, at Sonnenfelsgasse 11. This salon-like apartment was where the ideas were born that saw artistic careers take shape in Galerie St. Stephan. She opened her door to an interdisciplinary who's who of Austria's post-war avant-garde, where friends and Fröhlich's partners, Markus Prachensky, Peter Kubelka, and Al Hansen, frequented her apartment over the years. Among her regular visitors were Raimund Abraham, Friedrich Achleitner, Barbara Coudenhove-Kalergi, Christine de Grancy, Christl Dertnig, VALIE EXPORT, Elfriede Gerstl, André Heller, Wolfgang Hollegha, Hans Hollein, Wilhelm Holzbauer, Kurt Kalb, Martin Kippenberger, Kurt Kocherscheidt, Kiki Kogelnik, Friedrich Kurrent, La Mamma Group, Maria Lassnig, Friederike Mayröcker, Josef Mikl, Hermann Nitsch, Evelyn Oswald, Max Peintner, Walter Pichler, Reinhold Priessnitz, Helmut Qualtinger, Arnulf Rainer, John Sailer, Rudolf Schönwald, Karl Schwarzenberg, Oswald and Ingrid Wiener, as well as Michel Würthle, to name a few.

Her pluralistic approach and talent for applied art ensured Gertie Fröhlich the position of art director and graphic designer for the Austrian Film Museum, founded by Peter Kubelka and Peter Konlechner. Over several decades Fröhlich developed an internationally acclaimed series of award-winning posters and designed the institution's trademark logo, the mythical "Zyphius." Her original and fantastical imagery raised the museum's international profile and won Fröhlich awards and fans abroad.



Following a sold-out exhibition in 1985 at Galerie Peter Pakesch, André Heller invited her along with over 30 other artists, including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Sonia Delaunay, and her friend Roy Lichtenstein, to Hamburg to take part in his multidisciplinary art amusement park *LUNA LUNA*, launched in 1987. For the project, Fröhlich showcased a performative art piece in a mythologically styled interactive booth, introducing her gingerbread edible artwork to a larger audience, which had already won her acclaim in the media and the US.

Among her most significant commissioned works are the tapestries she made on behalf of Wilhelm Holzbauer for the St. Virgil educational center in Salzburg. In these vast pieces, Fröhlich expertly showcases the craft, retelling the Holy Scriptures using mythical figures in scenes depicting women, natural elements, and animals. The haptic design allows Fröhlich to engage all senses: Viewers stand rapt before the six-by-five-meter-high wall hangings.

As her fellow artists began reclaiming the female body, Fröhlich set out to win the battle for the female psyche. Her painting *Ariadne Ties Up the Minotaur* (1996) is a classic example. Here, she distances herself from the surrealists and turns the attention to Ariadne as a heroine conquering the Minotaur with her wits.

Although she did not experience the same meteoric rise to fame as many of the men credited as being avant-garde, she made a name for herself as an independent voice despite the chauvinist tendencies of the art world. Later in her career, she gradually garnered much-deserved recognition with an honorary professorship and the City of Vienna's art prize.

To mark the exhibition *GERTIE FRÖHLICH: (In)Visible Pioneer*, a film by Austrian director, scriptwriter, and artist Marieli Fröhlich will be programmed, which includes rare archive interviews with Fröhlich and those who knew her.

Supported by Gustav Belousek / Legat Carla and Joseph Binder

Press photos are available for download at [MAK.at/en/press](https://www.mak.at/en/press).



**Press Conference**

Tuesday, 12.9.2023, 10 am

**Opening**

Tuesday, 12.9.2023, 7 pm

Free admission on the opening night

**Exhibition Venue**

MAK Direktion and MAK Works on Paper Room

MAK, Stubenring 5, 1010 Vienna

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**Exhibition Dates**

13.9.2023–3.3.2024

**Opening Hours**

Tue 10 am–9 pm, Wed to Sun 10 am–6 pm

**Curator**

Kathrin Pokorny-Nagel, Head of MAK Library and Works on Paper Collection/Archive, in creative collaboration with Marieli Fröhlich

**Graphic Design and Exhibition Design**

Stefan Fuhrer

**Supporting Program**

Information is available online at [MAK.at/en](https://mak.at/en)

**MAK Admission**

€ 15, reduced € 12, every Tuesday 6–9 pm: admission € 7

Admission free for children and teens under 19

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