

FOCUS IM OBERSTEG COLLECTION

MODERN DANCE OF THE DEAD

MAIN BUILDING MEZZANINE FLOOR / MARCH 07 – SEPTEMBER 02, 2018 / CURATOR: HENRIETTE MENTHA

In this exhibition we look at artists from Basel who at the beginning of the 20th century addressed the ephemeral nature of existence in their work. Death as an omnipresent theme is an age-old subject: Emanuel Büchel's watercolor of "The Basel Dance of the Dead" references a long-gone pre-Reformation era. Indeed, the Medieval theme remained topical even in the early 20th century. In 1920, Otto Plattner addressed the subject with its significant relevance for Basel in a caricaturing portfolio that is now part of the Im Obersteg Collection. In addition to Otto Plattner's work, the exhibition also showcases pieces by Niklaus Stoecklin, Kurt Seligmann and Charles Hindenlang.

The historical dance of the dead

In Medieval art, a preoccupation with human mortality and sinfulness and the belief in an impending Last Judgement culminated in visual creations that show figures of death dancing, making music, and wearing symbols that show them to belong to different social classes. These so-called depictions of the "Dance of the Dead" were disseminated in the form of printed books and prints or as monumental murals on cemetery walls. One characteristic feature these images of morality share is the combination of image and text, which also points to literary sources: Namely, the "Vado Mori" verses, a legend of three living and three dead men which originated in the Orient. The verses tell the tale of three nobles, who while hunting come across three open caskets with corpses. They receive a message from the dead in the sense of a memento mori: "What you are, we were, what we are, you shall be". In the "Dance of the Dead", the theme of mortality is connected to the fact that our hour of death is unknown to us yet inevitable and that all human beings are equal in death. Despite our all suffering the same fate in the end, the "Dance of the Dead" reflects and legitimizes the social hierarchy of the estates-based Medieval society in the succession of couples it presents. Death appears in different guises: As a seductive musician, macabre dance partner, dreaded enemy. Widely held belief saw death as a transition into an unknown afterlife, shaped by the way one had led one's life in the mortal world. In view of the permanent danger of being surprised by the end of one's life on earth without having had an opportunity to do penance for one's sins, the cycles of images accessible to the public admonished people to lead their lives morally and piously. There can also be no underestimating the public impact such monumental visual works would have had, and the extent to which they enhanced a city's reputation.

The "Basel Dance of the Dead"

Created by an unknown artist, the artistically quite exceptional "Basel Dance of the Dead" in the Predigerkirche church is an early, important example of this genre. Dating from the 1440s, it was painted on the inside of the Dominican monastery's cemetery wall, not far from the no. 11 tram stop at Universitätsspital, before being demolished in 1805 according to the wish of the Basel public. The mural, two meters high and spanning some 60 meters in length, began with a scene showing a sermon and an ossuary, and ended with a de-

piction of the Fall of Man. In between, the mural showed pairs of almost life-size figures: representatives of different social classes (clergy, aristocrats and patricians, burghers, peasants) – in total 37 figures including that of death. The original state of this extensive picture cycle is unknown, as it was restored and modified several times over the years. The mural was restored by Hans Hug Kluber in 1568, when it was significantly altered. Kluber modelled the facial features of the preacher at the beginning of the depiction after those of Basel reformer Johannes Oekolampad, in this way adapting the monumental painting to the new reformist circumstances. This made it possible to save the mural from destruction by iconoclasts. Apart from numerous instances in which Kluber painted over the original piece, he also added a self-portrait, as well as one of his wife and son, at the end of the composition. Between 1770 and 1773 Emanuel Büchel created a copy in watercolor of the monumental piece, which is in the collection of Kunstmuseum Basel in bound form. This copy shows one pair of dancers on each page of the book together with a corresponding verse. The dead are portrayed as mummified corpses (skin and bones) and only a few of them are shown making music.

In 1839, Hieronymus Hess copied Emanuel Büchel's "Dance of the Dead" watercolor for a book project. Hess took greater liberties in doing so, giving the dying expressive physiognomies and in part portrait-like features of persons well known throughout the city. He also added the figure of a Chinese man, thereby referencing the Opium War (1839-1842) and again drawing a link to his own day.

Büchel also made a copy of the "Kleinbasel Dance of the Dead", which was originally in the Dominican convent Klingental and based on, as well as created just a few years after, the one in Predigerkirche. Büchel painted this copy from 1766-1768. This "Dance of the Dead" has likewise not survived. It was torn down along with the convent in 1860.

Hans Holbein's "Dance of the Dead"

Hans Holbein the Younger created a succession of woodcuts on the theme of the "Dance of the Dead" in 1526. They were published as a volume in Lyon in 1538, and presented the material in a fundamentally renewed and altered way. Appropriate to the book medium, Holbein dismantled the roundelay into images that function independently of one another and placed a stronger focus on individual scenes. These are no longer simply images of pairs of dancers, but developed and detailed genre scenes. The representatives of the different estates are shown in their everyday working environments and spheres of activity. Death is depicted as a skeleton, actively and at times critically intervening in events. It is the new spirit of humanism and Reformation that becomes manifest in certain scenes with a downright anti-clerical and socio-critical thrust. The theme of dancing plays only a secondary role here, and what is at stake instead is one's personal encounter with death.

Otto Plattner's "Modern Dance of the Dead"

With artist Otto Plattner (1886-1951) from Liestal near Basel we take a great leap in time, up into Modernity. The artist trained under Basel decorative painter Franz Baur before attending the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Geneva; he later also studied in Paris and Munich. He was renowned in the Basel region for his murals and posters and also worked as a landscape painter, glass painter, heraldist and illustrator. The portfolio *Modern Dance of the Dead* (1920) comprises 14 watercolors and was presumably only realized or only survived in this version. When and under what circumstances the series of works became part of the Im Obersteg collection is unknown. Many postcards illustrated by the artist written to Karl Im Obersteg, as well as an ink drawing referencing shared recreational activities in Ascona, attest to the friendly relationship between the two that stretched back into the 1920s.

Otto Plattner was exceptionally gifted at drawing. He illustrated books, created caricatures and posters and even designed lanterns for the Carnival celebrations. The "Dance of the Dead" cycle can be considered part of this satirical section of his work. On the one hand, Plattner drew on the Basel Dance of the Dead tradition in his watercolors, yet as the title of the portfolio shows, he aimed to create an interpretation that

was up-to-date with the circumstances of modern, early 20th century living. He also provided a variation on the theme that was reduced in scope. What remains is the combination of visual art work and verse. The clerical and secular hierarchy formerly so much a part of the images no longer enters into the picture. Those condemned to death all come from profane, modern backgrounds – only some represent particular occupational groups, such as the farmer, the nurse, the shorthand typist, the painter, the critic, the communist editor, the singer, the mother and the soldier. Special characters or types of person, such as the philanthropist, the demagogue, and the revolutionary are also featured. In contrast to the mode of representation employed in the historical Dances of the Dead with their striding dancing couples, Plattner showed in part drastic scenes of people being taken by surprise and overpowered, even suffering violent acts, in which death (sometimes supported by a monster) confronts humans with their own immorality, arrogance or vanity and besieges them violently. Only very few of the protagonists are shown understanding by or even receive praise from the figure of Death for their exemplary conduct of life and attitude – they are the only ones who are not shown as grotesque caricatures. While these images are characterized by an almost stoic sense of calm, the majority of the scenes are marked by a drastic realism and the brutal aggression of the figure of Death. The good middle class artist shows his political colors when speaking of the communist editor or the revolutionary. The caricatures are accompanied by pithy lines also penned by the artist. Finally the painter himself confronts Death. He is shown as the creator of a standard bearer with a physiognomy reminiscent of Hodler. It was an irony of fate that the artist was to die suddenly and entirely unexpectedly in the middle of a work day around 30 years later.

Charles Hindenlang (Basel 1894–1960)

His painting «Totentanz» from the year 1945 was clearly influenced by Picasso, especially in terms of the Neo-Classicist elements and the formalist visual language that sets the figures off against the background plane. In terms of content, there is a connection to the thematic world of the circus, the Basel Carnival culture and local “Dance of the Dead” traditions. The figure of the harlequin as tambour melds these different areas.

Niklaus Stoecklin (Basel 1896–1982)

The internationally renowned artist grew up in the Basel arts scene and addressed the presence of death in everyday life in Basel. His piece «Sargschreinerei» from the Im Obersteg collection shows the window display of a coffin builder, presumably located at Utengasse 52 in Kleinbasel. Stoecklin had seen the urn that appears in the painting «Die Kondolenzurne» at this coffin builder’s shop on Utengasse. In the painting Stoecklin portrayed his friend, the sculptor Ernst Sulzbachner (1895–1915), who committed suicide shortly after his 20th birthday, on September 26, 1915. The young man in the uniform is literally pushed into a corner and stands forlorn in a tight, grey nook of a room. Likewise from the Kunstmuseum collection, «Rheingasse» provides a detailed depiction in the style of New Objectivity of the house entrance and two shop windows across the road from Stoecklin’s studio, which was located on the ground floor of the Café Spitz building on Rheingasse. Everyday scenes, such as the coffin visible in the window over the butcher’s shop, or the solitary old woman with her cat, seem like premonitions of death. The small town idyll is disrupted; there is an ominous sense of foreboding.

Kurt Seligmann (Basel 1900 – 1962 Sugar Loaf/New York)

Born in Basel, Kurt Seligmann left his home town at an early age. He lived in Paris for many years, where he was a member of the artist association “Abstraction-Création” (1931–1937) and belonged to the circle of Surrealists around André Breton. In late 1939, Seligmann emigrated to the US. Nevertheless, Basel remained an important cultural bedrock and source of subject matter in his work, as two late drawings, «Menuett» and «La ronde», both in the Im Obersteg collection, amply show. They straddle the twin poles of drawings created in the style of the Old Masters such as Holbein, on the one hand, and carnival masquerade, on the other. Indeed, they are allied to Seligmann’s exploration of the themes of dance and the “Dance of the Dead”. In 1937, the artist created an etching entitled “Danse macabre,” and in its wake various depictions of dances and processions, combining Surrealist elements with old heraldic symbols much as do the ink drawings on display.

THE IM OBERSTEG COLLECTION IN THE KUNSTMUSEUM BASEL

Basel shipping agent and art connoisseur Karl Im Obersteg (1883-1969) and his son Jürg (1914-1983), a professor of Forensic Medicine, collected international 20th-century art for some seventy years. The preponderance of this important collection, comprising some 260 works today, can be credited to the activities and passion of Karl Im Obersteg: he purchased major works by Marc Chagall, Alexej von Jawlensky, Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso and Chaïm Soutine, among others. He did not pursue a definable concept, making his acquisitions on the basis of friendships with artists and his predilection for expressive, figurative painting. And yet, apart from the powerful expressiveness of colour, there is an intense and often melancholy view of human existence running leitmotif-like through the collection. Chance encounters with Russian exile artists in Ascona in the winter of 1918/19 set off Karl Im Obersteg's indefatigable acquisition activity and culminated in lifelong friendships, particularly with Jawlensky. Today the Im Obersteg collection boasts more than 30 works from all periods of the Russian artist's career – Switzerland's most comprehensive and important group of the artist's works outside the Jawlensky family's own.

In the Twenties, Karl Im Obersteg's collecting activity became increasingly international in outlook. The first high point was his purchase of two seminal works by Pablo Picasso: «Arlequin», 1923, which had to be sold after Im Obersteg's death (1969), and «Buveuse d'absinthe», 1901, an early work from the artist's first independent stylistic phase, the Blue Period. Inspired by Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec, this half-length portrait shows a seated woman with the blank stare and dejected body language of a person living on the margins of bourgeois society. A further painting on the reverse, *Femme dans la loge*, pulsates with colour and gestural brushwork. When and why this scene from Pigalle's demi-monde, which must have been created shortly before the Absinth Drinker, was over-painted is unknown. The black overpainting has been only partially removed, with traces of it still visible today. In the collection's heterogeneous little group of Picassos, this double-sided canvas is complemented by a small, surrealist nude from the Thirties and «La guenon et son petit» (1951), a bronze cast from an assemblage of toy cars, bits of pottery, metal and plaster.

The longer the more, Im Obersteg's fascination for Picasso, coupled with his Europe-wide shipping business, led the collector to turn his attention to Paris, where he acquired works by Paul Cézanne, André Derain, Aristide Maillol, Amedeo Modigliani, Maurice de Vlaminck, Georges Rouault and Auguste Rodin. The belorussian Chaïm Soutine was also working in Paris, and seven paintings by this “peintre maudit” – still lifes and portraits characterized by vehement brush strokes – are among the highlights of the collection.

It was probably thanks to his personal friendship with Marc Chagall that, in 1936, Karl Im Obersteg was able to acquire a whimsically mask-like self-portrait of the young artist plus three powerful and already world-famous portraits of Jews dating from 1914. Through this purchase, Im Obersteg's exquisite and hitherto very personal collection inevitably gained a dimension and significance transcending the purely private.