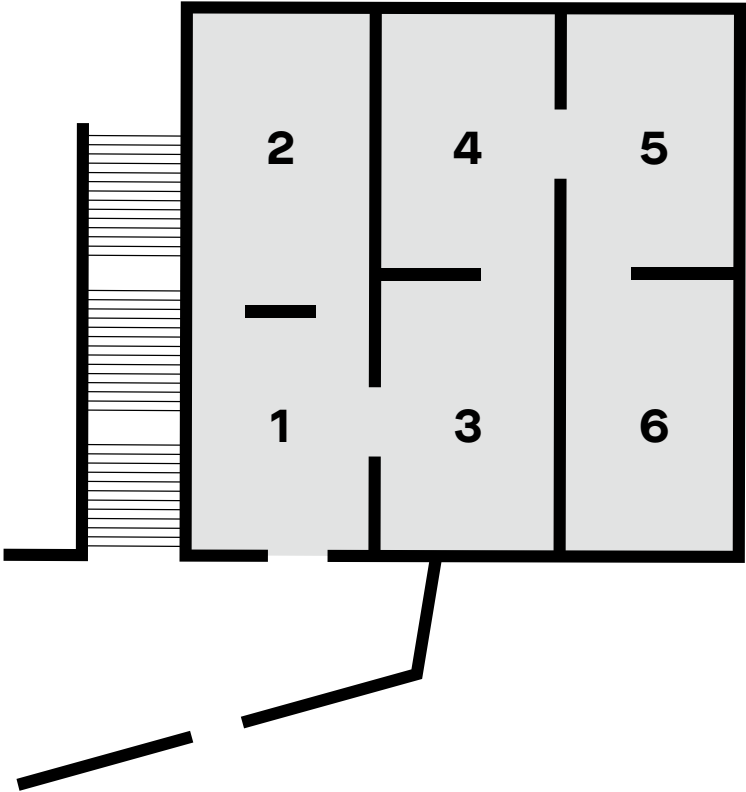


kunstmuseum basel

# The Collector Curt Glaser

From Champion of Modernism  
to Refugee

# Kunstmuseum Basel | Neubau Lower level



The Jewish art historian Curt Glaser (1879–1943) was a central figure in the Berlin art world of the 1910s and 20s. He was the director of the Kunstbibliothek [Art Library] and built up an important art collection together with his first wife, Elsa, who died in 1932.

The National Socialist seizure of power in 1933 put an abrupt end to Glaser's career. After his dismissal in early April, Glaser put most of his possessions up for auction in Berlin in May. His collection was thus largely dissolved.

In the summer of 1933, Glaser emigrated with his second wife Maria – initially to Switzerland, and then in 1941 to New York, where Glaser died two years later at the age of 64. Glaser's accomplishments and the fate of his collection fell into obscurity.

## **The 1933 Basel Purchase from the Glaser Collection**

The Kunstmuseum Basel acquired two hundred drawings and prints for the Kupferstichkabinett from the auction of Glaser's collection in 1933. Among them were important works by Edvard Munch. In 2004, the Glaser community of heirs made a claim to these works for the first time. This claim was rejected by the Canton of Basel-Stadt, as the official owner.

After the heirs again made contact in 2017, the Kunstmuseum carefully investigated the circumstances of this purchase. The case was examined by the museum's Kunstkommission [Board of Trustees]. Subsequently, the canton of Basel-Stadt acknowledged that Glaser sold his collection due to persecution by the Nazi regime.

## **The Agreement with the Community of Glaser's Heirs**

In March 2020, the canton of Basel-Stadt came to an agreement with the community of heirs regarding a “just and fair solution” in accordance with the “Washington Principles” (The Washington Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art).

The heirs demanded recognition of the fact that Glaser had sold his collection as a victim of Nazi persecution. The Kunstmuseum confirmed this through financial compensation. The two hundred works, however, remained in the museum's holdings. This exhibition is also part of the settlement and is intended to honor Glaser's life and work and his collection.

# 1 Curt and Elsa Glaser

Curt and Elsa Glaser married in 1903. They traveled the world together, sharing their enthusiasm for art. Together they visited Henri Matisse in Paris and Edvard Munch in Oslo and had their portraits painted by these artists.

They hosted receptions on Mondays in their upper-class apartment in Berlin, where the celebrities of the art world met. In his library, Glaser displayed the impressive portrait that Max Beckmann had painted of him in 1929. Less is known about Elsa Glaser than about her husband. She translated writings about art from the French, such as Joachim Gasquet's book on Paul Cézanne.

# 2 Life and Work in Berlin

In the early 1930s, Curt Glaser was at the peak of his career as director of the Kunstbibliothek in Berlin. Even as a student, he had already been active as an art critic and had written countless exhibition reviews. From 1909 to 1924, he had been in charge of the collection of modern and contemporary graphic art in the Kupferstichkabinett.

Through contact with many artists, he acquired a great deal of expertise in contemporary art. In addition, he authored numerous scholarly books on topics ranging from Hans Holbein the Elder to Edvard Munch and the art history of East Asia. Glaser was also an innovator in his role as director of the Kunstbibliothek. For instance, he included contemporary photography in the collection and the exhibition program.

### 3 The Private Collection

Curt and Elsa Glaser built up an extensive and diverse collection together. In their spacious apartment in Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse, the couple lived among stylish furniture, art and books. Old masters were as much a part of the collection as East Asian, Arabic or African art.

The collection evolved with the couple's preferences: paintings they had acquired by Vincent van Gogh, Franz Marc or Henri Matisse were later sold again. Modernist drawings and prints, especially expressionism, came to make up the majority of the holdings. These were mostly kept in portfolios. The Glasers particularly appreciated Edvard Munch and Max Beckmann.

### 4 Curt Glaser and Edvard Munch

In 1913 Curt and Elsa Glaser visited Edvard Munch in Norway for the first time. In 1917, Glaser published the first German monograph on the artist. The two developed a long friendship and their letters contain valuable depictions of Glaser's eventful life.

It was thanks to Glaser's mediation that the first major exhibition of Munch in Switzerland took place at the Kunsthhaus Zürich in 1922. After Glaser's emigration in 1935, Wilhelm Wartmann, then director of the Kunsthhaus, took custody of seven paintings, including five by Munch. *Music on Karl Johan Strasse*, which Curt had donated to the Nationalgalerie in Berlin in memory of Elsa Glaser, came to Zurich in 1939. Over time, Curt and Maria Glaser sold four of the paintings to the Kunsthhaus, whose history is also closely linked to that of Glaser.

## 5 The Emigration

As director of the Kunstbibliothek, Curt Glaser was a prominent fixture of Berlin's cultural life in the early 1930s. Nevertheless, like countless others of Jewish heritage, he was subjected to antisemitic hostility. With the National Socialist seizure of power in early 1933, hostility turned to systematic persecution of Jews. Glaser's professional existence was destroyed by the new Nazi laws. At the start of April 1933 he was placed "on leave" from his post and officially dismissed in September.

As a result, that same spring he was also forced to give up his large apartment in Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse. The building was then used from that point on as the headquarters of the Geheimen Sicherheitspolizei [Secret Security Police].

In May 1933 Glaser sold a large part of his possessions in two extensive auctions. At the end of May he married his second wife Maria Milch. The couple emigrated to Switzerland and managed to ship 14 moving crates and a small part of the collection there. For the next eight years they lived in Ticino, and at times in Florence. Their daughter Eva was born in 1935 and was later placed in the "Sonnenhof," an anthroposophically run home for children with disabilities located in Arlesheim near Basel.

In 1941 Curt and Maria Glaser went into exile to New York via Havana. Unfortunately, Glaser was unable to regain a professional foothold either in Switzerland or in America. He died in November of 1943, the same year as Eva, who had remained in Arlesheim. Glaser's widow Maria married Ernst (Ernest) Ash and lived in New York until her death in 1981.



## 6 The Fate of the Artworks

The auctions in May 1933 dissolved the enormous art collection of Curt and Elsa Glaser. The present owners are known only for a very few works. The two hundred drawings and prints that the Kunstmuseum Basel bought at auction for the Kupferstichkabinett constitute the largest known holdings at a single location.

Museums in different countries have handled the works from the Glaser collection in various ways. The circumstances of the auction have not been assessed uniformly. German museums have acknowledged Glaser's persecution. They have returned the works to the community of heirs and have bought some of them back again.

The works that Glaser kept until his death took a different path. For instance, the drawings he took with him to New York were bequeathed to the Morgan Library & Museum by Maria Glaser in 1981.

# Curt Glaser

<b>May 29, 1879</b>	Born in Leipzig; grew up in Berlin
<b>1897</b>	Graduates from high school and begins medical studies
<b>1902</b>	Receives medical degree in Munich and begins art history studies
<b>1903</b>	Marries his cousin Elsa Kolker (1878–1932) from Breslau
<b>1907</b>	Receives doctorate in art history under Heinrich Wölfflin in Berlin
<b>1909–1920</b>	Works as a research aid and assistant at the Kupferstichkabinett Berlin
<b>1914–1917</b>	Volunteers for military service; is deployed to the Berlin military hospital; later a military doctor on the front in Belgium
<b>1920</b>	Promotion to curator at the Kupferstichkabinett Berlin
<b>1924</b>	Named director of the Kunstbibliothek in Berlin
<b>July 10, 1932</b>	Elsa Glaser dies at the age of 54
<b>April 7, 1933</b>	Placed “on leave” by the National Socialists because of his Jewish origins; officially dismissed in September
<b>May 9, 1933</b>	Glaser puts majority of his household goods and artworks up for auction at the International Art and Auction House Berlin
<b>May 18/19, 1933</b>	Glaser sells the majority of his art collection at the auction house Max Perl in Berlin
<b>May 30, 1933</b>	Marries Maria Milch (1901–1981)
<b>June/July 1933</b>	The couple emigrates and initially stays in Paris
<b>Aug. 1933 (?)</b>	Settle down in Ascona, Ticino
<b>July 22, 1935</b>	Their daughter Eva Renate Gertrud is born

**1938** Unsuccessful application for the post of curator of the  
Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel (Kunstmuseum)

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**Feb. 1941** The couple emigrate and travel from Vigo (Spain)  
to Havana (Cuba)

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**May 13, 1941** Arrive and settle in New York

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**Feb. 23, 1943** Eva dies at the "Sonnenhof" in Arlesheim near Basel

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**Nov. 23, 1943** Glaser dies after a long illness in Lake Placid, New York

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Visit also the exhibition in the Hauptbau:

### **Galop charivarique**

Caricatures by Daumier from the Collection  
of Curt and Elsa Glaser  
Hauptbau, Grafikkabinette  
22.10.2022–05.02.2023

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### **Öffnungszeiten / Opening Hours / Heures d'ouverture**

Di–So 10–18 Uhr / Tue–Sun 10 a.m.–6 p.m. / Mar–Dim 10h–18h  
Mi 10–20 Uhr / Wed 10 a.m.–8 p.m. / Mer 10h–20h  
Sonderöffnungszeiten / Special opening hours /  
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Toutes les expositions & collection: CHF 26, 13, 8

Sammlung & *Curt Glaser* / Collection & *Curt Glaser* /  
Collection & *Curt Glaser*: CHF 16, 8/8

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