

WALL TEXTS

TOKENS OF FRIENDSHIP: ULRIKE CRESPO'S GIFTS TO THE STÄDEL MUSEUM

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Exhibition Hall of the Department of Prints and Drawings

Tokens of Friendship. Ulrike Crespo's Gifts to the Städel Museum

Every collection has its own physiognomy, shaped by its masterpieces and special areas of concentration, but also by what it leaves out. Donations and targeted acquisitions serve to deepen and broaden its specific character. The Städel Museum has Ulrike Crespo (1950–2019) to thank for one of the most important gifts of the past years.

It was in 2001 that the photographer, psychotherapist, and philanthropist founded the Crespo Foundation, which carries out a wide array of projects to the benefit of socially disadvantaged persons with a focus on education and creativity. She also provided assistance to artists as well as art institutions, and amassed a collection of contemporary art. The visual arts were a matter of existential importance to Ulrike Crespo—and a family tradition.

As a token of friendship, she generously left some ninety works of twentieth-century art—from Franz Marc, Oskar Schlemmer, and Jean Dubuffet to Max Ernst and Cy Twombly—to the museum. They were all once in the collection amassed by her grandfather, the businessman Karl Ströher (1890–1977). Ströher had initially concentrated on works of German Romanticism before turning to modern art after World War II. He also collected art of his own time: Willi Baumeister, later Joseph Beuys, even American Pop Art made their way into his holdings. As a collector, Ströher—who himself loved to draw—demonstrated a distinct predilection for works on paper.

The individual works and workgroups from the Crespo bequest form an excellent complement to the Städel Museum collection. They enhance existing holdings and close gaps—including those left behind by the Nazi confiscation of artworks within the framework of the 'degenerate art' campaign. In the exhibition, selected 'new arrivals' and works from the Städel Museum collection thus correspond and correlate with one another to the mutual enrichment of both.

All works from the Ulrike Crespo bequest are on view in the Städel Museum's Digital Collection.

Bauhaus Artists: From Schlemmer to Moholy-Nagy

In the first decades of the twentieth century, a wide range of stylistic approaches and aesthetic conceptions—some quite contrary to one another—existed side by side. Many were shaped by a critical reappraisal of tradition. The Bauhaus founded in 1919 set out to unite art and the crafts and to train artists accordingly. The teachers were called upon to convey their personal aesthetic visions to the students. The Bauhaus thus brought together many formally independent artistic standpoints, all bearing significance for modern art: Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Lyonel Feininger, Oskar Schlemmer, Johannes Itten, László Moholy-Nagy, and many others. Although not all the donated works in this section have their origins directly in the Bauhaus, they are distinguished by its characteristic search for new forms. Landscapes and figures undergo reduction to sign-like shapes, Cubist-style fragmentation, or geometric construction. Finally, Moholy-Nagy's composition attains complete abstraction.

Paths to Abstraction: Hölzel, Kandinsky, Marc, Jawlensky

In the early twentieth century, Adolf Hölzel departed from purely representational painting. Now he regarded form, colour, and line as the factors determining the artwork and its impact. From 1905/06 onwards, in his capacity as a teacher in Stuttgart, but also as an important theorist, he exerted a formative influence on artists such as Oskar Schlemmer, Johannes Itten, Ida Kerkovius, and Willi Baumeister. Around the same time, the artists' association Blauer Reiter found its way to new formal possibilities in Munich. For Wassily Kandinsky, true art came into being as an inner necessity, independently of the outer world. Kandinsky, Franz Marc, and Alexej Jawlensky accordingly abandoned the pure representation of nature in favour of an abstract—and thus, in their conception, universal—formal language.

Expressionist Tendencies: Kirchner, Nolde, Rohlf, Dix

In addition to Hölzel in Stuttgart and the Blauer Reiter in Munich, another important centre of modernism also formed around 1905: the Brücke artists' community in Dresden. There Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Emil Nolde, and others strove to translate their own experiences of the world into art in an 'immediate and undistorted' manner. Their works are distinguished by spontaneity and sketchy reductiveness. At the same time, their prints and drawings testify to the great

pleasure they took in experimentation. This was an aspect they had in common with Christian Rohlf, who was constantly trying out new painting mediums and techniques. The donated works in this section integrate seamlessly into the rich holdings of the Städel Museum and thus into the onetime collection of Carl Hagemann (1867–1940). Otto Dix, for his part, introduces a new aspect. Nonetheless, thanks to the wet-on-wet technique, his watercolour—less ‘new-objective’ than ‘expressive’ in character—bears an affinity to the work of Emil Nolde while at the same time revealing an entirely different colouristic temperament.

Individual Positions: Klimt, Ernst, Léger, Giacometti

Apart from major workgroups of Expressionism, the Bauhaus artists, and German post-war modernism, Ulrike Crespo’s bequest to the Städel Museum from the former Ströher Collection also includes important individual works—by Gustav Klimt and Paula Modersohn-Becker, Fernand Léger and Max Ernst, Ben Nicholson and Alberto Giacometti. Spanning more than half a century, these works are distinguished by a wide diversity of artistic strategies. One highlight is Max Ernst’s surrealist *Fishbone Forest* of 1927 combining ‘classical’ painting with experimental methods. Here chance and free association have become part of the pictorial invention process.

Art Brut: Dubuffet

After World War II, Jean Dubuffet saw greater credibility in the immediacy and openness of the art of children and the mentally impaired than in the formal language of trained artists. He was also interested in matter and, drawn by their apparent formlessness, in earthy and crusted-looking substances. He produced his painting surfaces from sand, plaster, and other unusual materials, then made incisions in them or applied the materials with a spatula-like tool. He used found textures for his prints and, with papier maché, created reliefs that look like loamy soil churned up by a plough—though they are in reality artificial constructs. He aspired towards an intense, ‘raw, crude art’. In 1945 he coined the term ‘art brut’ for this aesthetic.

Post-War Modernism: Baumeister, Bissier, Winter

Willi Baumeister was one of the most important protagonists of German post-war modernism. He had an impact not only as an artist and theorist, but also as a kind of agent. A close acquaintance of Karl Ströher’s, Baumeister not only accompanied the collector on his travels, but also introduced him to the widow of his friend Oskar Schlemmer and to Fernand Léger. He will accordingly have exerted no small

influence on the formation of the Ströher Collection. Works by Baumeister himself, but also by Julius Bissier and Fritz Winter, form an important workgroup in the Ulrike Crespo bequest. Winter was moreover the third recipient of the Ströher painting prize, the first to be endowed in the post-war period. However different their styles, what the three abstract artists have in common is their exploration of the aspects of art that cannot be expressed in words. Their sign-like elements defy interpretation. The artwork was to be perceived and experienced directly and intuitively.

American Art: Francis, Twombly, Oldenburg

After World War II, New York advanced to become the most important art centre in the western world. Abstract Expressionism and its subjective, gestural approach conquered the European art scene in the 1950s and was initially perceived in Germany as a transatlantic variation on European Informel. Pop Art followed close on its heels, critically reflecting on the aesthetic of the media and the consumer world. Ströher's first American purchases were accordingly works by Sam Francis and Cy Twombly, followed in 1968 by the Pop Art collection of the insurance broker Leon Kraushar (1913–1967) of New York. These holdings contributed decisively to shaping the international reputation of his collection. It was in roughly the same period that the Städel Museum began acquiring American art on paper, an area it has continued to pursue to this day. The works by Twombly, Francis, Claes Oldenburg, and Tom Wesselmann further reinforce this Städel collection focus.