

# LE CLAIRE

SEIT 1982

## KUNST



CHRISTIAN ROHLFS

1849 Niendorf, Holstein - Hagen 1938

*Birch Trees on a Hillside*

Oil on canvas, 1907.

Signed lower right and dated: *C Rohlfs 7*

51.5 x 72.5 cm

PROVENANCE: Grave, Hagen – Dr. Wilhelm Colmsan, Göttingen – Adalbert and Thilda Colmsan, Langenberg – Thence by descent

LITERATURE: Paul Vogt (ed.), *Christian Rohlfs, Oeuvre-Katalog der Gemälde*, Recklinghausen 1978, no. 420, repr.

The works Christian Rohlfs produced at the turn of the twentieth century place him firmly in the vanguard of German *plein-air* painting. Although stylistically closer to French Impressionism than other German painters of the time, his painting nevertheless follows the Barbizon-influenced tradition of the Weimar school. Through Henry van de Velde, Rohlfs came into contact with Karl Ernst Osthaus (1874–1921) a young patron and student of the arts who was the founder of Museum Folkwang, a public art museum in Hagen in Westphalia, opened in 1902. At Osthaus's invitation Rohlfs left Weimar and moved to Hagen, where he set up an atelier and painting school in the new museum. As Paul Vogt points out in his catalogue raisonné, the appointment was to bring Rohlfs his 'first immediate contacts to the true sources of modernism'.<sup>1</sup> The Folkwang collection expanded rapidly to include works by Renoir, Cezanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin. The Museum also purchased and exhibited Neo-Impressionist paintings – works by Seurat, Signac, Van Rysselberghe and Luce – and examples of early Fauvism, particularly by Matisse. Acquisitions soon included first work by the young German Expressionist painters. The experience of these avant-garde artistic trends was to take Rohlfs's work in a new direction.

The landscapes he painted between 1902 and 1904 in divisionist technique exhibit a darker palette than the works of the Neo-Impressionists. Describing this and subsequent stylistic developments, Vogt notes: 'Vivid as his paintings may seem, they have more of a mosaic-like quality because the dabs of colour placed on the canvas are so vigorous that they fail to mix in the spectator's eye and the desired optical effect is therefore not achieved [...]. Nevertheless, awareness of the colouristic resonance of his paintings and its non-representational character is key, as is awareness of the enhanced tonal range which no longer precluded ventures into pure colour - an experience that would be crucial to his later stylistic development and which began to bear fruit as soon as he attempted to meld it with the bold, dramatically structured strokes of an artist like Van Gogh. [...] It was in Van Gogh's work that Rohlfs first discovered a strong and vibrant, supremely colourful, extraordinarily free style of expression that wrenched objects and elements in nature free from their dependency on naturalistic representation [...]. In this respect therefore, Van Gogh served as Rohlfs's model. His new style, colouristically vibrant yet highly sensitive, arresting yet pleasing to the eye, was

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Vogt, op. cit., 1978, p. 15.

fully developed by 1906. In the aspirations of Christian Rohlf's we see a striking parallel with the very similar aspirations of the young 'Brücke' painters, the nucleus of German Expressionism. [...]. The term "a dramatic form of Impressionism" coined by Kirchner for his own and his friends' work is equally appropriate for [Rohlf's] work'.<sup>2</sup>

*Seine Malerei ist Musik der Farben* – this is how Osthaus characterised Rohlf's painting, and the same could also be said of the present oil. Rich orange-yellows, red-browns, greens and blues are expressively orchestrated to contrast with the silvery white of the slender birch trunks and energize the composition with a blaze of autumn colour.

A comparable painting executed in the same year is now in the Museum Folkwang in Essen [Fig. 1]. Titled *Birch Forest*, shortly after its completion it was purchased by Osthaus for the Folkwang collection in Hagen (the collection was acquired for the city of Essen in 1922 and re-established as Museum Folkwang). In 1937, the National Socialist regime branded the painting and a number of other works by Rohlf's 'degenerate' and they were confiscated. In 1958 *Birch Forest* was repurchased for the Museum.



Fig. 1: *Birch Forest*, 1907,  
oil on canvas, 110 x 75 cm.  
Museum Folkwang, Essen [inv. G 291].

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<sup>2</sup> Vogt, op. cit., 1978, pp. 15-16.