

## **Modern Masters: "Degenerate" Art at the Museum of Fine Arts Berne**

April 7, 2016 – August 21, 2016

**The exhibition *Modern Masters: "Degenerate" Art at the Museum of Fine Arts Berne* presents, for the first time ever, the acquisition history of the Kunstmuseum Bern's collection. The show is mounting masterpieces by Pablo Picasso through to August Macke viewed from the perspective of their accession history, leading us into a dark chapter of the past. For example, the exhibition includes works that the Nazis branded as "degenerate" and confiscated from German museums. The show seeks to palpably illustrate the research on its collection, based on examples, and inform our audience about the complexities involved in issues of provenance.**

The Kunstmuseum Bern boasts one of the leading collections of modern art. However, the Kunstmuseum only purchased a small part of the works on its own. Most of them were either donations, bequests, or belong to foundations and have been placed at the disposal of the museum. As is the case with all public collections, the Kunstmuseum Bern perceives the research and presentation of the history of its holdings as an important goal. This concern became all the more pressing when Cornelius Gurlitt bequeathed his collection to the Kunstmuseum Bern.

The exhibition strives to show what makes up this internationally outstanding collection of works by modern masters at the Kunstmuseum Bern. And it seeks to trace the various paths to the Kunstmuseum taken by the works of art decried as "degenerate" by the Nazis during the Third Reich, a number of which were destroyed. At the same time, this angle on our collection provides a backdrop for probing the circumstances that ultimately led to great losses in the cultural legacy of German museums and private collectors too.

### **Historical background**

Since 1938, the Third Reich enforced a law allowing the seizure of art deemed "degenerate," which retrospectively legitimated the confiscation and decimation of much of the modern masters' collections in German museums. This policy was implemented ruthlessly already from 1937. German museums were purged of art that was classified as "degenerate," which was then either sold as profitably as possible or destroyed. Among these works were pieces executed by Jewish artists as well as those in which the Nazis claimed to identify "Jewish" or "Bolshevist" influences. What was vilified and rejected in the German Reich as "degenerate art" was appreciated and sold as "works of modern masters" in Switzerland. The title for the exhibition was inspired by the historically momentous and well-researched auction that took place in June 1939 at Galerie Fischer in Lucerne: *Gemälde und Plastiken Moderner Meister aus deutschen Museen* (Paintings and Sculptures of Modern Masters from German museums).

### **Exhibition**

The exhibition focuses largely on issues related to the works of art that were considered "degenerate" in Nazi Germany and which came into the Kunstmuseum Bern's possession in 1933. Among them are masterpieces by Franz Marc, Ernst Barlach, August Macke, and many other

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famous artists. Seventy objects are on show, including a selection of 53 paintings, works on paper, and sculptures by modern masters from our collection. In the exhibition they have been arranged chronologically according to their accession dates. Seven of the pieces on view were part of museum collections in Germany prior to 1937.

The exhibition has been subdivided thematically to address topics such as: "What was 'degenerate' art supposed to be?" Or, "how did Switzerland respond at a cultural level to the threat of Nazi Germany?" And, not least, "how and why was art from German museums sold in Switzerland?" The respective sections attempt to answer these questions. Other sections of the show are devoted to individual artists who suffered under the Hitler dictatorship in Germany and were in some way biographically linked especially to Switzerland, such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Paul Klee, and Otto Dix.

A catalogue was published to accompany the exhibition and within the context of an extensive research project. It documents 525 works in the collection of the Kunstmuseum Bern according to the current state of knowledge about their provenance. The research simultaneously underscores how much further work is required in order to clarify the situation for all the museum's works of art in regard to how they made their way there from the artists' studios. Thus both the exhibition and the catalogue *Modern Masters: "Degenerate" Art at the Museum of Fine Arts Berne* mark the beginning of the coming extensive research on provenances to be carried out at the Kunstmuseum Bern.

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**The exhibition is sponsored by:**

**CREDIT SUISSE**  
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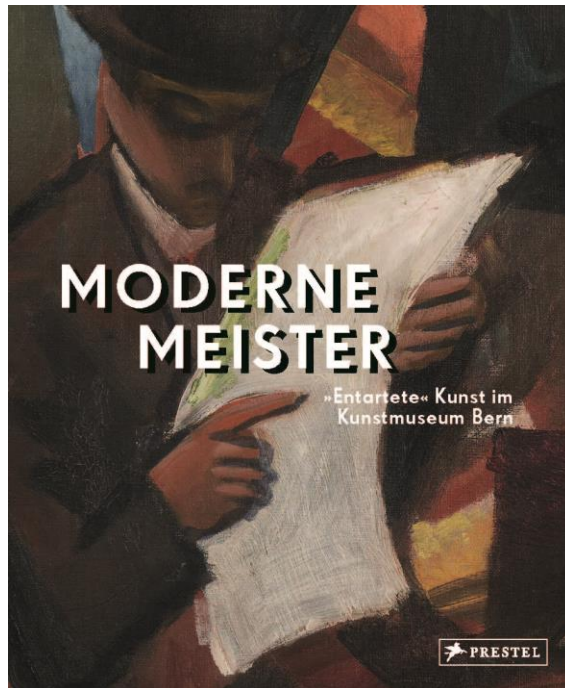
**RUTH & ARTHUR SCHERBARTH STIFTUNG**

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## Catalogue



### Modern Masters:

#### "Degenerate" Art at the Museum of Fine Arts Berne

Editors: Matthias Fehner, Daniel Spanke

With contributions by Claudia Blank, Bettina Brand-Claussen, Matthias Fehner, Meike Hoffmann, Andreas Hüneke, Georg Kreis, Franz Müller, Daniel Spanke, Esther Tisa Francini, and Christoph Wagner.

In German and English, bound volume, 376 pages, Prestel Verlag

Price of catalogue at the Kunstmuseum Bern: price 49 CHF (subject to change)

We are only too happy to send you a copy of the catalogue and wish to thank you for releasing your review of it.

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## **Accompanying Program**

### **Public guided tours:**

Sunday, 11:00 a.m.: April 10, May 1/22, June 5/26, July 3/10/17/24/31, August 7/14/\*21

Tuesday, 7:00 p.m.: April 19, May 10/31, June 14, July 5/26, August 9/16

\*with the curator Daniel Spanke

### **Our series "Art and Religion in Dialogue"**

Sunday, April 17, 3:00 p.m. Daniel Spanke in conversation with Brigitta Rotach (Haus der Religionen).

### **Discussions at the exhibition**

Tuesday, May 10, 6:00 p.m.: Magdalena Schindler, Kunstmuseum Bern, in conversation with Esther Tisa Francini, provenance research associate at Museum Rietberg, Zürich

Sunday, May 22, 1:00 p.m. *Modern Masters* exhibition curator Daniel Spanke in conversation with Franz Müller, Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft

Tuesday, May 31, 6:00 p.m. Beat Schüpbach, Kunstmuseum Bern, in conversation with Matthias Frehner, Kunstmuseum Bern Collections Director

Sunday, June 5, 1:00 p.m.: Beat Schüpbach, Kunstmuseum Bern, in conversation with art historian Andreas Meier

Sunday, July 3, 1:00 p.m.: Andreas Meier in conversation with Herbert Winter, President of the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities

Sunday, August 21, 1:00 p.m.: *Modern Masters* exhibition curator Daniel Spanke in conversation with Wolfgang Henze, joint proprietor of Galerie Henze&Ketterer in Wichtrach

### **Volkshochschulkurs (Bern adult education center course)**

Wednesdays, from 3:00 to 4:00 p.m.: May 18 and 25, June 1 and 8, 2016

Bookings: Volkshochschule Bern Tel.: 031 320 30 30, info@vhsbe.ch

### **Introductory courses for teachers**

Tuesday, April 26, 6:00 p.m.

Wednesday, April 27, 2:00 p.m.

Bookings: Tel.: 031 328 09 11, vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch