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The Lady for elegant women with elegant minds



ART BELONGS TO THE PEOPLE!

A venerable institution celebrates two German artists who set the tone for the post-war avant-garde

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Written by Sandra Smith

Student protests, anti-capitalist demonstrations and a yearning to comprehend, if not reinvent, post-war society were common preoccupations throughout 1960s Europe. Nowhere was this more evident than in West Germany, where a young generation struggled to come to terms with the aftermath of a bloodbath of unparalleled proportions.

For two particular German artists, this cauldron of contemporary politics spurred an interchangeable symbiotic relationship united not just by art but intellectual conversation, too.

In 1968 Joseph Beuys taught at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art. His provocative work had already been instrumental in his establishment as a leading figure of the post-war avant-garde movement. From sculpture in felt, the moulding of animal fat and performance pieces, he thrived on the potential of new media.

Jörg Immendorff, 24 years younger than his tutor, joined the Academy to study under Beuys. The two forged a friendship that reflected their joint commitment to the role of art in influencing people's beliefs and attitudes.

In *Art Belongs To The People!* the Ashmolean showcases some of the most famous works produced by these two illustrative artists. Although limited to one gallery, more than 50 pieces provide a valuable insight into the issues that most ignited their passion in an exhibition as colourful as it is thought-provoking.

One of the most eye-catching displays is Immendorff's *Die Geschichte der EPAS/Breschnew* (The Story of EPAS/Breschnew), a colossal work encompassing space travel and rival superpowers as well as the production of a new perfume, all of which entice the onlooker to absorb this telling commentary on the mood of the day. Look out, too, for his haunting *Café Deutschland* as well as the Hogarth-inspired *Sohn der Sonne* (Son Of The Sun).



Democracy Is Merry by Joseph Beuys (1973)

The variety of work here produced by Beuys is testament to the eclectic range of styles and materials by which he was infatuated. His 1969 Sled (using belts, felt, fl ashlight, fat and rope), for instance, blends comfortably with Felt Suit, and his blackboards and silk screens. Yet it isn't only the skills of Beuys and his student that the Ashmolean is venerating in this nostalgic exhibition of post-1968 work. Ideology, topical news and political posturing inform and challenge in equal measure. Indeed, the gallery has been sufficiently bold to honour two radical artists; proof enough that this classical museum of art is prepared to be equally radical in its choice of artists.

Until 31 August at the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford: 01865-278000,
www.ashmolean.org

