

The History of the Collection

The Collector

Oskar Reinhart (1885–1965) came from a prominent Winterthur business family. His father, Theodor Reinhart (1849–1919), ran the trading firm Gebrüder Volkart, which had originated from the family of his wife, Lilly Volkart, and played a decisive role in shaping direct trade between India and Europe. In keeping with Winterthur's economic structure, which was shaped by the textile industry, the company focused on cotton imports. In addition to his business activities, Theodor Reinhart was deeply committed to the arts—a passion he passed on to his son. Oskar Reinhart thus came into contact at an early age with young Swiss and German artists who were active in his father's circle and were supported by him. Reinhart began building his own collection at a young age and laid the foundation for his life's work in the early 1920s. In 1924, at the age of 39, he withdrew from the family business to devote himself entirely to art. That same year, he acquired the villa "Am Römerholz" in Winterthur, which henceforth served as his residence and the home of his collection. He lived there until his death, surrounded by significant works of European art history.

In keeping with his commitment to making art accessible to the public, Reinhart bequeathed part of his collection—comprising works by German, Swiss, and Austrian artists from the 18th to the 20th centuries—to the city of Winterthur as early as 1940. This collection has been on display at the Oskar Reinhart Foundation in the Stadtgarten since 1951. In 1958, he bequeathed the remainder of the collection, including the villa "Am Römerholz," to the Swiss Confederation. The Oskar Reinhart Collection 'Am Römerholz' has been open to the public since 1970.

The Collection

The collection 'Am Römerholz' is divided into two main sections, a division that is also reflected architecturally in the complex comprising the villa and the gallery annex. Traditionally, older paintings were displayed in the historically designed rooms of the villa, built in 1915, while the gallery annex focused on French Impressionism and its immediate precursors—the collection's thematic focus. Since the introduction of the new hanging system in 2026, the arrangement can be radically altered and the presentation quickly changed. Chronological sequences can be disrupted, and paintings can be hung according to painterly and aesthetic similarities. This approach to re-presentation views the collection not as a static ensemble, but as a network of relationships. Through deliberate juxtapositions, formal, thematic, and chromatic correspondences are made visible. This hanging concept also aligns with Oskar Reinhart's commitment to collecting exclusively works of the highest painterly quality and allowing them to engage in dialogue with one another. Thus, a collection emerged whose groups of works are today among the most significant of their kind internationally. Since 2018, following a new regulation by the Federal Office of Culture, individual loans to other museums have been possible. Visitors experience a concentrated overview of European art from the 14th to the early 20th century. The focus is on painting, complemented by selected drawings as well as individual sculptures and textile works.

Historical Context

With his earlier works and their presentation in historic rooms, Oskar Reinhart drew inspiration from the model of French private collections of the Second Empire. This trend spread from Paris to Germany in the late 1870s and ultimately reached its final flowering in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. The collection of Clay Frick (1849–1919) in New York, for example, is a good illustration of this. It was formed during the years when the Winterthur art lover was developing his taste and, at the same time, began collecting art. By that time, the French Impressionists had long since established themselves as the beacon of modernism. Enthusiasm for Impressionism and its precursors first took hold in the United States at the end of the 19th century and spread shortly thereafter, particularly in Germany. In Switzerland, especially in Winterthur, the generation preceding Oskar Reinhart was enthusiastic about French painting. Many private collectors did not rule out the Old Masters in their new orientation. In the 1920s, the American Albert C. Barnes (1872–1951) followed this example in Merion. The innovators in the art world were impossible to overlook. Museum reformers in Germany and German private collectors who had emerged from this milieu drove the development forward. From his youth onward, Oskar Reinhart sought close contact with the leading figures of German collecting culture. These figures reflected this understanding of art to a particular degree. It was here that Oskar Reinhart laid the foundations for his collection.

The Concept of the Collection

Oskar Reinhart regarded Impressionism as one of the most significant achievements of his era and of art as a whole. He recognized the central role of color and light and understood their intensification as a development toward an independent visual language. From this perspective, he developed a particular appreciation for the painterly quality, which for him represented the decisive criterion for judging art. Reinhart viewed the Old Masters not only as outstanding representatives of their time but also as precursors of modernism. Accordingly, he acquired their works selectively and always with this connection in mind. His pronounced preference for older painting was based on the distinctive presence of painterly quality in these works. In compiling his collection, Reinhart consistently pursued the goal of making the formal similarities between historical and modern art visible and highlighting Impressionism as a unifying leitmotif. At the same time, he sought to condense different stylistic trends into an overarching essence of art. This concept is evident in the carefully staged presentation of his painting gallery. The hanging does not follow a chronological order but is guided by the interplay of color and form. In this way, the continuity between the past and the modern era is emphasized and brought together into a comprehensive, timeless whole. The impressive staging of this expanded, almost abstract dimension in the gallery's large hall creates an intense aesthetic experience and opens up a comprehensive approach to painting as such.

The Artists

Reinhart focused on individual artists rather than epochs. He favoured the most independent ones, great artists who had arrived at an original painterly idiom through an innovative use of colour and light. Ultimately, however, he was less interested in documenting avantgarde innovation than in showing how such innovation had become an established norm. Thus, he preferred the Impressionists to the Post-Impressionists, who took the use of light and colour to new extremes. He highlighted three artists who still unmistakably drew on traditional painting: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Édouard Manet, and Paul Cezanne. From the Post-Impressionist generation, the collection primarily includes those artists who, like Vincent van Gogh, were particularly committed to Impressionism. Works by 20th-century artists remained the exception. An early portrait by Pablo Picasso marks the furthest point his collection goes in the direction of modernism. On the other hand, the immediate forerunners of Impressionism are well represented, with major, almost equally important groups of work by Gustave Courbet, Honoré Daumier and Camille Corot. Reinhart illustrated the roots of their achievement by means of formally related Old Master paintings, including works by Lucas Cranach the Elder, Hans Holbein the Younger, Jacopo Bassano, Nicolas Poussin, Jean-Siméon Chardin and Francisco de Goya.

The History of the Building and its Expanded Use

The Original Building

The villa 'Am Römerholz' was built between 1915 to 1918 by the architect Maurice Turrettini (1878–1932) from Geneva for the industrialist Jakob Heinrich Ziegler-Sulzer (1859–1930). The simplicity of the design echoes the clear massing of Italian Renaissance architecture. This style also dominates the main interior space. By contrast, the small adjoining salon is in the French eighteenth-century manner. Oskar Reinhart acquired the villa in 1924. One year later he commissioned Turrettini to add a picture gallery. Like the two period rooms, the gallery essentially survives in its original form. Reinhart had a separate entrance constructed later, when he opened his collection to the public. In contrast to the period rooms, the design of the gallery contains no historical elements, enabling the more recent works in the collection to be displayed to maximum effect. The simple elegance of the gallery's large central space is topped by an imposing lantern that distributes light evenly throughout the rooms.

The Conversion into a Museum

After his death in 1965, Oskar Reinhart bequeathed the 'Am Römerholz' collection including his residence and the adjoining gallery to the Swiss Confederation. The complex was opened to the public in 1970. The original combination of personal living space and small annex was drastically modified to accommodate the needs of a public museum. The dining room was converted into a commodious entrance area and the windows in the corridor of the villa were walled up to create more hanging space, attenuating the personal intimacy and harmony of the ground floor. Even the interiors of the gallery were changed considerably. The parquet flooring was covered with light wall-to-wall carpeting.

In 1997-1998 the Swiss Confederation commissioned the architects Annette Gigon and Mike Guyer from Zurich to carry out a thorough overhaul. Their plans combined necessary technical refurbishment with an attempt to returning the building as far as possible to its original state and emphasising the private nature of the domestic area. The new courtyard elevation revolved around the connection between the villa and the gallery, which the first remodelling had deprived of its function as a separate entrance and which was now serving as an exhibition space. New rooms were added to it in which to store works on paper.

Renovation 2025

During the several-month closure in 2025, the building was extensively modernized by Tropeano Architekten AG in accordance with heritage preservation standards. The wall surfaces were renovated, the wall coverings in the gallery spaces were color-coordinated, and the hanging systems were replaced based on historical models. New climate control and lighting systems ensure optimal conservation conditions. At the same time, accessibility for people with disabilities was improved in accordance with the guidelines of the "Kultur inklusiv" label: access to the building and the wheelchair lift was expanded, and the garden is now also accessible without thresholds. The historic park has also been restored to its original condition and once again follows the architectural garden concept of the Mertens brothers. This includes reconstructed plantings, such as the historic fruit trellis, as well as the restoration of the water basins.

Endowment 2026

In 2026, the heirs of Oskar Reinhart entrusted Oskar Reinhart's historic park and bath complex to the federal government. The donation reunites the complex after some 60 years, reinforces its cultural significance, and restores its historical unity.

Facts and Figures

Architecture

1915–18 Maurice Turrettini (1878–1932), Geneva
1997–98 Annette Gigon and Mike Guyer, Zurich, remodelling and addition
2009–10 Stefan Piotrowski and Jean-Marc Bovet, Winterthur, remodelling
2025–26 Tropeano Architekten AG, Zürich

Donor

In 1958 Oskar Reinhart bequeathed his residence 'Am Römerholz' with its gallery annex and his valuable collection to the Swiss Confederation.

Used as a Museum

since 1970

Exhibition Area

690 square metres

Selection of Featured Artists

Lucas Cranach the Elder, Francisco de Goya, Eugène Delacroix, Camille Corot, Honoré Daumier, Gustave Courbet, Edouard Manet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Paul Cezanne, Vincent van Gogh, Aristide Maillol, Pablo Picasso

Guided Tours

Public tours, foreign-language tours, 'Art at midday', 'Art in the evening', guided tours for people with visual impairments.

Audio Guides

Audio guides in English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian and Spanish.

Integrated induction loop for the visually impaired.

Children in the Museum

Special audio guide for children.

Guided tours and workshops for children, young people and families.

Children's suitcase for the museum visit.

Organisation of children's birthday parties

Accessibility

The museum and café are accessible to people with disabilities.

Café

Coffee and cake, lunch during the opening hours of the museum until 5 p.m. Can be rented for private events.

Starting in 2026, dinner will also be served after closing time at Restaurant Reineke.

Picnic in the Museum Park

In the months of May – September.

Picnic basket reservations via the website and the café.

Exhibitions

From Goya to Impressionism: Masterpieces from the Oskar Reinhart Collection 2025 in der Courtauld Gallery

Of Grandeur and Grace – Maillol and Sintenis, 2024

A Bath of Colours – Renoir and Monet at the Grenouillère. 2023

Cranach – The Early Years in Vienna, 2022

Courbet – Dreams of a Realist, 2021

The Miracle in the Snow – Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 2019

The Hidden Gems of the Collection. Exhibition series 2016 – 2018

Victor Chocquet. Art Collector and Friend of the Impressionists. Renoir, Cézanne, Monet, Manet, 2015

Entre nous, The 'Am Römerholz' collection with selected Masterworks from the Museum Oskar Reinhart am Stadtgarten, With a biographical display, 2012

Camille Corot, The Secret Armoire: Corot's Figure Paintings and the World of Reading, 2011

Eugène Delacroix, Reflections. Tasso in the Madhouse, 2008

Honoré Daumier in the 'Am Römerholz' collection, 2008

Venite, adoremus: Geertgen tot Sint Jans and the Adoration of the Kings, 2007

Division and Revision: Manet's 'Reichshoffen' Revealed, 2005

Cooperation Partners since 2018 (selection)

Kunsthalle Bremen; Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest; Städel Museum, Frankfurt; Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Köln; The Courtauld Gallery, London; National Gallery, London; Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel; Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; Louvre, Paris; Musée d'Orsay, Paris; Petit Palais, Paris; Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien; Palais Liechtenstein, Wien; Kunsthaus Zürich

Publication

Publication on the Collection

Oskar Reinhart Collection 'Am Römerholz', Winterthur: Complete Catalogue, edited by Mariantonia Reinhard-Felice, Oskar Reinhart Collection 'Am Römerholz', for the Federal Office of Culture, in association with the Swiss Institute for Art Research, Basle, 2003 / 2005

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English edition, Schwabe Verlag, Basle, 2005, ISBN-10: 3-7965-2132-0 and Paul Holberton Publishing, London, 2005, ISBN 1-9034-7038-2

Publication on Exhibitions

Gottardo, Ketty, et al. *Goya to Impressionism: Masterpieces from the Oskar Reinhart Collection*. The Courtauld, essays by Ketty Gottardo, Kerstin Richter, Katja Baumhoff, Chloe Nahum, Karen Serres, Rachel Sloan, Barnaby Wright.

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