

Intervention: “Rethinking and Re-envisioning the Collection”

New Perspectives on Key Works of Modernism

The intervention “Rethinking and Re-envisioning the Collection” is a further component of the current campaign “Rethinking the Collection.” In response to the question “What does a collection represent?”, individual works in the collection of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen are presented in more detail in several chapters.

At the same time, the format ties in with current societal debates and aims to facilitate a change of perspective on the ideas and theories of modernism. The goal is to provide a space within the collection of K20 where visitors can explore the historical, social, and political conditions under which key works of classical modernism were created. Individual works from the collection will be shown in new dialogues, accompanied by historical photographs in display cases and expanded labels and wall texts. In addition, a selection of thematic literature will be available in the rotunda with a lounge area. An archive of the individual interventions is planned for the website of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen.

K21

The following chapters will be on view:

Werner Schmalenbach’s Legacy

The Founding of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen

July 2021 – December 2021

In the Course of Time

Dealing with Colonial Thought and Tradition

Starting in spring of 2022

Filling in the Gaps

The Pioneering Women Painters of Modernism

Starting in summer of 2022

Werner Schmalenbach and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen

When the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen was founded in 1961, the canon of modernism had already been consolidated. Founding director Werner Schmalenbach (1920–2010) adhered to Western art history in compiling a unique and excellent collection for the new state museum. During his twenty-eight-year term, he assembled a number of exceptional paintings that rank internationally among the key works of European and

American art. At the same time, Schmalenbach refined the postwar canon through his precise acquisitions of outstanding “masterpieces.” His collecting went hand in hand with a classical museum strategy reflecting a linear development of modern art history. As a result, he repeatedly had to defend his “elitist concept of quality” in the face of public criticism. Shortly before the end of his tenure, Schmalenbach accompanied the relocation of the collection from Schloss Jägerhof (now the Goethe-Museum Düsseldorf) to the new building on Grabbeplatz, which was completed in 1986.

The idea of abstraction in modernism

In Werner Schmalenbach’s concept of modernism, Pablo Picasso took on a key role. The painter served as a synonym, representative, and living picture for the various avant-garde styles and modernist movements. According to Schmalenbach, the painting “Femme au miroir” shows how Picasso used “modern interventions” to deliberately try to break with his “classical position.” Looking at a sketch that Picasso casually made on a cigarette packet in a Parisian café, it becomes evident that the cubist triangular shapes in the mirror resulted from the structural lines that organize the picture plane. Schmalenbach considered Picasso to be a painter who revitalized figurative painting after the rise of geometric abstraction.

Conversely, Schmalenbach argued that “Les Drapeaux,” a painting by Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, evokes a pictorial reality in the language of abstraction. The work creates – according to Schmalenbach – a “non-perspective space” and, shortly before the outbreak of the war, depicts “reality as a phantom” and, at the same time, as a “genuine threat.” This, he believed, demonstrated that Vieira da Silva had freed herself from both “representational” and “geometric bonds.” Her paintings met the standards valid at the time and thus found their way into Schmalenbach’s collection of modernist and post-war art. In addition, she was one of the few women artists who became known as a member of the Nouvelle École de Paris. However, Schmalenbach noted in retrospect that he regretted the acquisition of this particular painting as a “personal mistake” and would have preferred one of her later works instead.

Vieira da Silva and Picasso in dialogue

In August 1939, Vieira da Silva painted “Les Drapeaux” in her live-in studio on Boulevard Saint-Jacques in Paris. Soon afterwards, on September 3, 1939, following the Nazi invasion of Poland, England and France declared war on Germany. That same month, Vieira da Silva and her Hungarian-Jewish husband Árpád Szenes fled to Lisbon. In June 1940, they traveled to Brazil where they lived in exile in Rio de Janeiro until 1947. In 1955, “Les Drapeaux” was shown at documenta I in Kassel. Three years later, it was on view at Vieira da Silva’s first retrospective at the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hanover, then under the direction of Werner Schmalenbach. Later, the painting traveled to Mannheim, Turin, and Grenoble. Together with Lee Bontecou, whose work “Untitled” entered the collection as a donation, Vieira da Silva is the only woman artist whose work was acquired for the state museum under Schmalenbach’s supervision.

Picasso painted "Femme au miroir" on February 16, 1937. At the time, he was spending his weekends with Marie-Thérèse Walter and their daughter in a country house in Le Tremblay-sur-Mauldre southeast of Paris. A few weeks later, on April 26, 1937, the rural Basque town of Guernica was bombed by the Spanish Nationalists in an allyship with the Nazi German Luftwaffe's Condor Legion. Hundreds of civilians were killed in the attack. As an immediate response, Picasso began to work on his studies for the monumental anti-war painting "Guernica." In 1939, "Femme au miroir" was shown at Paul Rosenberg's art gallery in Paris for the first time. During World War II, it was featured in a traveling exhibition of French paintings in the United States. Subsequently, it was presented in group exhibitions in New York, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Boston.

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