

# “GREAT REALISM & GREAT ABSTRACTION”

**DRAWINGS FROM MAX BECKMANN TO GERHARD RICHTER**

**13 November 2019 to 16 February 2020, Städel Museum**

**Frankfurt am Main, 12 November 2019.** “Great realism, great abstraction” – the Städel Museum’s holdings of twentieth-century German drawings, which comprises roughly 1,800 individual works within the Department of Prints and Drawings, oscillates between these two poles. A selection of roughly one hundred drawings will be presented in a concentrated exhibition from 13 November 2019 to 16 February 2020, impressively reflecting the quality of the collection and its historically evolved focal points.

The exhibition opens with masterful drawings by Max Beckmann (1884–1950) and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938), which also provide comprehensive insight into the draughtsmanship of the two artists. This is followed by works by members of the artist group “Die Brücke”, including Erich Heckel (1883–1970), Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (1884–1976) and Emil Nolde (1867–1956). Following on from Expressionism and its abstracting tendencies, drawings by Rolf Nesch (1893–1975), Werner Gilles (1894–1961) and Ernst Wilhelm Nay (1902–1968) are presented, as are watercolours by Paul Klee (1879–1940), whose works oscillate between a closeness to the subject and abstraction. Also in divided Germany during the post-war period, this preoccupation with the representational and the non-representational was characteristic for many artists. This can be seen in works of the Art Informel movement, as well as in neo-expressionist tendencies and Pop Art, as exemplified by the works of Karl Otto Götz (1914–2017), Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), Gerhard Richter (\*1932), Georg Baselitz (\*1938), A. R. Penck (1939–2017), Sigmar Polke (1941–2010) and Anselm Kiefer (\*1945). The exhibition brings together works by a total of roughly forty artists.

“Research into the holdings of the Städel’s Collection of Prints and Drawings has a long tradition and is now being continued with a pertinent selection of German drawings from the twentieth century. In addition to the extensive and internationally significant collection of drawings by Max Beckmann and the “Brücke” artists, the Städel is also home to outstanding works by Paul Klee, Willi Baumeister, Ernst Wilhelm Nay, Wols, Joseph Beuys, Georg Baselitz, Gerhard Richter and many other artists. With these expressive works, created through 1989/90, the time of German unification, both the

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caesuras and the consistencies of the twentieth century, as well as the changing role and task of the medium of drawing are impressively documented”, explains Städel Director Philipp Demandt.

The drawing takes on a special role in the twentieth century. It has always been a medium of searching, inventing and experimenting. In the modern age, it also gained independence and autonomy and became – especially in times of state surveillance and oppression – a medium of free thought. In its diversity, it also reflects the complexity of the rapidly changing culture and society of the twentieth century.

“The twentieth century is polyphonic, contradictory and extreme, also in the realm of art: It was a century of avant-gardes, of artist groups and unyielding individual positions, of realisms and abstractions. The broad spectrum of twentieth-century art can be characterized by the two “poles” that Wassily Kandinsky described in 1911 as fundamental to modernism: “great realism” and “great abstraction”, the representational and the non-representational. This complementary pair forms a cross-generational leitmotif that links the nearly 1,800 works of twentieth-century German drawings preserved in the Städel Museum’s Collection of Prints and Drawings. The drawings presented in the exhibition and addressed in detail in the catalogue trace this pluralism”, explains Jenny Graser, curator of the exhibition and research assistant in the Städel Museum’s Department of Prints and Drawings.

The scientific research of twentieth-century German drawings has been made possible by the Gabriele Busch-Hauck Foundation, Frankfurt am Main. In the past decades, this foundation has generously facilitated the art-historical cataloguing of selected drawing collections of the Städel Museum through its continuous commitment. A catalogue will also be published to accompany this exhibition, which for the first time will provide an exemplary overview of the holdings of twentieth-century German drawings in the Städel Museum.

### **The Exhibition**

The roughly one hundred works on view from the twentieth century, supplemented by two paintings, are examined on the basis of various aspects, such as how the artists dealt with reality, how they questioned, further developed or undermined traditional pictorial ideas conveyed at the academies, and last but not least the fundamental significance of drawing within their respective oeuvres. The pencil sketches, brilliantly colourful pastels and aquarelles, and the monumental collages exhibited here also reveal the technical diversity of the medium of drawing, the specific characteristics of which the artists exploited, each in their own way. The drawings are loosely assigned to

chronological groups which shed light in different ways on the relationship between closeness to the subject and abstract detachment from the model of nature.

The Expressionists already used drawing as an autonomous art form, but at the same time it remained a medium of experimentation. Both are reflected in the first chapters of the exhibition dedicated to Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Max Beckmann. Shaken by the events of the First World War, Beckmann came to Frankfurt am Main in 1915 and initially withdrew to his private surroundings. He produced studies of the local environment as well as numerous portraits, including an intensive and personal pencil drawing of his close lady friend Fridel Battenberg (1880–1965) from 1916 and a painterly pastel portrait of Marie Swarzenski (1889–1967) from circa 1927. Marie Swarzenski was the wife of Georg Swarzenski (1876–1957), the then director of the Städtisches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie, whom Beckmann captured shortly before his death in an impressive portrait, a charcoal drawing on blue paper, which can also be seen in the exhibition. These and other works illustrate Beckmann's keen instinct for his vis-à-vis and the individual use of drawing utensils, and also document Beckmann's changing formal language. The pre-war compositions are characterised by rounded lines and soft contours. The composition then became stricter, the motifs sharply outlined, revealing angular forms.

For Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, drawing was the "key to his art". With over 120 drawings by Kirchner, the Städel Museum boasts one of the most important collections of the artist's drawings in Germany, which is largely due to the donation of works on paper from the estate of the Frankfurt patron of the arts Carl Hagemann (1867–1940) in 1948. One of the masterpieces is the pastel drawing *Berliner Straßenszene* (Street Scene in Berlin) from 1914. The hasty glances of the two prostitutes depicted, their quick steps and those of the passers-by, define the image: Kirchner was fascinated by people in motion, by the hectic mood of the aspiring metropolis of Berlin, which he translated into striking lines. The reality of people's lives was the source of his art. He abstracted what he saw by reducing natural forms to the essential.

The close connection between man and nature linked Kirchner and Emil Nolde with each other, even after their time together in the artist group "Die Brücke" (1905–1913). The closeness to nature becomes particularly visible in Nolde's watercolours, such as *Vierwaldstätter See* (Lake Lucerne) from circa 1930. Here, Nolde transformed the nature he had experienced into a composition of planes with bright, contrasting colours. Control and chance both played a decisive role in the creative process – it was precisely this combination that made the drawing a mirror of the forces acting between man and nature.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, August Macke (1887–1914) was also searching for adequate forms of expression for the “tremendous life” that swept over him. In the study *Zwei Mädchen* (Two Girls) from 1913, which is closely related to the painting of the same name, two young girls are depicted in an urban setting. The lines translate rhythmic impulses, light effects and the ambient sound of the big city into an abstract structure of forms and lend the drawing a dynamic effect.

In the 1920s and 1930s, a number of artists developed a strongly abstracted formal vocabulary, often following on from Expressionism. They also turned away from traditional compositional principles taught at the academies and initially tested new means of representation on paper. They abandoned naturalistic depictions and transformed what they had seen and experienced into fundamental pictorial elements such as line and surface, colour and form. Rolf Nesch, Werner Gilles and Ernst Wilhelm Nay worked with two-dimensional colour forms, striking lines and geometric figural depictions and dispensed with an illusionistic representation of depth. These formal tendencies can also be observed in Willi Baumeister’s (1889–1955) *Sportler in Ruhe* (Athletes Resting) from 1929. Baumeister, however, distinguished himself from Expressionist models and cultivated a more objective means of expression. Nevertheless, the immediate visual experience was the starting point for all of their works, regardless of the artists’ different modes of representation. Their artistic goal was to depict the primal forces of nature, which they perceived as expressions of life and translated into their pictorial compositions – such as Nay into rushing colour gradients, Gilles into clear colours seemingly flooded with sunlight, or Baumeister into relief-like surface structures reminiscent of rock formations.

Two drawings by Paul Klee, who had travelled to Tunisia with August Macke and had been inspired by his impressions on this journey to increasingly abstract compositions, reflect his virtuosity and joy of experimentation in drawing. For *Fruchtbares geregelt* (Fertile Well-Ordered) from 1933, the artist used a brush and a stamp to press the paint onto the paper. For the late drawing *alea jacta* from 1940, Klee applied a blend of pigment and glue to a rough paper clearly marked by the signs of the times. He combined abstract signs and expressive field of colour – enigmatic ciphers reminiscent of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s ‘hieroglyphics’ – with a gestural application of paint that already points to the intuitive painting and drawing style of Art Informel.

Against the background of the atrocities of National Socialism and the Second World War, it seemed impossible for many young artists around 1945/50 to continue the art of the 1920s and 1930s. Like the generations before and after the First World War, they were searching for new forms of expression. They developed an abstract pictorial language based exclusively on colour and form, which placed the expressive gesture at

the centre of their art: Proceeding from early Tachist tendencies in France and influenced by Surrealism, Art Informel developed in Germany. At the beginning of the 1950s, Frankfurt am Main became the German centre of this new movement. Karl Otto Götz first visited the city in 1950 and met the like-minded artists Otto Greis (1913–2001), Bernard Schultze (1915–2005) and Heinz Kreutz (1923–2016). In December 1952, they formed the loose artist group 'Quadriga'.

Götz drew quickly and developed a painting style based on movement. He covered his paintings with dynamic swirls and swaths of colour, as in the untitled gouache from 1957. For this, he used a new technique, discovered rather by chance in the summer of 1952, in which he applied paint to paper and spread it across the surface with a knife or squeegee. In this way, he succeeded in dissolving formal elements. The many varieties of Art Informel can be seen in the exhibition: delicate bundles of lines in graphite, as well as colour-intensive splashes and dabs of paint, fine nets of lines and paste-like paint spreading into the third dimension.

Many artists of the post-war generation also clearly distinguished themselves from the representatives of Art Informel. As children, they had experienced the horrors and consequences of the Second World War and now made recent German history their theme. To this end, they explicitly resorted to a figurative visual language. Eugen Schönebeck (\*1936) and Georg Baselitz (\*1938) depicted deformed bodies covered with scars, wounds and ulcers in their coloured pencil and ink drawings, Markus Lüpertz (\*1941) drew "German motifs", Jörg Immendorff (1945–2007) prepared a stage for the "Café Deutschland" in colourful gouaches, and Anselm Kiefer (\*1945) reflected in monumental works an aesthetics perceived as German. In addition to these recalcitrant works by artists who lived in the FRG, drawings by Hermann Glöckner (1889–1987), Gerhard Altenbourg (1926–1989), Werner Tübke (1929–2004) and A. R. Penck are also on view, which exemplify the diversity of the art of drawing in the GDR. Around 1989/90, the unification of East and West Germany created a very special atmosphere, which Gerhard Richter captured in delicate and sensitive graphite drawings. In their dynamic language, they convey to this day something of the collapse and upheaval of that time.

That being said, in the 1960s, German artists not only began to focus more on their own recent past, but also on the bourgeois, consumer-oriented affluent society. In his drawings, Thomas Bayle (\*1937) clothed a female nude with a coat, the pattern of which is composed of coffee cups. In addition, everyday drawing utensils previously deemed unworthy of art or newly developed, such as ballpoint, neon and fineliner pens, as well as spray paints were used. Sigmar Polke used them both for simple drawings as well as for complex collages. Many artists exceeded the usual formats of drawing and created monumental works: Antonius Höckelmann (1937–2000) stretched a network of

winding loops over broad strips of paper, and Johannes Grützke (1937–2017) staged his own person in large-format self-portraits. Peter Sorge (1937–2000) reflected the changing media landscape and the increasing omnipresence of images in his coloured pencil drawings composed of various pictorial quotations, which are more topical than ever today.

**“Great Realism & Great Abstraction” – Drawings from Max Beckmann to Gerhard Richter**

**Duration of the Exhibition:** 13 November 2019 – 16 February 2020

**Press Preview:** Tuesday, 12 November 2019, 11:00 am

**Curator:** Jenny Graser, research assistant in the Department of Prints and Drawings

**Venue:** Städel Museum, Schaumainkai 63, 60596 Frankfurt am Main

**Information:** [www.staedelmuseum.de](http://www.staedelmuseum.de)

**Visitor Services and Guided Tours:** +49(0)69-605098-200, [info@staedelmuseum.de](mailto:info@staedelmuseum.de)

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Thu + Fri 10 am–9 pm

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**Tickets and admission:**

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With your ticket, you can visit all exhibitions and the collection of the Städel Museum. You determine the date and time of your visit yourself.

**Evening Special:** From Tue–Wed starting at 5 pm as well as from Thu–Fri starting at 7 pm there is a reduced admission of 14 EUR. Exceptions are public holidays. It applies from 23 Oct 2019 up to and including 31 Jan 2020. Tickets are available online at [shop.staedelmuseum.de](http://shop.staedelmuseum.de) and at the museum counter.

**Guided Tours through the Exhibition:** Fri 6 pm, Sun, 2 pm. Participation is included in the admission fee. The number of participants is limited, no registration necessary.

**Catalogue:** A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Jenny Graser and with a foreword by Philipp Demandt, will be published by Kerber Verlag. German edition, 328 pages, Kerber Verlag, Bielefeld 2019, ISBN 978-3-941399-95-2, 34.90 Euro (museum edition).

**Artists:** Altenbourg, Gerhard; Baselitz, Georg; Baumeister, Willi; Bayle, Thomas; Beckmann, Max; Beuys, Joseph; Bohrmann, Karl; Buchheister, Carl; Feininger, Lyonel; Gilles, Werner; Glöckner, Hermann; Götz, Karl Otto; Graubner, Gotthard; Greis, Otto; Grützke, Johannes; Heckel, Erich; Höckelmann, Antonius; Immendorff, Jörg; Kiefer, Anselm; Kirchner, Ernst Ludwig; Klee, Paul; Kreutz, Heinz; Lüpertz, Markus; Macke, August; Mueller, Otto; Nay, Ernst Wilhelm; Nesch, Rolf; Nolde, Emil; Pechstein, Max; Penck, A. R.; Polke, Sigmar; Rainer, Arnulf; Richter, Gerhard; Rohlf, Christian; Schmidt-Rottluff, Karl; Schönebeck, Eugen; Schultze, Bernard; Schumacher, Emil; Sorge, Peter; Thieler, Fred; Trier, Hann; Tübke, Werner; Wols

**Supported by:** Gabriele Busch-Hauck Foundation

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