

PRESS RELEASE

# WERNER TÜBKE

## METAMORPHOSES

2 JULY TO 28 SEPTEMBER 2025

Exhibition Hall of the Department of Prints and Drawings

Press Preview: Tuesday, 1 July 2025, 11.00 am

**Frankfurt am Main, 23 May 2025.** In 2023, the Städel Museum received an impressive and representative collection of works by Werner Tübke, one of the most important painters of the German Democratic Republic, from the collection of Barbara and Eduard Beaucamp. From 2 July to 28 September 2025, the Städel is presenting this outstanding donation of forty-six drawings and watercolours by Tübke in an exhibition dedicated to his graphic work and metaphorical visual language. Tübke (1929–2004) ranks alongside Bernhard Heisig and Wolfgang Mattheuer as one of the leading representatives of the so-called First Leipzig School and created a body of work in painting and drawing that is autonomous and consistent, dense in both form and content. “Drawing is an elementary need”, the artist once said, “everything else comes afterwards.” Tübke’s watercolours and drawings in graphite, pen and chalk testify to his great creative freedom and independence. They are an essential part of his artistic oeuvre: he used them to collect ideas, explore formal considerations and develop a wide variety of themes.

In his multi-layered compositions, characterized by an imaginative, sometimes almost exuberant fantasy, Werner Tübke reflects on the complexity of the world, with all its existential questions, hardships, and conflicts. In doing so, he demonstrates a keen awareness of human vulnerability, placing the individual at the centre of his art. Angels, unicorns and magicians, harlequins, veiled and bound figures, and repeatedly tortured and masked characters populate his works. In his “world theatre”, time is suspended through the creative appropriation of older art history, and everything is permeated by memories. While his art is characterized by a realistic formal language, the pictorial statements often remain ambiguous. Tübke was less concerned with a concrete reproduction of reality than with “interpreting existence”.

The exhibition is sponsored by the Heinz and Gisela Friederichs Foundation, with additional support from Fritz P. Mayer.

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Werner Tübke's outstanding contribution to post-war German art was recognized and honoured early on by the West German art critic Eduard Beaucamp. He followed the work of the "great anachronistic" artist from the late 1960s onwards, first as an art critic for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, then as a friend and collector. The Städel Museum, Germany's oldest private museum foundation, is supported by private patrons, companies and foundations, as well as the city of Frankfurt and the state of Hesse. Barbara and Eduard Beaucamp have been associated with the Städel for many years through their commitment. In 2010, the museum received Guercino's *Virgin and Child* (1621–1622) from the Beaucamp Collection as a donation.

**Philipp Demandt, Director of the Städel Museum**, on the exhibition: "Werner Tübke is a solitary figure in post-war German art. His works challenge us to recognize the human in the abysmal, the timeless in the historical and the true in the alienated. It is thanks to Eduard Beaucamp's decades of tireless commitment that we are able to show his drawings in such depth today. As an art critic, friend and collector, he recognized Tübke's stature early on and communicated it passionately to the public. The generous donation by Barbara and Eduard Beaucamp represents far more than a significant addition to the Städel Museum's collection; it sheds new light on Tübke's work and cements its place in art-historical consciousness."

"The seemingly realistic nature of Tübke's work is deceptive, because his art is far from representational or unambiguous. There are always 'tipping points', ambiguities and multiple meanings. He was interested in fundamental human themes, which he approached directly through his paintings and drawings. He virtually circled them with each new work. Beaucamp aptly described this artistic approach as 'thinking in images'. Consequently, Tübke rarely produced classical preliminary sketches for his paintings. Rather, painting, drawing and printmaking were all equal parts of an ongoing process of reflection. The end result is not one pictorial solution, but many—spanning various media and decades. Tübke's art proves to be constantly changing and as metamorphic as his visual language", adds **Regina Freyberger, Head of Prints and Drawings after 1800 at the Städel Museum and curator of the exhibition.**

Throughout his life, Werner Tübke was closely associated with the Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig (HGB)—first as a student, then as a professor, and finally as rector. His relationship with the GDR was marked by tension: his independent formal language initially contradicted the official art doctrine of socialist realism, resulting at times in fierce criticism and ultimately leading to his dismissal from the HGB. It was not until the 1970s that his metaphorically charged work was accepted. Despite receiving significant commissions, such as the panoramic painting *Early Bourgeois Revolution*

in Germany (1976–1987) in Bad Frankenhausen, Tübke's art repeatedly sparked debate—most recently in the German-German painting dispute over the 'state art' of the GDR, which the painter Georg Baselitz triggered in an interview in 1990.

### Tour of the Exhibition

The exhibition presents Werner Tübke's drawings in five chapters that bundle his motifs and themes.

Tübke's **self-portraits** served as a means of self-affirmation, often manifesting in surrogate figures such as jesters or harlequins—characters outside of social norms and thus symbols of artistic freedom. However, in *Harlequin on the Beach* (1965), the masked figure appears unable to free himself by his own strength—or of his own volition—from the tangle of trees and branches uprooted by the wind. In *Street in Brussels (with Self-Portrait)* (1965), the artist depicts himself amidst social contrasts, attempting to find his place between NATO soldiers and prostitutes, between sober objectivity and opulent sensuality. The drawing *On the Beach near Suchumi* (1961) is programmatic for Tübke's work: the artist depicts himself as an observer from behind, while a dazzling scene unfolds before him, somewhere between real presence and enigmatic vision.

Tübke frequently addressed **historical and contemporary events**, translating them into complex compositions whose titles and realistic, figurative imagery appeared to align with the ideological expectations of GDR cultural policy. However, rather than creating embellished historical paintings, Tübke drew on art-historical models to produce works that explore fundamental human issues and reflect on the recurrence of historical patterns. The depiction of a lynching in the 1957 pen-and-ink drawing *On "White Terror in Hungary"*, for example, deals with the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and is reminiscent of classic crucifixion scenes. His most significant work addressing recent history is the cycle *Life Memories of Doctor of Law Schulze* (1965–1967), which was created without commission. Consisting of eleven paintings, fifteen watercolours, and around sixty-five drawings, of which seven are on display at the Städel, the cycle unrelentingly and critically addresses the Nazi regime's unjust court rulings and judicially sanctioned terror. The fictional character of Judge Schulze represents those judicial officials of the Nazi regime who continued to work in both German states after 1945.

Several study trips undertaken by Werner Tübke from 1961 onwards, including to the Soviet Union, Central Asia, Bulgaria and Italy, had a lasting influence on his artistic work. For him, **landscape** was not only a motif, but also a vehicle for historical, mythical and cultural significance. In *Icarus over the Vitosha Mountains* (1980), for

example, the iconic figure from Greek mythology plunges into the Bulgarian mountain landscape—the site of ancient Thrace, believed to be the birthplace of the slave leader Spartacus. This combination of motifs has been interpreted as a premonition of the failure of socialist utopia, as the slave revolt led by Spartacus in 73 BC posed a serious threat to the Roman Empire. The watercolour *Funeral in the Tian Shan Mountains in Winter* (1962) also transcends the purely pictorial, depicting a Muslim funeral procession in an interplay of observation and imagination.

From the late 1970s onwards, Tübke increasingly withdrew from the social reality of the GDR. He created works that drew on a wide variety of sources and refused to tell a concrete story. These enigmatic **'fables'**, incorporating motifs from ancient mythology, the Bible, fairy tales, legends and everyday life, emerged directly from the drawing process and tie in with the pictorial tradition of 'capriccios', an art form characterized by playfulness, ambiguity and strangeness. *The Death of the Magician* (1984) for example, depicts a mysterious Rococo gathering around a deceased magician, in whom the artist may have imagined himself. Alongside harlequins and jesters, veiled and bound figures, the physically disabled and other outsiders of society, angels appear repeatedly in Tübke's world theatre. Examples include *The Angel of the Annunciation* (1977) and the drawing *The Lost Children Return Home* (1978). In the latter, the artist addresses his limited contact with his children following his separation from his first wife. He depicts himself as a troubled Passion figure based on a biblical model.

In his works, Tübke dissolved time levels: he drew on older artistic traditions in terms of style and iconography, transforming individual motifs into new, ambiguous statements without quoting them. In **everyday scenes**, such as those depicted in the drawing *Four Musicians* (1986), the past, present and future intertwine and dissolve into one another. A similar effect can be observed in the portraits, in which Tübke captured people with great sensitivity. Even historical figures such as *Ignatius of Loyola* (1987) are portrayed in such a way that they appear to be contemporaries. Tübke's lifelong commitment to social outcasts and the less fortunate of history is particularly evident in the graphite drawing *Lourdes* (1977), in which he pays a poignant tribute to a sick and desperate pilgrim. The title refers to the French pilgrimage site where, according to legend, the Virgin Mary appeared to a young girl in 1858.

#### **WERNER TÜBKE. METAMORPHOSES**

**Exhibition Dates:** 2 July–28 September 2025

**Curator:** Dr. Regina Freyberger (Head of Prints and Drawings after 1800, Städel Museum)

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

**Information:** [staedelmuseum.de/en/](https://staedelmuseum.de/en/)

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

**Opening Hours:** Tue, Wed, Fri, Sat, Sun + holidays 10 am–6 pm, Thu 10 am–9 pm

**Special Opening Hours:** For up-to-date information on special opening hours, please visit [staedelmuseum.de/en/visit](https://staedelmuseum.de/en/visit).

**Tickets:** Tue–Fri €16, reduced €14, Sat, Sun + holidays €18, reduced €16; every Tuesday from 3 pm €9; admission free for children under 12. Groups of at least 10 persons who would normally be charged the full admission fee: €16 per person. Registration is generally required for all groups, by telephone +49 (0)69-605098-200 or [info@staedelmuseum.de](mailto:info@staedelmuseum.de).

**Catalogue:** The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue with a foreword by Philipp Demandt and texts by Eduard Beaucamp, Regina Freyberger and Herwig Guratzsch. German edition, 158 pages, 25.50 euros (museum edition).

**Sponsored by:** Heinz and Gisela Friederichs Foundation

**With additional support from:** Fritz P. Mayer

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