

Rethinking the Collection

The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen and Its Perspectives for the Present and the Future

The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen is best known for its masterpieces from Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky to Jackson Pollock and Roy Lichtenstein. In 2020, its founding director Werner Schmalenbach would have celebrated his 100th birthday—an occasion to once again honor his legacy and think it forward. “On the substantial basis of the outstanding collection compiled by Schmalenbach, we are faced with the task of expanding and differentiating ‘his’ view of modernism,” explains Susanne Gaensheimer, Director of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen since 2017. With the current collection presentations at both K20 and K21 and a strategy for the coming years, Gaensheimer introduces new perspectives on the masterpieces of the collection.

K21

Today at K20, works by Max Beckmann, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, as well as the Expressionists, the Surrealists, and the Nouveaux Réalistes enter into dialogues with works from other geographical and temporal contexts. Pictures by Picasso are juxtaposed with sculptures by the French-Algerian artist Kader Attia; paintings by René Magritte, Max Ernst, and Salvador Dalí encounter Surrealist works by artists from the Arab region such as Hassan El-Telmisani and Fouad Kamel. Newly added are works by important women painters from the modernist period, such as Etel Adnan, Helen Frankenthaler, Carmen Herrera, and Lygia Pape. These first but pioneering steps are the beginning of a process in which the collection of the state museum of North Rhine-Westphalia will be expanded and supplemented in order to meet the challenges posed to a European art museum in a globalized world and under the influence of current social changes.

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When the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen was founded in 1961, the canon of what was to be subsumed under the heading of Modernism in the visual arts—at least according to the Western understanding of the term—had already been formed. Appointed in 1962, Werner Schmalenbach (b. 1920 in Göttingen) followed this guideline in setting up the newly founded museum. The founding director’s approach to “modern art” was decisively influenced by his encounter with the important paintings and sculptures of the historical avant-gardes, which were sold at the legendary auction in Lucerne in 1939. These works had been seized by the National Socialists from public collections in Germany as “degenerate” art in an unprecedented confiscation campaign, thus unintentionally laying the foundation for what was later to be celebrated as “Classic Modernism.” Schmalenbach’s experiences at the *documenta* exhibitions in Kassel in 1959 and 1964, when he was a member of the Exhibition Committee, also pointed the way forward.

Schmalenbach conceived a “Museum of Modern Art” according to the standards of quality and significance that were valid for him at the time. His outstanding achievement during his twenty-eight-year tenure at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen was to build up a small but exquisite collection of exceptional paintings that rank internationally among the undisputed masterpieces of Western and American art. When Schmalenbach took up his post in 1962, nearly ninety works by Paul Klee had already been acquired as a cornerstone of the collection. The state of North Rhine-Westphalia had purchased this collection in 1960 to make a cultural-political statement and to honor the artist, who had taught at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art in the early 1930s and was dismissed from his post after the National Socialists took power; as a result, Klee emigrated to Switzerland in late 1933.

The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen sees one of its key tasks in paying tribute to Schmalenbach’s epoch-making activity, but at the same time classifying it historically and, beyond that, developing criteria—from the standpoint of the present—that make it possible to think forward on this basis. Six terms that are central to art serve as guiding ideas, namely dialogue, society, equality, globality, innovation, and the future: the dialogue between people, cultures, and artistic genres; the issues and crises of the societies in which we live; equality and justice as a common goal; the diversity and tasks resulting from globalization; the power and possibilities of new technologies; and, finally, the question of how to shape our future—all of these are issues that are not only being negotiated in art today. The works of contemporary artists on view at K21 – Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen take up these themes and questions very clearly and with great urgency. But they are also central motivations—under different circumstances—in the modernism of the early twentieth century and in the period after World War II. It is the aim of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen to broaden and complement the horizon of the collection from these perspectives, and finally to reflect on the changes among the public and the associated role of the museum as an institution.

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