

Media release

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## **Sophie Taeuber-Arp Living Abstraction**

March 20–June 20, 2021, Kunstmuseum Basel | Neubau

Curators: Eva Reifert, Anne Umland, Natalia Sidlina, Walburga Krupp

The Kunstmuseum Basel dedicates a major retrospective to the Swiss artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889–1943), whose face will be familiar to many of her present-day compatriots thanks to her decades-long presence on the 50 Swiss Franc note. Showcasing over 250 works, the exhibition *Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Living Abstraction*, which is produced in cooperation with the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Tate Modern, London, will introduce broad international audiences to the interdisciplinary and exceptionally multifaceted oeuvre of this long-neglected pioneer of abstraction and establish her as one of the great avant-gardists of classic modernism.

At the time of Taeuber-Arp's death in a tragic accident in 1943, her oeuvre spanned an extraordinarily wide range of techniques and materials: textiles, beadwork, a puppet theater, dance performances, costumes, murals, furniture, architecture, graphic designs, paintings, sculptures, reliefs, and drawings. Undaunted by traditional divisions between media and hierarchies of genre, she framed a vision of art as a close companion to life that is without parallel in the era of classic modernism. It is to this vision that her works owe their undimmed fascination and current relevance.

Sophie Taeuber-Arp's oeuvre is brought to life by a unique conjunction of technical expertise—she received extensive training in applied art—and the experimentalism of the avant-garde circles in which she moved in Zurich and Paris. Where others associated the novel and revolutionary formal language of abstraction with a spiritual realm of pure ideas, she applied it to enhancing everyday life, designing pillows, table cloths, bags, furniture, and entire rooms, as at the *Aubette*, a café in Strasbourg that has been called the «Sistine Chapel of modernism.» In the abstract paintings based on simplified geometrical shapes she created in Paris in the 1930s, too, the compositions are cheerily colorful and in rhythmic motion rather than static or austere.

Arranged in chronological fashion, the exhibition *Living Abstraction* presents an overview of Taeuber-Arp's output and her various sources of inspiration and vividly renders the apparently playful ease with which the artist dismantled longstanding barriers between art and life and rigid art-historical categories.

Applied art, dance, and Dadaism are Taeuber-Arp's defining pursuits in her Zurich years between 1914 and 1926. The architecture-related projects she realizes in Strasbourg

beginning in 1926 show her creativity evolving in a direction that leads toward her involvement in the Paris-based artists' groups *Cercle et Carré* and *Abstraction-Création* in the 1930s. She also had close ties to Basel, illustrated in the exhibition by a spotlight on her important contribution to the presentation of Constructivist art at Kunsthalle Basel in 1937. The latter was not only key to the evolution and dissemination of abstract art; it also helped Taeuber-Arp win a circle of loyal collectors in the city, whose descendants are now among the individuals who have generously agreed to lend her works to the museum for *Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Living Abstraction*.

The Nazi invasion of France in 1940 prompted Taeuber-Arp and her husband Hans Arp to escape Paris for the south of France; they settled in Grasse, where, living in isolation and poverty, the artist mostly produced drawings. A temporary visa allowed the couple to return to Zurich, where Taeuber-Arp's oeuvre breaks off abruptly: on a cold night in January 1943, she died at Max Bill's house of carbon monoxide poisoning caused by a stove.

The exhibition *Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Living Abstraction* gathers ca. 250 works from Swiss and international collections, including Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin, the Arp Museum Bahnhof Rolandseck, Remagen, the Fondation Arp, Clamart, the Fondazione Marguerite Arp, Locarno, the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, and the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain, Strasbourg. It also offers Swiss audiences a rare opportunity to see works from the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Yale University Art Gallery, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, and numerous private collections.

## **Catalogue**

The Museum of Modern Art has prepared an extensive catalogue (in English) to accompany the exhibition; a German version edited by the Kunstmuseum Basel will be released by Hirmer. Contributions by international authors shed light on the diverse facets of Taeuber-Arp's oeuvre.

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The exhibition will travel to the following institutions:  
Tate Modern, London, 15 July to 17 October 2021  
Museum of Modern Art, New York, 21 November 2021 to 12 March 2022

## **Imagery and information on the exhibition**

[www.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/en/media](http://www.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/en/media)

## **Media contact**

Karen N. Gerig, Tel. +41 61 206 62 80, [karen.gerig@bs.ch](mailto:karen.gerig@bs.ch)

## Biographical sketch and overview of the exhibition

Sophie Taeuber-Arp (b. Davos, 1889; d. Zurich, 1943) knew at a young age that she wanted to study applied art and pursued this interest first in St. Gallen and then at the Debschitz School in Munich, where she specialized in textile design and woodcarving. At the time, the prevalence of industrial mass production prompted a newfound appreciation for manual craftsmanship and artisanal techniques. Under the influence of the ideals championed by the British Arts and Crafts movement, fine and applied arts came to be seen as closely allied. In 1914, Taeuber-Arp settled in Zurich. During the First World War, the city in neutral Switzerland became a refuge for many members of Europe's artistic avant-gardes. Taeuber-Arp studied expressive dance at the school founded by Rudolf von Laban. With Hans Arp, whom she would later marry, she was actively involved in the anti-bourgeois Dada movement. Her position at the Zurich Trade College, where she taught until the late 1920s, provided her and her husband with a secure income during these economically difficult years.

The beaded purses, necklaces and pillows in **gallery 1** of the exhibition give an impression of the decorative objects that Taeuber-Arp manufactured and sold. Unfortunately, not many finished pieces have survived. Luminous gouaches and drawings in colored pencil, meanwhile, let the visitors immerse themselves in the universe of abstract motifs that the artist charted starting in 1915. A painted triptych that strikes contemporary beholders as a standalone work of art was probably a folding-screen in an earlier life: a characteristic example of how Taeuber-Arp's work blurs the boundaries between applied and fine arts.

The original set of puppets that Taeuber-Arp created for an adaptation of the Commedia dell'arte play *King Stag*, on display in **gallery 2** of the exhibition, is one of the exhibition's highlights. Although the production saw no more than three performances—this was in 1918, amid a raging influenza pandemic—the puppets continue to fuel the imagination of creative minds like Karl Lagerfeld (who cast them for a fashion collection photo shoot in 2015). The formal idiom, too, evinces a certain continuity: not unlike the motifs that appear in her decorative objects, the figures are composed of rigorously geometric shapes. The puppets are brought to life in film sequences recorded for the exhibition, a coproduction with Narrative Boutique with support from Basler Marionetten Theater and the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich.

In connection with the puppet theater project, Taeuber-Arp also created a series of abstract heads in wood that took on outstanding artistic significance in the context of Dada; no anthology of the seminal anti-art movement would be complete without it.

Sophie Taeuber-Arp contributed work to numerous presentations of artisanal work. Her pillowcases and beadwork made their debut in an art setting in exhibitions organized in Basel and Zurich by the artist's association *Das Neue Leben (The New Life)*, which, like other similar reformist groups, was committed to bridging the gulf between applied and fine arts. **Gallery 3** is dedicated to Taeuber-Arp's work as a teacher at the Zurich Vocational College and her wonderful textile work in a variety of techniques. Knotted, woven, or embroidered, her tablecloths, rugs, and pillows captivate with their distinctive motifs: colorful shapes organized in geometric structures and abstractions of animal and human figures. The extant painted scraps of paper related to these projects offer fascinating insight into Taeuber-Arp's creative process: shifting them around and assembling them in modular fashion allowed her to sample fresh combinations and test their effect.

In the second half of the 1920s, Sophie Taeuber-Arp and her husband became French citizens. During her frequent stays in Strasbourg, she was hired to design a series of interiors. In **gallery 4**, gouaches the artist produced in connection with these commissions show airily buoyant lines and chromatic gradations that attest to the changes in her visual vocabulary as well as her keen eye for nuances of color and form. A recurring motif is the figure with bent arms: it appears in the designs for Hotel Hannong, the murals at the Heimendinger residence, and the stained-glass windows for the architect André Horn's apartment. Small-format photographs from Taeuber-Arp's travels suggest that she found inspiration in life in all its infinite variety, taking pictures, say, of the arcades in Italian cities as well as the sea of beach chairs on the German island of Rügen.

In the late 1920s, Taeuber-Arp was commissioned to furnish and decorate the interiors of the *Aubette*, a cultural center with a bar, restaurant, dance hall, billiard parlor, and tearoom on Strasbourg's Place Kléber. The ensemble—the artist brought in Theo van Doesburg and her husband, Hans Arp, to contribute to the project—grew into a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The large-format historic photographs, numerous design drawings, and extant glass windows by Taeuber-Arp that form the heart of the exhibition in **gallery 5** convey a vivid sense of how truly radical her application of the formal language of abstract art in this public space was. The building's contemporary users, however, never warmed to the uncompromising modernity of geometric abstraction in a setting of their workaday lives. The ensemble was heavily altered before the 1930s were over, and only a partial reconstruction can be seen in Strasbourg today.

The ambition to modernize all domains of life united the designers, artists, and architects of the avant-garde. Taeuber-Arp not only had a network of professional contacts in these various disciplines, she also tried her hand at all of them. From her plans to reorganize the functional spaces of a household to furniture designs and even the construction of her own studio building on the outskirts of Paris, the exhibits in **gallery 6** richly illustrate the intertwinement of art and life in her oeuvre.

In the early 1930s, Taeuber-Arp gave up the teaching position in Zurich that had secured her own and her husband's livelihood for over a decade and relocated to Paris. She moved in the circles of the non-figurative avant-garde, affiliating herself with the groups *Cercle et Carré* and *Abstraction-Création*, which also counted Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Kurt Schwitters among their members, and sent her art to exhibitions in France and abroad. Her style can now be broadly classified as Constructivist, and although the new work is geometrically abstract through and through, it is always set apart by a peculiar agility, a delicate and playful equilibrium of masses. The presentation in **gallery 7** retraces how motifs and ideas—such as circular constellations, intersecting diagonals, and arc shapes clashing with straight lines—evolve in series of works while communicating with each other through manifold visual echoes. In an environment that increasingly turned hostile to modernism, Taeuber-Arp from 1937 on also made a name for herself as a graphic designer; among her creations in this genre is the layout of *Plastique/Plastic*, a magazine she edited that sought to foster the exchange of ideas between avant-gardes on both sides of the Atlantic.

In 1937, an opportunity opened up to show her work in Basel, which had emerged as a destination for art enthusiasts in the course of the decade thanks to the local Kunsthalle's exhibition programming. Taeuber-Arp, who had excellent contacts in the art world, advised the curators, Lucas Lichtenhan and Georg Schmidt (who would soon be tapped to lead the

Kunstmuseum), not only on which of her works to include, but also on which other artists to invite. She traveled to Switzerland to help prepare the exhibition and attended the opening.

**Gallery 8** is dedicated to *Konstruktivisten*, the group show at Kunsthalle Basel, which opened in 1937: arguably the single most important presentation of Sophie Taeuber-Arp's art in her lifetime. Among the objects on view were her singular painted wood reliefs—revisiting the material of the puppets, they are yet thoroughly abstract in their design: three-dimensional creations that straddle the boundary between painting and sculpture. In neighboring Germany, modernist and abstract art faced severe repression, and its turn in the limelight in Basel was perceived and remarked upon as symbolizing the hopes for a better future. The event also proved crucial for the artist's relationship with Basel. Taeuber-Arp was in contact with eminent collectors like Maja Sacher-Stehlin, the Müller-Widmanns, and Marguerite Hagenbach. Members of this circle subsequently made gifts of many of her works to the Kunstmuseum. Not much less than a century later, the Kunstmuseum Basel—where this exhibition is on view door to door with the museum's collections—invites the public to experience Taeuber-Arp's oeuvre as a defining contribution to classic modernism and Constructivism.

The drastic change in the Arp-Taeuber's circumstances precipitated by their escape from Paris to the south of France is unmistakable in the drawings on view in **gallery 9**, with which the exhibition concludes. The distinction between sketch and finished work appears to have become irrelevant: colorful and monochromatic, the meandering lines suggest a nomadic restlessness—in their precision and lucidity, however, these works are equal to those of the Paris years. A video collage of historic photographs of the artist and her friends and excerpts from her correspondence recapitulates Taeuber-Arp's life, her extensive social network in the artist circles of her time, and the living abstraction of her art. The quotes in the film are read by the Swiss musician Sophie Hunger.