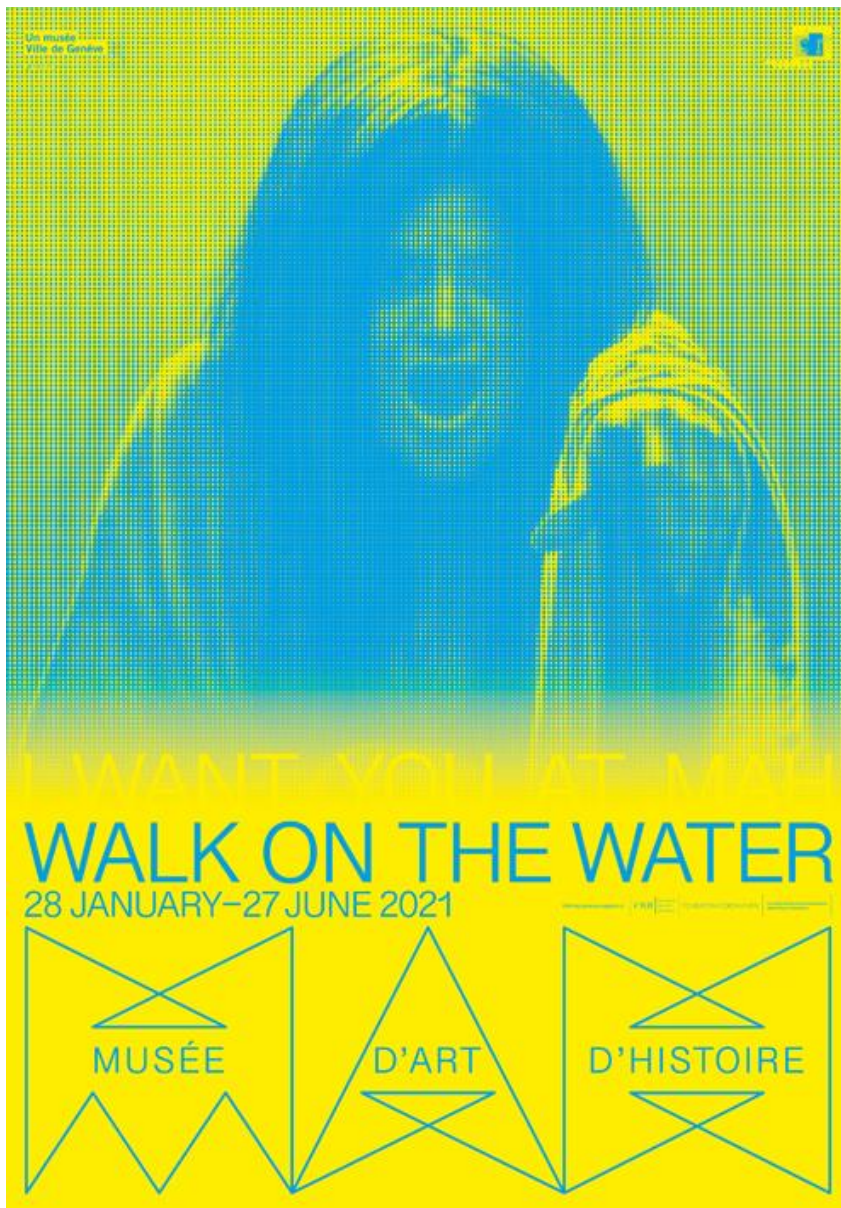


## PRESS KIT

WALK ON THE WATER – 28 JANUARY- 27 JUNE 2021



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## 1. Concept of the Exhibition

The title *Walk on the Water* derives from two radically opposed cultural references: a side panel of the famous altarpiece by Konrad Witz held at the MAH, which shows Jesus Christ walking across the waters of Geneva's harbour and the hit track *Smoke on the Water* written by the British hard rock band Deep Purple after they witnessed the fire that destroyed the Montreux Casino in December 1971. This cultural clash is a representative instance of Jakob Lena Knebl's practice, which brazenly combines design, pop culture, and references to the 'Great' art history. Driven by her aspiration to create experiences that everyone can relate to, the artist strives to abolish genre hierarchies, to engage with visitors to bridge the gap that separates them from the pieces on display and to explore with humour the concepts of identity and body.

All temporary exhibition spaces, from the AMAM hall to the Palatine rooms, have been made into playgrounds for the artist and countless interventions have been incorporated into the permanent exhibition section (Hall of Arms, "Egypt" room, etc.). For Jakob Lena Knebl, this is far from a trial run: Vienna's Mumok in 2017 and the Lentos Museum in Linz in 2020 have already invited her to revisit their collections and show them in a new light. However, her latest project with the Geneva museum differs from previous collaborations in Austria with regard to the variety and historical span of the objects and pieces made available to her. Jakob Lena Knebl was allowed to choose from a vast collection of applied art, paintings, sculptures, graphic productions, fashion designs, furniture, timepieces, archæological artefacts to stage surprising displays featuring bold associations. The visual reference for the exhibition is one of Carlos Schwabe's angry women, who appears in a series of studies for *The Wave*: the manner in which women have been depicted throughout the history of art is a crucial aspect of this exhibition.

Thanks to a concept seeking to involve the public, visitors are regularly prompted to interact with the installations: to sit down on a modular memory foam sofa presented as a "soft sculpture", to try on clothes laid out in an installation suggestive of a fashion store, to take pictures of "pre-censored" sculptures of nude models and post them on social networks...

Part of the artist's inspiration was drawn from a novella by Jorge Luis Borges entitled *There Are More Things* (1975), in which a random chain of events leads the narrator to let himself into a strange house surrounded by mysterious rumours. Faced with objects so impossible to define and label, he becomes frightened. Only by shifting his perception is he finally able to reason himself and pluck up the courage to confront the monstrous new owner of the house. The moral of this story is suggested by the protagonist's confusion: the preconceived ideas we hold to be true keep us from looking at things out of their contexts.

In the same spirit, Jakob Lena Knebl invites MAH visitors to leave behind all sense of apprehension and preconceived ideas, and take a leap of faith: to walk on water. Or at least to open their minds and eyes wide enough to change their perspective on the objects that surround them, whether they be mundane everyday items or works by great artists: "Walk on the water" is a reference to that moment when we try something new for the first time. Is it going to work out or not? Are we going to be able to walk on water?" (Jakob Lena Knebl, 2020).



## 2. A few words from Jakob Lena Knebl

“My engagement with the museum collection is based on a very personal approach, developed through the eyes and with the methods of an artist.

I am interested in how the things that surround us affect us and, to some extent, become part of ourselves; spaces and productions that gobble you up, challenge you, mistake you. A low-threshold approach is important to me, as it also addresses people who were previously not interested in art and design.

Art, design and everyday things hold an equal position within the spaces I create. I dissolve the distance separating them, I connect them with each other. Art becomes a display of design and vice versa. My goal is to construct hybrid spaces that seduce, that allow new perspectives on familiar works and ways of reading them, thereby achieving a presentation that undermines the norms of the museum. For this exhibition, which I designed in collaboration with the curators of the MAH, I used different tactics: humour, inversion, fetishism, paradoxes, the uncanny and the homely.

When we visit exhibitions, we first look for things that we know, that are familiar to us. In my scenography, I work on the way the works of the collection are presented. I like to blur the line between public and private, and to achieve this my displays are inspired by the interior design: I can look at a painting by Vallotton in my own kitchen, get very close to it; then I'm lying in bed with a monumental Egyptian sculpture; then I'm losing myself in time...”

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## 3. Overview of the Exhibition

### a. Lobby

A plaster statue by Carl Angst, titled *Contemplation* (before 1931), welcomes visitors as they enter the museum. The name of the exhibition has been inscribed onto her thigh using a laser normally used for stonework restoration.

### b. AMAM Room – Kitchen and Bathroom

Personal hygiene and the fruits of the earth are the two themes of this dual installation, whose main course consists of a modular memory foam sofa. Visitors can curl up — let themselves become engulfed, so to speak — in this soft sculpture, under the watchful eye of Henri Laurens's *Great Oceanid*. Three sculptures appear to be caught in the act of showering: a plaster Venus 'italica' by Antoni Canova, James Pradier's *Venus at Bath* in plaster and Roger Ferrier's *Standing Child*, also in plaster. Behind the cubicles, the installation features large-scale reproductions of works from the collection also showing bath scenes: *The Cargo Handler* (1906) by Henri Edmond Cross, a Japanese print titled *Maid Fetching Water for the Iris Bath*, as well as a poster for a seaside resort in Trouville, Normandy.

The second part of the room explores table settings and good food. In a simulacrum of an ultra-modern kitchen, silver and tin plates, crystal flagons and copper pots collide with ancient ceramics and food-related scenes from 17th-century Dutch genre paintings.



**c. Hall of Arms – The Garden**

Three garden sheds stand in the storied Hall of Arms, each housing pieces of ancient furniture from different periods owned by the museum and awaiting restoration for some of them. On the exterior walls of each shed hang several paintings with bucolic themes, which might even be described as typically Helvetian — bouquets of flowers, cows grazing in mountain pastures...

**d. Hall of Honour at Zizers Castle – The Séance**

In 1584, the delegates from the reformed Cantons of Zurich, Bern and Geneva met around the famous Table of the Covenant and signed a treaty, pledging to protect the lakeside city from the Duchy of Savoy's ambitions to take possession of it. Today, half a dozen mannequins dressed in white stand around this large, round walnut table for another kind of gathering: a crystal bowl and deck of tarot cards clearly hint that a séance is about to begin. Ranging from a delicate 19th-century dress in satin, tulle and organza to recent designs by Yves Saint-Laurent and Pierre Balmain, the selection of pieces will be changed after three months for conservation reasons.

**e. Egypt Room – Sleep and Death**

Turned into a bedroom reminiscent of Hollywood's flamboyant brand of luxury, the "Egypt" room sees its colossal statue of Ramses II placed in a comfortable bed, surrounded by various ancient items. The sculpture, which arrived in Geneva in 1889 thanks to Édouard Naville's efforts, was originally meant as a propaganda tool for the royal power. The Pharaoh is here seen enjoying a well-deserved nap, a humoristic nod to the cult of the dead in his homeland. According to beliefs associated with funerary rites in ancient Egypt, death was the perilous journey from one life to another — the second differing from the first in that it was spent alongside the gods. For the Austrian artist, sleep and death are akin: in some way, dying is not unlike going to sleep, and the second life of Egyptians may be conceived as a new day, a new beginning.

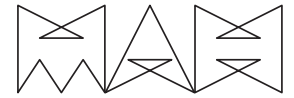
**f. Medieval Room – Lights Behind the Scenes**

To draw back the curtain on what goes on behind the scenes, crystal and metal chandeliers are displayed in the wooden crates that are generally used to ship them. They cast a metaphorical light on the medieval room, which houses among other things the stained glass panels from Saint Peter's Cathedral in Geneva.

**g. Second Palatine Room – Cube / the Dark Room**

This Palatine room houses two cube structures. The first one incorporates built-in recesses in which works are nestled out of sight. These pieces from the collection were picked out because they are considered, today, for adults only (erotic statuettes, Venuses and phalluses), or problematic due to controversial proclivities attributed to their author (Émile Chambon).

Dedicated to the irretrievable passage of time, the second cube consists of a large-scale mechanical device incorporating a tunnel. Time ticking away is evoked through video screenings and a small selection of clocks displayed on rotating platforms. All to the first notes of Pink Floyd's *Time* set on a loop.



#### h. Smaller Palatine Rooms – Missing Limbs

Once again body image is at the centre of this installation, which looks to restore the missing limbs of antique statues. In 2014, the exhibition *Rodin and the Accident* explored the sculptor's interest in damaged and broken sculptures in his creative process. Today, the missing limbs are recreated by the mischievous artist out of stuffed fabric. And in the "Greece" room, the alluring Bathing Aphrodites has undergone the same alteration.

#### i. First Palatine Room – JEANNE Boutique

Focusing on themes of body image and clothing, this room has been turned into a fashion store where styles and periods collide. Women's shoes dating from the 18th century to today rotate on the kind of conveyor belt you would expect to find in a sushi restaurant; several mannequins are clad in delicate silk dresses accented with multiple rows of frills and other more contemporary designs; a selection of necklaces and hats with particularly elaborate decorations are displayed on shelves. Around the sides of the room, a series of painted portraits provides an overview of how men's and women's fashion has evolved through the centuries.

Metal and coloured wood structures suggest the outline of display windows and cornices are covered with blown-up versions of Jacques-Laurent Agasse's *Fountain Personified*, various preparatory studies to Carlos Schwabe's *The Wave*, and one from *A Flood Scene* by Anne-Louis Girodet. Alongside this installation, a locker cabinet is provided for visitors wishing to leave their things. Last but not least, a dress especially designed by the artist, as well as vintage clothes of her choosing, can be purchased in this shop.

The selection of dresses, shoes and other accessories will change after three months, as recommended for the conservation of such fragile items that are sensitive to both air and light.

#### j. Inside the Permanent Collections – In-Situ Censorship

Last year, the MAH saw one of its posts, a photograph of an antique nude illustrating the exhibition *Caesar and the Rhone. Antique Masterpieces of Arles*, censored by Facebook. This installation is a nod to that incident: the private parts of James Vibert's sculptures Past and Future placed on either side of the monumental staircase have been covered, so have those of Emperor Trajan as Diomedes who stands in the "Rome" room. Visitors are invited to take pictures and share these pre-censored versions of the works on social networks.

### 4. Developing the Exhibition

Following the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, preparations for the exhibition were made remotely with the help of online communication tools. After Jakob Lena Knebl visited the museum and its storerooms in February 2020, she then worked to create the layout of the exhibition inside the halls. The pieces she chose came from among those she found in the galleries and in the stores, but also from works that came recommended by various conservators she talked to and from her investigations on the online collection catalogue ([mahmah.ch/collection](http://mahmah.ch/collection)).

A large part of the staging has been overseen by the MAH's technical team, whilst the other has been manufactured by Austrian companies — as the artist could not travel abroad and wanted to keep a close eye on the production of the structures that would help visitors gain a new perspective on the collection.





## 5. Artist's Background

Born in 1970 in Baden, Jakob Lena Knebl lives and works in Vienna. At age 30, she resolved to resume her studies. She followed Ralph Simmons's fashion design classes at the University of Applied Arts Vienna and studied textual sculpture with Heimo Zobernig at the Academic of Fine Arts Vienna. She modelled her pseudonym by combining her maternal grandparents' first names and last name.

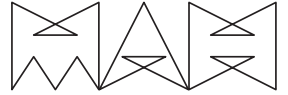
Since 2009, her work has been presented in a number of monographic and group exhibitions in museums and galleries around the world, mainly in Austria (Lentos Museum, Linz; Galerie Georg Kargl, Vienna; Mumok, Vienna), France (Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris; Biennale de Lyon), the UK (Belmasc Gallery), Switzerland (Kunsthaus Zurich), and Germany (Kunstverein Hamburg), as well as in the US, Poland and Turkey.

A guest lecturer at the University of Art Linz, she has received many accolades in her own country and also teaches at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, which she joined as a senior artist.

In 2022, she will represent Austria at the Venice Biennial alongside her partner in crime Ashley Hans Scheirl.



<b>Curator</b>	Jakob Lena Knebl, artist
<b>Shop</b>	A dress, especially designed by the artist, along with vintage clothes of her choosing are available for purchase in the shop set in the palatine rooms
<b>Catalogue</b>	The publication <i>Walk on the Water</i> , published by the Museum of Art and History, will be available in Spring 2021
<b>Sponsors</b>	CBH Compagnie Bancaire Helvétique Fondation Coromandel Fondation genevoise de bienfaisance Valeria Rossi di Montelera
<b>Contact</b>	Media Relations Sylvie Treglia-Détraz Museum of Art and History, Geneva T +41 (0)22 418 26 54A sylvie.treglia-detraz@ville-ge.ch
<b>Useful Information</b>	Museum of Art and History 2, rue Charles-Galland – 1206 Geneva Open 11am-6pm, Thursdays 12pm-9pm Closed on Mondays Free admission to the permanent collections  Website: mahmah.ch Ticket booking: billetterie.mahmah.ch Blog: mahmah.ch/blog Online collection: mahmah.ch/collection Facebook: facebook.com/mahgeneve Twitter: @mahgeneve



From 1<sup>st</sup> December 2020

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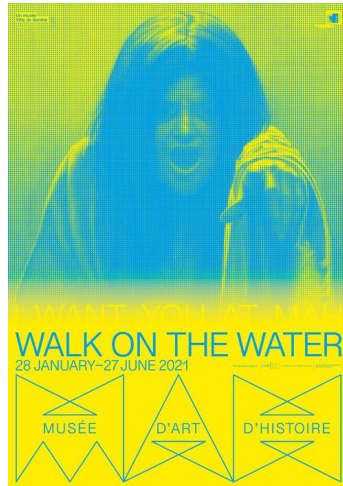
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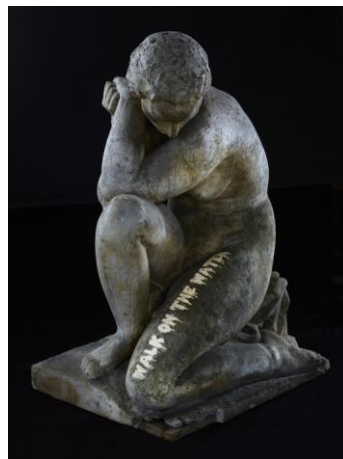
Photographs of the exhibition will be available from 27 January 2021.



*Walk on the Water*  
Hubertus Design

Exhibition's poster  
© MAH, 2020

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Charles-Albert Angst (1875-1965)  
*Meditation*, 1931

Plaster, 110 x 60 x 75 cm  
Inv. BA 2005-0088  
Museum of Art and History of Geneva  
© MAH, photo: B. Jacot-Descombes



Jakob Lena Knebl  
Artist and exhibition's curator

© Christian Benesch



**Konrad Witz** (1400/1410-after 1444,  
before May 1447)  
*The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, 1444

Oil on wood panel, 134,60 x 153,20 cm  
Inv. 1843-0011  
© MAH, photo: B. Jacot-Descombes



**Carlos Schwabe** (1866-1926)  
*The Wave*, 1907

Oil on canvas  
196 x 116 cm  
Inv. CR 0161  
Ombre Schwabe Bequest, 1932  
© MAH, photo: Y. Siza

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**Carlos Schwabe** (1866-1926)  
*Study for « The Wave » :*  
*female figure to the right of the central figure*,  
1906

Black and red Conté chalk, charcoal, eraser strokes,  
charcoal wash, white pastel or white chalk  
664 x 482 mm (sheet)  
Inv. 1985- 0009  
Acquisition 1984  
© MAH, photo: F. Bevilacqua



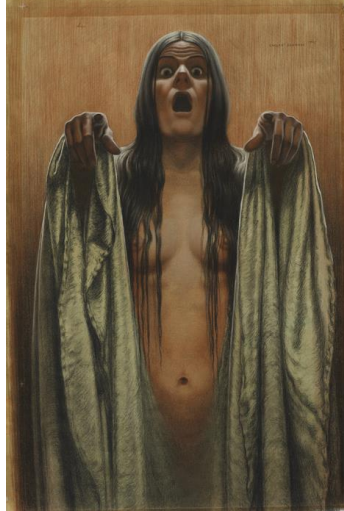
**Carlos Schwabe (1866-1926)**  
*Study for « The Wave » :*  
*Female figure on the right, 1906*

Black and red Conté chalk, charcoal, eraser strokes,  
charcoal wash, white pastel or white chalk  
666 x 482 mm (sheet)  
Inv. 1985- 0005  
Acquisition 1984  
© MAH, photo: F. Bevilacqua



**Carlos Schwabe (1866-1926)**  
*Study for « The Wave » :*  
*female figure to the left of the central figure,*  
*1906*

Black and red Conté chalk, charcoal, eraser strokes,  
charcoal wash, white pastel or white chalk  
662 x 480 mm (sheet)  
Inv. 1985- 0007  
Acquisition 1984  
© MAH, photo : F. Bevilacqua



**Carlos Schwabe (1866-1926)**  
*Study for « The Wave » :*  
*Central female figure, 1907*

Black and red Conté chalk, charcoal, eraser strokes,  
charcoal wash, white pastel or white chalk and green  
pencil  
1000 x 575 mm (sheet)  
Inv. 1985- 0008  
Acquisition 1984  
© MAH, photo : F. Bevilacqua