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In her book *Twelve Paintings* Tal Sterngast explores the contemporary relevance of the Old Masters

Reading familiar paintings in new ways: In her book *Twelve Paintings: Excursions in the Gemäldegalerie of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin* – published by Hatje Cantz-Verlag – author Tal Sterngast takes a closer look at selected works from the collection of Berlins' Old Master Paintings in a new and subjective way. Sterngast analyses masterpieces by Caravaggio, Rembrandt and Vermeer through the lens of contemporary social and art-criticism discourses, revealing that the Old Masters still have a great deal to say to us today.

“In her essays, Tal Sterngast combines art criticism with social analysis, hauling supposedly antiquated subject matter into the here and now” remarks **Michael Eissenhauer**, Director-General of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and Director of the Gemäldegalerie and the Skulpturensammlung. “I would like to thank the author for responding to our request to publish her texts on works from the Gemäldegalerie in book form, offering a broad readership a new and surprising perspective on the history of European art and the history of this wonderful collection.”

“If the present seemed to move toward such an unprecedented brink of change, what did it still share with the older worlds that are presented in the Gemäldegalerie?” asks author **Tal Sterngast** regarding the point of departure of her investigations. “I approached the Old Masters as if they were contemporary art, as objects of observation in order to return to the present, better equipped.”

The **Gemäldegalerie** is home to one of the most significant collections of 13th- to 18th-century European painting anywhere in the world – with masterpieces from all art-historical epochs, including paintings by **Albrecht Dürer, Pieter Bruegel, Raphael, Titian, Peter Paul Rubens** and many more. Tal Sterngast has dedicated each of the 12 chapters of her book to a painting from the collection, including highlights such as **Jan van Eyck's *Madonna in the Church*** (ca. 1440), **Caravaggio's *Amor Vincit Omnia*** (1601–02), or **Jan Vermeer van Delft's *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*** (1663–65), along with less well-known works by artists such as **Nicolas Poussin, Albrecht Altdorfer** and **Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun**.

The discussions unpack the artistic questions tied up in the paintings – questions that are still relevant to us today – showing how centuries-old artworks can also provide commentaries on important social issues from **feminism** to the **#metoo movement**. Why, for example, were just 15 of the collection's 2,800 works made by women artists? Why does the “wild man” of the German Renaissance continue to haunt the visual arts until

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today? How does the primordial urge to destroy artworks continue to influence discussions today? And should Caravaggio's *Amor Vincit Omnia* be banished to the storeroom? At the same time, Tal Sterngast puts the works and the histories of how they ended up in the collection under the magnifying glass: Why is light the real protagonist in the works of Jan van Eyck? Why, at the height of his career, did Nicolas Poussin create two puzzling, almost identical self-portraits? Why does it not matter if Jan Vermeer used an optical device to make his paintings? And why did the Prussian government prefer Rembrandt to Vermeer when the collection was first founded?

Tal Sterngast (born in 1972 in Israel) studied photography and film in Jerusalem, London and Berlin. She has published numerous essays and articles on contemporary art and film in international newspapers and magazines, and has curated a range of exhibitions. *Twelve Paintings* is based on the *Old Masters* column that Sterngast published from 2017 to 2019 in the weekend edition of the German daily *taz*.

Twelve Paintings: Excursions in the Gemäldegalerie of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin is published by Hatje Cantz-Verlag, English edition, 112 pages, 12 reproductions, ISBN 978-3-7757-4767-7, price: €24.

To coincide with the publication, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin are making an extract from the publication available online. The chapter on Caravaggio is available at: www.smb.museum

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