

kunstmuseum basel

# Pair ings

March 13, 2025



# The Im Obersteg Collection

The Im Obersteg Collection is a private collection started in 1916 that was developed in Basel and Geneva. It has been housed in the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004.

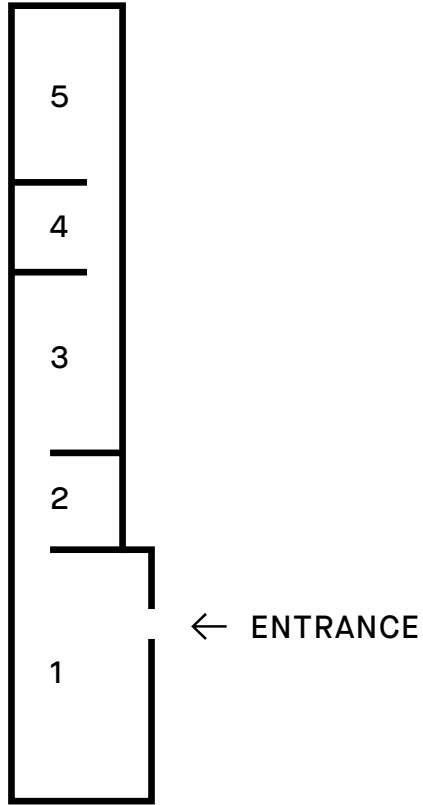
The Basel shipping contractor Karl Im Obersteg (1883–1969) and his son Jürg Im Obersteg (1914–1983), professor of forensic medicine, collected international art of the twentieth century for some seventy years. The core of the important collection, which today comprises around 220 works, can be traced back to Karl's interests. In 1916, he acquired his first painting, by Cuno Amiet. Later this was followed by important works by Marc Chagall, Alexej von Jawlensky, Pablo Picasso, Chaïm Soutine, and others.

Following a sustained preference for representational modernism from the French and Russian cultural sphere, Karl and Jürg Im Obersteg began to open up to new artistic trends after the Second World War. Color-determined abstractions, for instance by Jean-Paul Riopelle, and works by Louis Soutter, Jean Dubuffet, and Antoni Tàpies found their way into the collection.

After Karl Im Obersteg's death, Jürg continued to run his father's company and maintain the art collection. Together with his wife Doris Im Obersteg-Lerch (1931–2015), he was—like his father—surrounded by art and engaged intensively with the works. Expanding the collection, he acquired works by Lyonel Feininger, Emil Nolde, and Marianne von Werefkin, among others.

After Jürg's death, Doris Im Obersteg-Lerch established the Im Obersteg Foundation, which displayed the art collection in a villa in Oberhofen on Lake Thun during the summer months from 1995 to 2002. She then entrusted it to the Kunstmuseum Basel on permanent loan. Thus, the collection has returned to the city of its origin, where it can be accessible to a broad public and stands in dialog with a first-rate public collection.

KUNSTMUSEUM BASEL | HAUPTBAU GROUND FLOOR



# Pair ings

By displaying works of art from the private Im Obersteg Collection side by side with works from the Kunstmuseum Basel's holdings, the *Pairings* exhibition establishes elective affinities that transcend generations and stylistic boundaries. What connects the juxtaposed paintings and sculptures? How do they differ? Do the paired works enrich each other through the dialogue?

The accompanying exhibition booklet brings together short texts by authors who have engaged with the works from different perspectives. Visitors can also use headphones to hear compositions performed by local young musicians. The pairings are regularly broken up and rehung to involve the exhibited works in other dialogues. The rendez-vous between the two collections develops into a slowly evolving choreography.

**ROOM 1**

**JEAN-PAUL RIOPELLE (1923–2002)**

*Composition*, 1951

Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1451

Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

**WALTER BODMER (1903–1973)**

*Draht- und Metallplastik* (Wire and Metal Sculpture), 1955

Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1978.53

Gift of Margy Bodmer, Basel 1978

*Metallplastik* (Metal Sculpture), 1965–1966

Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1978.54

Gift of Margy Bodmer, Basel 1978

**Ilma Rakusa** is an author, translator, and literary critic;  
she lives in Zurich.

## There Is No Such Thing as Standing Still

Movement as a primal impulse. There is no such thing as standing still. Everything is in a whirl in Jean-Paul Riopelle's *Composition*, made of sprays and dabs and streams and lines of color, a magma that forms rhythms and structures. Random or controlled by hand? The explosive intensity of the process captured here is more like a natural event. Something bursts into a thousand pieces, leaving behind splinters and shreds that come together to form what appears as order, which—on closer inspection—is itself made up of fragments and particles. And these particles move. Only here they are lashed down in a snapshot of a moment. Indeed, the picture does not really want to be a picture. The artist's intention is the act of painting, which amounts to an event without intention. It happens. Given enough paints on hand, the Action Painting develops its own dynamic. With or without a brush or palette knife. On whatever painting surface. And draws us into its vortex. We see surfaces and deep structures, networks of lines and blotches of color, we search for paths for the eye to find its way out of the labyrinth of diverse stimuli that arouse us. Our pulse quickens and suddenly we are no longer sure whether what we see is chaos or order, whether concealed behind the *Composition* is an artistic big bang.

Walter Bodmer's figures create a different kind of tension. Dance-like in their gestural character, they too are all movement, measuring out the space by demanding space. The outstretched arms of the female figure appear not only self-confident, but imperative. Here, the I makes its rounds: make way, don't you come too close to me!

There may be good reasons for this. For instance, to ward someone off. And what is going on with this strange figure threatening to plunge a spear-like spike into the belly of the beauty? She backs away a bit, alarmed by so much importunity. What happens next—we don't know. The halted movement only hints at it.

Bodmer works with wire, which suggests movement instead of volume: through staggered outlines and "limbs." The artfully bent wire produces momentum and rhythm. No coincidence—the artist was also a jazz musician. His sculptures are delicate attempts to make wire, iron, and sheet metal vibrate. And already we are swinging along, hesitantly or not.

**ROOM 1**

**EDUARDO CHILLIDA (1924–2002)**

*Música callada (Musique tacite) (Silent Music) I*, 1955

Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1975.11

Purchased in 1975

**ANTONI TÀPIES (1923–2012)**

*Pintura (Painting), no. XLVII*, 1957

Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1551

Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004



**Géraldine Meyer** is curator of the Im Obersteg Foundation as well as of the exhibition *Pairings*.

## Silent Music

A sculpture by Basque artist Eduardo Chillida encounters an abstract piece by Catalan artist Antoni Tàpies. Both works were created in the 1950s, in the shadow of the Second World War and the Franco dictatorship in Spain.

The surface of the gray wall bears traces of a deliberate attack. Gouges, the result of violent abrasions and impacts, seem to have scraped open the metallic ground; in its gesture, the painting style is tantamount to physical violence. Antoni Tàpies was inspired in Paris by representatives of the *informel* movement. Here, he associates the image, free of the representation of any object, with the oppressive reality of his Catalan homeland.

*Música callada* (*Musique tacite*) can be translated as “silent” or “soundless music.” Eduardo Chillida's title refers to one of the most famous Spanish poems, “Cántico Espiritual” by the mystic San Juan de la Cruz (1542–1591), who produced the “spiritual song” in a bleak prison cell. Chillida translates the silent poetry into an abstract iron sculpture. To create the work, he used parts of a multi-pronged iron tool common in agriculture in his Basque hometown of Hernani. The form of the sculpture oscillates between an expansive, intricate structure and an instrument with dangerously sharp points and edges. When the two works are placed side by side, the impression arises that the iron prongs caused the injuries in Tàpies's painting.

Both works are lyrical creations that refuse to take a clear political stance. Both seem marked inherently by the experience of violence; both manifest melancholy and vulnerability. Social and political upheavals take their toll. In remembrance of the victims of war on Spanish soil, all music is silenced.

**ROOM 1**

**RAOUL DUFY (1877–1953)**

*La sirène* (Siren), ca. 1925–27

Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1181

Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

**RAOUL DUFY (1877–1953)**

*Trouville-Dauville, les jetees* (Jetties at Trouville-Dauville), 1929

Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1960.17

Bequest of Dr. h.c. Richard Doetsch-Benziger, Basel, 1960

**Marco Schneider** is a member of the visitor services team at the Kunstmuseum Basel.

## Dream and Awakening

The port of Trouville-Deauville awakens in me a longing for nature, fresh air, the sea, warmth, and carefree times. I gaze into the vastness of the painted seascape as if through a window. The imprecise depiction of the scene emboldens me to give free rein to my own imagination and leave everyday life behind me. As a staff member on the visitor services team at the Kunstmuseum Basel, I am familiar with many masterpieces. I look at them regularly, often for hours, and know every detail. The two paintings by Raoul Dufy, on the other hand, are rarely seen. For me, they are discoveries that invite one to daydream.

The picture opposite, *La sirène*, raises questions: The title reveals that it may be a mermaid (siren), but she looks human-like. The artist seems to have transported a scene from Greek mythology into the present. I once read that sirens are known to lure passing sailors with their beguiling song and then kill them. In the background of the picture, I see two ships approaching the beautiful woman. I am filled with unease and suddenly realize that, as the viewer, I am standing closest to the dangerous siren.

The Norman harbor view enticed me into dreaming. The siren in the second work wakes me up again and warns me to take care not to overlook impending dangers. Ordinary life goes on.

**ROOM 1**

**ROBERT GENIN (1884–1943)**

*Balinesin* (Balinese Girl) II, ca. 1926

Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1208

Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

**THEO MEIER (called Meier aus Bali) (1908–1982)**

*Kopf einer Balinesin* (Head of a Balinese Woman), 1938

Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1978.116

Legat Dr. August Meyer, Basel 1977

## I See Her as if She Were Glass

They say it is the highest honor to be plucked from one's youth this way—to be singled out, molded, made more special; indeed, to put one's stamp on time itself. I was all of five, and yet they—my father, the *raja*, the *pedanda*<sup>1</sup> had seen all they needed to see: how agile I was, and how oblivious to the magic I could conjure within the span of my little hands. Being men, they had no use for that thing called ego, other than their own, and I had none to offer.

Tenderly they sent me off to meet my destiny, and through the rooms and corridors of the temple I grew in my eyes, my feet, my fingers what I missed in my childhood—my mother, my siblings, my home—and as I held them there I learned a new language. With a mere flick of my wrist I am able to summon the most dastardly of demons and glue them to their seats. Command the *gamelan*<sup>2</sup> to make music out of the beat beneath my feet. Occasionally someone in the audience might yell how pretty I am even with my headdress askew, and I would just burn him down with my gaze.

Lately however, I have come to covet the sight of a girl who comes to our temple to help us welcome guests. She's no dancer, but I am felled by her proud unfettered womanliness. I see her as if she were glass. The poise with which she holds her head, so different from mine. The coral hair a besotted painter might fan into a flame, the downcast gaze that apologizes for nothing, not even for wearing those hideous studs that make her ears look like mangoes.

I am envious of the stillness of her movements, of her being, as if a gift from the gods bestowed only to the unchosen. Is there is a hint of sorrow in her eyes—has she perhaps love to give but nowhere to go? I might only have dreamed it. What is greatness if you are not allowed the grace of your own making.

There are many kinds of desire, and I wonder if there is between my eternal motion and her ethereal worldliness a place where we can meet in full, where the men are not.

<sup>1</sup> In Indonesia, a *raja* is a ruler, prince or king. *Pedanda* is the name for a Balinese Hindu priest.

<sup>2</sup> In Indonesia, *gamelan* refers to a musical ensemble, usually with traditional musical instruments.

**ROOM 1**

**ANTONI CLAVÉ (1913–2005)**

*Cristo de Alba de Tormes*, 1954

Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1101

Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

**RÉMY ZAUGG (1943–2005)**

*VOIR MORT*, 1989

*Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1993.5, gift of the Verein*

*Schule und Elternhaus Schweiz (Swiss Schools and Families Association), 1993*

**Hans Furer** is an art collector and the managing director of the Im Obersteg Foundation.

## Seeing Death—A History of Basel Images

In 1989, the Swiss conceptual artist Rémy Zaugg mounted an exhibition at the Mai 36 Gallery in Lucerne entitled *VOIR MORT*. It showed twenty-eight identical pictures side by side. Each picture was painted by hand. On our visit to the exhibition, my wife and I experienced both fascination and an admixture of disappointment. Why twenty-eight identical paintings in one exhibition? Isn't that boring? Were these supposed to be twenty-eight dead people (MORT) or twenty-eight sighted people (VOIR)?

The Spanish artist Antoni Clavé was thirty years younger than the collector Karl Im Obersteg and one year older than the collector's son Jürg. Of the fifteen works by Clavé in the Im Obersteg collection, all were acquired by the father Karl, with one exception: *Christo de Alba de Tormes*. This one painting was acquired by his son Jürg in Barcelona in 1955. Why this painting in particular?

Jürg Im Obersteg was head of the Institute of Forensic Medicine at the University of Basel and had the task of examining dead people. This may have been why the work especially appealed to him, but it was probably not the only reason. There was something serious about the character of the Im Obersteg Collection even back then: the portraits of Jews by Marc Chagall, the *Absinthe Drinker* by Pablo Picasso, and the *Meditations* by Alexej von Jawlensky are not cheerful pictures. I am certain that Jürg was motivated to buy the painting in part because of this seriousness, on the one hand, and also because of its connection to the *Dead Christ* by Hans Holbein the Younger, which is a work of such great significance for the Kunstmuseum Basel.

Zaugg knew the Kunstmuseum Basel like the back of his hand, and the paintings of Holbein the Younger inspired him in his own work. But the Basel culture of the dance of death, the seriousness of the Basel carnival, and the city's pharmaceutical research were also more or less part of the artist's DNA. While Jürg and Karl Im Obersteg "collected" death with their somber selection of works, Zaugg engaged with it through painting.

As I write this, I realize how often depictions of death can be found in Basel's art and culture. If, like me, you have lived in Basel all your life and have internalized the culture of this city, you learn that death is part of life.

**ROOM 2**

**GUSTAVE SINGIER (1909–1984)**

*Untitled*, 1956

Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1512

Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

**JOAN MIRÓ (1893–1983)**

*Le gentleman* (The Gentleman), 1924

Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1968.84

Gift of Marguerite Arp-Hagenbach, 1968



Music

## **ERIK SATIE (1866–1925)**

*La Diva de l'Empire*, 1904

Musicians

**Laurie Hamiche Smirnov** is a French musician who began her musical studies as a violinist and is now a voice student at the Basel Music Academy. She performs regularly as a soloist and works as a PR manager for MusikSpitex.

The pianist **Alik Balagozyan** comes from Belarus. He studied piano in Minsk and then at the Basel Music Academy, where he graduated with a master's degree in performance. He performs as both a soloist and a chamber music player. He was awarded the Kiefer Hablitzel Prize in 2023.

**ROOM 2**

**GUSTAVE SINGIER (1909–1984)**

Untitled, 1951

Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1511

Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

**CÉCILE HUMMEL (\*1962)**

*Schlittschuhläuferin* (Ice Skater), 2009

Kunstmuseum Basel, Department of Prints and Drawings,

Inv. 2014.51

Purchased with funds from the Stiftung für die Graphische Kunst in der Schweiz (Foundation for the Graphic Arts in Switzerland), 2014

Music

**YANN TIERSEN (\*1970)**

*Valse de la Noyée, 1997*

Musician

**Philipp Yavorskyi** is a Ukrainian accordionist. He recently received his master's degree in Bratislava, Slovakia after completing studies in Ukraine and then spending a year as an exchange student in the Netherlands through the Erasmus Program.

## Who is “Grenouille,” Suzanne?

### I

She steps into the tub with a great big step, as if she has to cross a threshold. The tub is big enough that the water makes a sloshing sound when she sinks her body into it. Big enough to make small waves when she paddles with her feet or slaps the water with her hand. Even big enough to soon envelop her completely; her torso, her legs, her arms, her head, so that in the end all of her thoughts circle down the drain.

*(The washerwoman’s hands afterwards, those watery, whitish wrinkles, do they remind you, Suzanne, of your mother, who was a washerwoman?)*

### II

And from what body of water does this stone bather emerge? From the Rhine or the river Wiese? From Lake Maggiore? More likely from the pool of a bathing establishment, perhaps at the Margrethen pool in Basel, which opened in 1903?

She holds her arms protectively around her chest and stomach to shield herself from prying eyes or a cool breeze. Tackles the transition back to land without haste. As if she were still submerged under water, she hears the children’s laughter from afar, the chatter of the other women, the call of the swallows, her own pulse. Feels for the first time in weeks quite clearly that she too is alive, not just the athletic dancers on the diving platforms, who plunge into the pool swift as an arrow.

The drops of water trickle down her calves. How differently her heart is beating now, how pleasantly cool her circulation runs. So still that she is almost dizzy.

III

*But the frog, Suzanne: what is this title all about? Is "La Grenouille" the nickname of the bather, the term of endearment of the one for the other? Frog because of the spread thighs, because of the jumping power and the hibernation?*

*You painted with as much defiance as the defiance that it takes to live, you said once.*

*And painted as many nudes as you wanted, of women as well as men, without a care for the prevailing taboos.*

IV

One of the bathers stands entranced under a swimming cap.  
The other wears nothing but her knotted hair.

**SUZANNE VALADON (1865–1938)**

*La grenouille* (Frog), 1910

Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1591

Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

**CARL BURCKHARDT (1878–1923)**

*Bather*, 1917

Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. P 40

Purchased through the Birmann-Fonds in 1917

## ROOM 3

### **PABLO PICASSO (1881–1973)**

*Femme dans la loge* (Woman in the Loge)

(*verso: Buveuse d'absinthe* [The Absinthe Drinker]), 1901

Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1411

Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

### **PIERRE-AUGUSTE RENOIR (1841–1919)**

*Femme dans un jardin* (*La femme à la mouette*)

(*Woman in a Garden* [Woman with a Seagull Hat]), 1868

Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1988.22

Acquired with a special loan from the Basel government and numerous private contributions in 1988

**Marius Glaser** is a retired fine arts teacher  
at the Olten Cantonal School.

## Brushstrokes that Caress, Whip, and Cover

In 1868, Auguste Renoir painted a picture of his twenty-year-old lover. Lise Tréhot is seated elegantly in an armchair, wearing a dark, blue-violet Parisian promenade dress and resting her left hand on a small table. In her right, she holds a light-colored glove. The red coral and gold earrings and the blue-grey seagull hat are striking. Renoir has depicted these fashionable details with precision, and they stand out particularly well against the dark foliage in the background, which is rendered in an animated painterly style.

In contrast, Pablo Picasso's *Femme dans la loge* has a wild and expressive effect. Picasso himself was twenty years old when he created the portrait of the seated lady with bright red-painted lips and a lavish hat. Her severely drawn face appears mask-like and withdrawn. Picasso has only roughly sketched the surroundings with energetic, even violent brushstrokes in blue, yellow, and a few shades of red. The face is clearly recognizable, while in other places the work appears almost abstract, like a painterly experiment.

The *Buveuse d'absinthe* on the reverse side of Picasso's painting forms a stark contrast to this wild application of paint. The colors are muted and applied more flatly; the composition appears calmer. The woman's gaze seems to be directed inwards, her crossed arms signaling distance. This melancholy picture depicts the portrait of an absinthe drinker, an unknown woman on the margins of society in Paris during the Belle Époque.

Thanks to their different coloration and application of paint, the three portraits of Parisian women also convey different content in a temporal context. To my mind, the juxtaposition makes it clear that the design and painting style of a work of art can convey meaning as powerfully as its motif.

**ROOM 3**

**NIKLAUS STOECKLIN (1896–1982)**

*Sarg-Schreinerei* (Coffin-Maker's Shop), 1919

Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1631

Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

**HANS HOLBEIN THE YOUNGER (ca. 1497/98–1543)**

*Two Skulls in a Window Alcove*, ca. 1520

Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. 299

Amerbach-Kabinett 1662

Music

**ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810–1856)**

*Dichterliebe* op. 48, song cycle based

on poems by Heinrich Heine

no. 16 *Die alten bösen Lieder*

Musicians

**Duo Gygli-Domański:** The two musicians have been performing as a duo since 2019.

**Felix Gygli** (baritone) is the winner of the 2023 Kathleen Ferrier Award and a member of the International Opera Studio at the Zurich Opera House. **Tomasz Domański** is a pianist with a focus on lieder accompaniment and correpetition.



## Under the Window Cross

The skulls: We're lying here in the window. As if on display. People are frightened when they see us. Their own mortality horrifies them. "What you are, we were. What we are, you will become!"

The coffin: I also feel them shuddering when the people walk past me. The smaller I am, the more terrified they are. Nothing gets to them so much as a child's coffin. But after all, one is old enough to die at any age.

The skulls: We were painted in the sixteenth century. A century of upheaval. Martin Luther sharpens his pen and shakes the world with his words. Magellan sails around it. The Ottoman Empire rises to become a world power. They all reach for the world and have to let it go again.

The coffin: As for me, I was painted in 1919. What sort of time was that? A World War fought with modern means left millions dead. Nothing is as it was. Centers of power shift. The world is changing breathlessly. Technological progress and genocide reveal mankind in all its contradictions.

The skulls: The more they suppress it, the more mercilessly it returns, death. Look at us, who put us here, in this window, so everyone can see us? And do they also see the cross above us? What do they see when they see the cross?

The coffin: They see the symbol of the "Christian West," reduced to a window cross. They see the cross in the newspaper: someone has died. They also look with horror upon the long history of death in Europe, at the misuse of the cross as a military promise of victory: "Under this sign you shall conquer!"

The skulls: And they forget again. The brain we harbor is too weak to retain the memory. That is why we are hollow. Hollow are their assurances. "Never again!" they say, and carve it in stone. But stone is patient and memory only lasts for three generations at most. Then everything starts all over again.

Coffin and skull: "What a wretched human I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal coil?"

**ROOM 3**

**MAURICE DE VLAMINCK (1876–1958)**

*Côte de mer* (Sea Coast), c. 1932

Oil on canvas

Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1602

Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

**LEIKO IKEMURA (\*1951)**

*Ur*, 1992

Bronze

Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 2019.7

Gift of Catherine and Bernard Dreyfus Soguel, 2019

**Undine Stabrey** is an archaeologist and historian of science.  
She works as a writer and editor in Basel and Zurich.

## Ur Sea Being The Theft of Seeing: Four Pairings

Water makes up some seventy percent of the earth's surface. Seas, oceans, an animated blue-white mass moving skyward—as in Maurice de Vlaminck's painting of the sea. Much of the earth appears to us like this: as a surface. Blue/blue-grey, white spray, dynamic water. Transitions everywhere. And somewhere between earth and sky, in the domain of the sea—Leiko Ikemura's primordial beings (*Urwesen*). One of which stands before you, or rather takes up residence in your eye as a paper flatness, together with the edge of the sea by Maurice de Vlaminck. Primordial beings and primordial sea: first pairing.

In the wild sea, beings often grasp the seas—which are themselves primordial beings—as forms that are both drop-shaped and yet sharp-edged. Just as stones at the edge of the sea are “washed” by water to form channels, so too is the primordial being. Its openings are permeated by water, by the movements of time/the weather, of Vlaminck's essence of the sea. Sea space and seeing space: second pairing.

Sharp-edged organic forms such as plant leaves or horseshoe crabs—such as the head of Ikemura's primordial being; beings of a time entirely without categories such as plants and animals or sea and time. Both Vlaminck's sea and Ikemura's beings, sea space and seeing space, are interwoven here, each a part of the fixed worlds of art: the sea affixed on the wall, the temporal form on a pedestal. The theft of seeing and situated being—artistic thinking and understanding of interior space: third pairing.

From the perspective of digitalization, of current stuff like video or virtual reality art, both works seem archaic. No glow, no electromagnetic state: In the view of digital object worlds, the space-time materializations of 1932 (Vlaminck's transitions between sky and water) and 1992 (Ikemura's temporal depth) are as if from another world—when objects/art were mostly made and grasped by human hands. Art/historicization—the era of knowledge and creation: fourth pairing.

**ROOM 4**

**PABLO PICASSO (1881–1973)**

*La guenon et son petit* (Baboon and Young), 1951

Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1414

Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

**ROSEMARIE TROCKEL (\*1952)**

*Untitled*, 1984

Kunstmuseum Basel, Department of Prints and Drawings,

Inv. 1991.220

Gift of Dr. Ernst Vischer, Basel, 1991

**ROSEMARIE TROCKEL (\*1952)**

*Untitled*, 1984

Kunstmuseum Basel, Department of Prints and Drawings,

Inv. 1997.419

Purchased with funds from the Max Geldner-Stiftung, 1997

## Human Animals

People like to make images of practically everything: of themselves and other creatures, buildings or nature. They employ various techniques and dictate the perspectives, which they have learned to use to further their own interests. The ongoing exploration of this visual heritage reveals gaps, losses, and continuities. The tradition of artistic images includes inventions and formats that relentlessly resist disambiguation or undermine totalizing, destructive visual regimes. In this process, animals play roles that have been assigned to them by humans.

What would change if—as Rosemarie Trockel put it in one of her artist books in 1993—“every animal is a female artist?” It would reveal the existence of a hitherto unconsidered (cultural) heritage. Are people qualified to harness this heritage? Due to the history of their civilization, including the production of animal images, they would initially be excluded. Artists would also have to prove their competence anew. Especially those who have used the topos of the “ape as painter” in a caricaturing and self-aggrandizing way. In Pablo Picasso’s case, one would need to reevaluate an entire portfolio. Apes appear in his works from 1905 onwards, and a baboon called Monina belonged for a time to the studio community. Picasso also owned works by Congo (1954–1964)—a monkey whom the behavioral scientist Desmond Morris exhibited at the London Zoo in the act of painting. Additionally, we should add to the list the sculpture *La guenon et son petit*, in which Picasso assembled his son Claude’s toy cars, fired ceramics, car springs, wood, metal, and plaster into a collage of materials.

What criteria would people need to fulfill to be able to judge art by animals? One was identified in 1997 by Rosemarie Trockel and Carsten Höller in the context of their project *A House for Pigs and People* for documenta X in Kassel: to recognize that their supremacy over other living beings is based on a cluster of custodial authorities, very few of which can be maintained.

Over a decade earlier, Trockel had tried her own hand at drawing monkeys in a series. For the supports, she used the backs of posters and often acidic writing paper, which discolors when exposed to light. Some sections consist of high-gloss spray paint, others appear matte, revealing brushstrokes and traces of drying. The large formats, executed as half and three-quarter portraits, like head studies, couple emotional and mental states and gestures with hybrid bodies. In a manner at once subtle and resolute, these works subvert the mantra of the evolutionary progress of patriarchal order.

**ROOM 4**

**JEAN DUBUFFET (1901–1985)**

*Effigie rocher fruiteux* (Effigy of a Fruitbearing Rock), 1958

Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1171

Deposited with the Kunstmuseum Basel in 2004

**JEAN DUBUFFET (1901–1985)**

*Le crapadeur* (The toad), 1959

Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1964.11

Gift of Werner Schenk, 1964

**Maira van Dam** is twelve years old and attends  
the first secondary school in Binningen.

## Stony Beings

When I see the artworks next to each other, I think of people. People, like works of art, are different, no two are alike and yet they all have things in common. Two works of art, created by the same artist, with different materials—one seems happier, friendlier than the other, is rounder and looks more homey, perhaps it lives in a big family. The other work is bonier, sadder or more wistful, older and lonelier. But you can't overlook the similarities either. Both have something stony, craggy, both are missing something if you follow their gaze; they are not angular, and both are unique.

If I wanted to meet them, I would look for them in stony valleys and caves. Maybe there would be more of them too? But they could also live in other places, because they are not really made of stone. One guy is made of paint on canvas, the other of papier-mâché. But who says these creatures are male anyway? Perhaps there is no way of knowing because they are extinct? Is that why they look so distressed?

I would like to ask them how they are doing and what they need. Of course, I would be unsettled if I actually met them, but actually I don't think they would do anyone any harm. But you can't really know that. People know nothing about many things. You don't have to know everything to do something special though. Art knows no boundaries, anything is possible. It doesn't just show what you already know. Artists can create something new, mysterious, and unknown. And that is exactly the case with these two works.

**ROOM 5**

**MARIANNE VON WEREFKIN (1860–1938)**

*Gens qui passent* (People Passing Through), c. 1910

Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1611

Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

**RAOUL DUFY (1877–1953)**

*Farm Landscape*, undated

Kunstmuseum Basel, Department of Prints and Drawings,

Inv. 1940.23

Purchased in 1940



## Images as Sources

Historians generally have a rather ambivalent relationship with the works of painters and writers. Novels and paintings, after all, rarely offer us reliable sources for reconstructing and interpreting historical events and processes. While we often prefer to rely on letters, minutes and reports, artworks sometimes prompt us more compellingly than any of these to reflect on the subjects they depict and the time in which they were produced. This is particularly true of *Gens qui passent* by Marianne von Werefkin and *Farm Landscape* by Raoul Dufy.

*Gens qui passent* is also the name of the French version of Max Haufler's 1942 film *Menschen, die vorüberziehen* (People Passing Through), which critics perceived primarily as an encounter between a settled peasantry and a traveling group of artists. Whether this interpretation does justice to Haufler's intentions is a question for another day. More relevant here is that Werefkin's painting of the same name radically defies such a reductionist view. For we do not know the status of the people and animals depicted in the picture. Do they belong to an itinerant group? Or are they part of a community that is on the move due to the seasonality of all agricultural production? Moreover, the image reminds us that entire segments of the rural population can also be forced to move around due to environmental disasters or social conflicts, as documented, for instance, in photographs taken in the USA in the 1930s and '40s by Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein.

Dufy's *Farm Landscape* appears similarly ambiguous, thereby providing food for thought. The image shows us not just people doing work, but also relying on the help of combustion engines. But unlike the nourishment for humans and their livestock, the coal that fuels the combustion engine has not been produced in the biosphere. It can therefore only be consumed, not reproduced, as the fossil energy supply of the combustion engine comes from the lithosphere in the Earth's interior—the reserves on which industrialized societies have relied since the nineteenth century.

**ROOM 5**

**KIKI DE MONTPARNASSE (ALICE ERNESTINE PRIN) (1901–1953)**

*Les lavandières* (The Washerwomen), 1927

Oil and pencil on canvas

Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1291

Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

**BORIS MIKHAILOV (\*1938)**

*Untitled*, from the series *Yesterday's Sandwich*, 1968–1975/

photo print 2002

Color photograph; ed. 2/5

Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 2012.7

Purchased with a contribution from the Verein der Freunde  
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2012

## Everyday Life

Why are certain scenes from everyday life immortalized in works of art, while others go unnoticed? How do artists choose the moments to which they devote their attention? Is it chance? Formative experiences? Or the *zeitgeist*?

Kiki de Montparnasse and Boris Mikhailov turned their attention to scenes of everyday life and lent them enduring meaning through their works. Mikhailov's work immediately transports me back to my childhood, as if playing back scraps of memory that are superimposed on one another like transparencies. I find myself in my faceless hometown in eastern Ukraine again. The residents would hang all their laundry out to dry in the courtyard, so we would see not only our neighbors' sheets and clothes, but also their underwear. In winter, all the things would freeze, and we would bring them with cold hands into the house, accompanied by the fresh smell of winter.

In the summer, we would sneak out of the yard while our parents were at work. We would run to the railroad and walk along the tracks to the river. Whenever a train came, we would jump into the thorn bushes along the edge and nosh on the sloeberries.

In Mikhailov's photo, the laundry blocks the tracks, as if everyday life were blocking the way forward. The tracks, after all, seem to be still in use. I wonder: will people be able to take their laundry down in time, or will the train rush through and tear up the line along with any daily routine?

Now we bypass the hanging laundry and follow the rails to the river in Kiki de Montparnasse's painting, immersing ourselves in another time, winding it back like a thread on a spool. We see the women who are washing these clothes—women going about their familiar work. They hang the laundry on the same line, the thread of time that carries this scene into the present and makes it accessible to us in the here and now, taking away its initial banality. The river flows on, carrying with it the stains that the women have so diligently washed out.

The rails in Mikhailov's photograph resemble a stream that transports us from one point to another, from one time to another. Will everyday life impede the flight forward or will speed and progress triumph? Or will the train break through the scene in *Les Lavandières*, tearing through the line and the freshly washed laundry? Mikhailov leaves the question open, just as he leaves his photograph untitled.

**ROOM 5**

**KURT SELIGMANN (1900–1962)**

*La ronde* (Round Dance), 1961

Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1492

Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

**HANS ARP (1886–1966)**

*Scène végétative (Ronde de danseuses)* (Vegetal Scene  
[Round Dance]), 1950

Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1968.39

Gift of Marguerite Arp-Hagenbach, 1968

## Dancing Plague

On Sunday, July 14, 1518, a hot and humid summer day, a great dance broke out in the streets of Strasbourg for no apparent reason. “The progenitor of this dance was a woman named Troffea, an obstinate, fickle, mad creature who sought to vex everyone, above all her dear husband, with her foolishness.” She begins with slow movements, then turns faster and faster. The dance infects other women and men, they dance in groups or alone in the squares, through streets and alleyways. An involuntary frenzy of dance takes hold of more and more people; a crowd of hundreds spin to the music, for now musicians have been called in. They dance with deliberation, and then with increasing abandon—a constant, rhythmic circling.

“Then there arose a dancing throng of young and old folk who did dance all day and night till they collapsed, so that o’er a hundred at once danced in Strasbourg. [. . .] Many didst dance themselves to death.” The individual people flow into one another and increasingly merge into a single moving body that turns, twists, and reforms itself in an incessant cycle until individual dancers fall dead out of the mass. Parts come to constitute a whole, just as individual cells form a body that renews itself cyclically until death, when it falls apart again. The fact that death is never really final, since the cells live on in the form of the next generation, is a small consolation.

The endless dance of the people of Strasbourg transforms into an incomprehensible struggle, the pure joy of life becomes a distressing ordeal, conscious cognition tips over into an unconscious tumbling of emotions and uncontrolled movement. Seemingly happy celebration turns into demonic possession and madness. Only red shoes and the worship of St. Vitus bring the hoped-for redemption.

“They sent them then on carts to St. Vitus near Zabern to the holy shrine; thereupon were they given crosses and red shoes and a mass was utter’d o’er them. They didst make crosses on the tops and bottoms of their shoes with chrism and sprinkle them with holy water in the name of St. Vitus, which helped almost all of them.”

In Strasbourg, so the historical sources tell us, order was restored through the intervention of St. Vitus. But in art, the spirits of the dance survive to this day.

Source: Melissa Solothurnmann, *Bis zum Umfallen. Die Tanzwut von Strassburg im Jahr 1518* [Till They Collapse: The Dancing Plague of Strasbourg in 1518],

[www.geschichteimpuls.ch/artikel/bis-zum-umfallen](http://www.geschichteimpuls.ch/artikel/bis-zum-umfallen) (4.1.2025)

English article to the topic: Ned Pennant-Rea, *The Dancing Plague of 1518*,

[www.publicdomainreview.org/essay/the-dancing-plague-of-1518/](http://www.publicdomainreview.org/essay/the-dancing-plague-of-1518/)

**ROOM 5**

**KURT SELIGMANN (1900–1962)**

*Menuett* (Minuet), 1961

Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1491

Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

**MAX ERNST (1891–1976)**

*La grande forêt* (The Great Forest), 1927

Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. 1580

Purchased with support from Dr. Emanuel Hoffmann-Stehlin, 1932

Music

**KURT SCHWITTERS (1887–1943)**

*Die Ursonate* (a Dadaist sound poem in four movements), 1932

Musician

**Corentin Marillier** is a percussionist, performer, and composer whose musical work lies at the intersection between contemporary classical and experimental music.

He is the artistic co-director of the Geneva-based collective Eklekto.

**Shamsuddin Naseri** is twenty years old. He comes from Kunduz, Afghanistan and has been living in Basel for two years. He soon will be starting an apprenticeship at the Bürgerspital Basel.

## A Bird in the Darkness, Dancers in the Light

Max Ernst's painting feels dark and tragic: three burnt-up mountains and charred trees in the stillness of a cold night. On the right side of the image, a small bird sits alone, looking out over the destroyed landscape. I imagine that the little bird has flown home and finds nothing there anymore—no nest, no family, no home. The image reminds me of people in Afghanistan who returned from the war to find their homes in ruins, their families gone. The moon in the background is large and cold. Its light shines on the death that dominates the night. The colors in the picture are dark. Perhaps someone burned the trees deliberately? The painting shows the sad reality of many people in war zones.

The drawing by Kurt Seligmann is completely different. It shows people dancing. I think there are three women and one man. They move with freedom and ease, full of joy and passion. The dance seems almost like a dream, something unreal taking place in a world full of possibilities. The dancers enjoy the night and are not fearful. They remind me of life in Europe. In Afghanistan, a dance like this would be unthinkable. Due to the religious and social rules, men and women are not allowed to dance together. Music and dancing are forbidden in my home country. Bare legs, like you can see in the picture, are not allowed either. But here the dance demonstrates freedom. Freedom to move, to show emotions, and to live without shame or fear of punishment.

These two pictures show how different life can be in the world. In one place, the night brings destruction and grief. In another, it brings joy and freedom. The night is the same, but it reveals two completely different realities. Sometimes I ask myself which of these worlds I belong to: the dark world of the bird or the free world of the dancers? And which world do I dream of?

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Selection of the musical contributions and the musicians for the exhibition:  
**Isabel Heusser**, artistic and administrative director of the FYM.

**FOR  
YOUNG  
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