

kunstmuseum basel

**Sophie
Taeuber-Arp**
Living
Abstraction

Biography

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Swiss artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp created a rich and diverse oeuvre bridging the divide between applied and fine arts. Her face will be familiar to most people in Switzerland, where it appeared on the 50-franc note from 1995 until 2016. This exhibition, which was organized in cooperation with the Museum of Modern Art, New York (Anne Umland, Walburga Krupp), and Tate Modern, London (Natalia Sidlina), seeks to introduce broad international audiences to a leading pioneer of abstraction.

Davos and Trogen 1889–1908

Early years

Sophie Taeuber is born in Davos on January 19, 1889, the youngest child of the pharmacist Emil Taeuber and his wife Sophie Taeuber-Krüsi [→1]. After her father's death, her mother runs a boardinghouse in Trogen (AR) to provide for the family. She teaches her young daughters various crafts and nurtures the children's creativity.

St. Gallen 1908–1910, Munich 1910–1914

Studying arts and crafts

Aged 18, Taeuber-Arp enrolls as an auditor at the Drawing School for Industry and Commerce in St. Gallen. The town has been a center of the textile and embroidery industries, eastern Switzerland's economic mainstays, since the mid-nineteenth century. After their mother's death in 1908, the sisters Sophie and Erika move to St. Gallen.

In 1910, Taeuber-Arp leaves for Munich to attend the reform-oriented Debschitz School, where women and men study together [→2]. The training she receives is influenced by the ideals of the British Arts-and-Crafts Movement, which underscores the affinities between manual craftsmanship and artistic creation and envisions an alternative to the "soullessness" of industrial production. Before graduating with honors in 1914, Taeuber-Arp spends a semester as a visiting student at the Hamburg School of Applied Arts. Her letters from her

student years include accounts of fancy-dress balls [->3]. Once the First World War breaks out, Taeuber-Arp returns to Switzerland and settles in Zurich, where her sister lives.

Zurich 1914–1928

Teaching and Dada

Politically neutral Switzerland becomes a sanctuary for many artists from all over Europe, making Zurich a center of the avant-garde. Seeing a group exhibition at Galerie Tanner in 1915, Taeuber-Arp meets the artist Hans Arp, her future husband [->4]. She and Arp socialize with the Dadaists, a circle of artists around Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Tristan Tzara, and Marcel Janco who make absurd and paradoxical anti-art to protest traditional bourgeois values and the horrors of war.

Taeuber-Arp studies modern expressive dance at the school founded by Rudolf von Laban. She makes friends with the dancer Mary Wigman and attends a summer course at Monte Verità outside Ascona. In 1917, she dances at the opening of Galerie Dada in Zurich. Her craftwork is shown at design expositions, but also makes its début in a fine-art setting in an exhibition held by the artists' association Das Neue Leben (The New Life) in 1918.

In 1916, Taeuber-Arp is hired to teach in the arts and crafts division of Zurich's Trade School. For the next twelve years, her salary provides her and Hans Arp with a dependable livelihood. The two get married in Pura, Ticino, in 1922, and Taeuber-Arp takes the hyphenated name under which she becomes known. After the end of the First World War, many of the Arps' artist friends in Switzerland return to their home countries, and now they cultivate these contacts by traveling widely. In 1925, for instance, they are in Rome and on the Amalfi Coast, see Naples and Pompeii, and spend time in Paris and Ascona [->5].

Strasbourg 1926–1928

Expansive modernism

Taeuber-Arp regularly visits Strasbourg, where Arp has moved in a bid to obtain French citizenship. The architect Paul Horn hires her to design the interiors of Hotel Hannong and the amusement center Aubette. Her clean lines and abstract geometric formal vocabulary are a challenge to the conventional taste of the time; the public expects ornamentation and sumptuous decoration [→6].

Clamart and Paris 1929–1940

Fine Art

Taeuber-Arp resigns from her teaching post in Zurich in 1929, the year the Great Depression begins. The proceeds from the Aubette commission enable the Arps to buy a piece of land in Clamart outside Paris and build a studio based on plans by Taeuber-Arp herself. A business card from this period mentions furniture and interiors. The functionality of her designs reflects the effort to modernize life in its entirety—an ideal also espoused by the Bauhaus and other European design hubs.

In response to the stir caused in Paris by the rise of Surrealism, artists working in the nonfigurative register band together in the associations Cercle et Carré and Abstraction-Création. Taeuber-Arp is actively involved in both [→7]. Beginning in 1936, she devotes much energy to the magazine *Plastique/Plastic*, which seeks to foster the exchange of ideas between avant-gardes on both sides of the Atlantic. Her fine art speaks a formal language that can be broadly classified as Constructivist and is featured in exhibitions both in France and abroad, including in Switzerland. The single most comprehensive public presentation of her abstract creations during her lifetime is the display of twenty-four of her works in the group exhibition “Konstruktivisten” at Kunsthalle Basel in 1937.

Grasse and Zurich 1940–1943

Escaping occupation and early death

In the spring of 1940, the Arps are among the roughly two million residents of Paris and the Île-de-France who flee the city ahead of the Nazi invaders. Racing toward the south, they catch their breath for a few days staying with the American collector Peggy Guggenheim in Veyrier; in September, they arrive in Grasse, north of Cannes, where they reunite with their artist friends Alberto and Susi Magnelli. Sonia Delaunay-Terk joins them in 1941 [→8]. Food, money, and art supplies are scarce. Taeuber-Arp illustrates a volume of her husband's poetry and produces drawings in colored pencil on paper.

In 1942, their application for visas to travel to the United States is granted, but the Arps decide against leaving Europe. A temporary visa for Switzerland lets them escape the occupation of southern France. In Zurich, Taeuber-Arp moves in with her sister, while Arp stays with the artist Max Bill. On January 13, 1943, Taeuber-Arp decides to spend the night in Bill's guest bedroom. She fails to notice that the wood-burning stove's flue is blocked, and dies of carbon monoxide poisoning in her sleep. She is buried in Höngg (Zurich) on the eve of what would have been her fifty-fourth birthday [→9].

Art and Life.

Motifs of Abstraction

The twentieth century is still young when Sophie Taeuber-Arp decides to study applied arts. It is a time when the prevalence of industrial mass production prompts a newfound appreciation for manual craftsmanship and the beauty of simple materials. She enrolls at the progressive Debschitz School in Munich, where students of both sexes learn together. Its teachers believe that applied and fine arts — the creative design of objects and art created for its own sake — are closely allied.

Decorative floral patterns are in fashion. The motifs with which Taeuber-Arp adorns necklaces, beaded bags, and pillowcases, however, are increasingly abstract. Colorful drawings and gouaches (a water medium) help her develop her ideas. She presents only the finished craftwork to the public, not these design sketches. In a contemporary perspective, they appear as works of — in some instances, radical — abstract art in their own right.

1 Franziska Anner, *The arts and crafts work of women in Switzerland*, 1916

Not unlike the gouaches, the colored-pencil drawings presumably originated as studies in color and composition for applied-art projects and were not intended to be seen as works in their own right. Still, Taeuber-Arp cannot but have been aware of their stunning modernity. In 1937, she has a reproduction of this work included in the book *Circle. International Survey of Constructive Art*, retrospectively designating it as a contribution to the history of abstraction.

2 *Elementary Forms, Vertical-Horizontal Composition*, 1917

Taeuber-Arp began by recording an idea in a gouache and then translated it into cross-stitch embroidery. The composition is animated by daring color combinations and dynamically deformed circles and rectangles. The motifs, like many others in this early phase of her oeuvre, straddle the line between ornament and abstraction. In retrospect, the artist came to consider some of her preparatory sketches as works in their own right, as is evident in her decision to include a reproduction of this gouache in an overview of her oeuvre compiled in 1934.

3 Beaded Bag, 1918

Beaded bags meant to hold small articles of daily use came into use in the eighteenth century. Taeuber-Arp decorates the small satchels with color fields and abstract shapes rather than the floral motifs that were conventional for such accessories. Some of her designs repeat as patterns, while others sprawl over the entire surface. The drawstring along the top edge allowed the user to close the purse and carry it around her wrist. The artist sold artisan craftwork such as this piece through specialized stores and at expositions. They constitute the bulk of her output until the mid-1920s.

4 Triptych. Vertical-Horizontal Composition with Reciprocal Triangles, c. 1918

These three uncommonly large panels appear to have originally served as a folding screen. In a contemporary perspective, they form a triptych (three-part painting). Taeuber-Arp herself initiated this reinterpretation of a piece of applied art as a work of “high abstraction” when she exhibited two of the three segments as paintings in 1939, a deliberate move that undid the division between artisan craftwork and fine art in her oeuvre.

5 Vertikal-horizontale Komposition, 1915/16

Not unlike the gouaches, the colored-pencil drawings presumably originated as studies in color and composition for applied-art projects and were not intended to be seen as works in their own right. Still, Taeuber-Arp cannot but have been aware of their stunning modernity. In 1937, she has a reproduction of this work included in the book *Circle. International Survey of Constructive Art*, retrospectively designating it as a contribution to the history of abstraction.

Room 2

Bodies in Motion. Marionettes and Dada

In 1914, Sophie Taeuber-Arp settles in Zurich. During the First World War, the city in neutral Switzerland becomes a sanctuary for many members of Europe’s artistic avant-gardes. Taeuber-Arp studies modern expressive dance with Rudolf von Laban. Hans Arp, whom she will later marry, introduces her to members of the anti-bourgeois Dada movement, and she translates a sound poem by Hugo Ball into dance.

Thanks to her training in applied art, Taeuber-Arp is a skilled woodworker. She designs turned vessels and a series of abstract heads, and has her photograph taken with the so-called *Dada Head*. In 1918, the Swiss Marionette Theater in Zurich puts on the play *King Stag*, for which she creates an entire ensemble of wooden puppets with movable limbs. Unfortunately, due to the Spanish Flu pandemic, the production sees no more than three performances.

6 Marionettes for King Stag, 1918

In 1918, Taeuber-Arp designed the puppets and sceneries for *King Stag*, one of altogether nine productions of the newly founded Swiss Marionette Theater to be debuted in conjunction with the exhibition of the Swiss Werkbund. The dramatist René Morax was brought in to adapt an eighteenth-century Italian source (Carlo Gozzi's *Il Re Cervo*), turning it into a parody of psychoanalysis, with characters with names including Freudanalyticus and Dr. Oedipus Complex. The action was moved from Venice to Zurich, but in this version as in the original, King Deramo is transformed into a stag by a spell cast by his antagonist, Minister Tartaglia.

Taeuber-Arp chose a distinctly modern formal idiom for her marionettes, which were turned rather than carved, as would have been the conventional. The bodies are composed of geometric elements, revealing the mechanism connecting the jointed limbs. The artist later recalled that the puppets were widely panned as “far too modern and too outré.” The production saw no more than three performances, in part due to the Spanish flu pandemic. The figures were immediately celebrated by avant-garde circles. Their power to inspire has not waned: in 2015, Karl Lagerfeld cast them for a fashion collection shoot.

7 Portrait H[ans] A[rp], 1918

This small abstract wooden head is one of at least six such works created between 1918 and 1920. Four of them are extant today. As the title suggests, Taeuber-Arp meant it as a humorous portrait of her future husband Hans Arp. It was probably on view in the exhibition mounted by the Basel artists' association Das Neue Leben (The New Life) in 1918. It was the first time that Taeuber-Arp presented her creations, which had previously been shown only in expositions of applied arts, in a fine-art setting. The catalogue describes the head as a study for a marionette, indicating a connection to the major project of articulated puppets for the play *King Stag*.

8 Powder Box, c. 1918

Part of Taeuber-Arp's training at the Debschitz School in Munich was turning, a technique in which wood is shaped on a lathe. She did not have her own workshop, though, and so it is likely that she had the objects on display here manufactured after her designs and then painted them by hand. The wooden receptacles—we know of four that are extant today—are not mentioned in the catalogue raisonné of the artist's oeuvre published in 1948, five years after her death. This particular object, dated 1918, is the only one whose specific function has been identified: Taeuber-Arp's sister Erika Schlegel used it as a powder box.

9 El Lissitzky und Hans Arp, Die Kunstismen – Les ismes de l'art – The isms of art 1914–1924, 1925

Publications in contemporary art magazines introduced an international readership to Taeuber-Arp's marionettes. In their anthology *The Isms of Art*, which came out in 1925, El Lissitzky and Hans Arp defined and illustrated the various avant-garde tendencies of the decade from 1914 to 1924—whose names typically ended in -ism—with more than a dash of irony. They chose a picture of the Guards from *King Stag* to represent Dadaism.

10 Kurt Schwitters, Merz, 1923

Used as a synonym of “Dada,” the nonce word “Merz” was actually coined by Hans Arp's friend the artist Kurt Schwitters, who produced issues of an art magazine of that title at irregular intervals between 1923 and 1932. On display here is issue no. 6, dated October 1923, which includes a picture of a Head by Taeuber-Arp that has since been lost.

Room 3

Conception, Design, Teaching

In 1916, Zurich's Trade School hires Sophie Taeuber-Arp to teach design and embroidery. For the next twelve years, the steady income from this position will sustain her and Hans Arp, whom she marries in 1922, through a period of economic difficulty.

She presents her textile works in exhibitions, including those held by the Swiss Werkbund and the Basel-based artists' association Das Neue Leben (The New Life), which seeks to undo the division be-

tween applied and fine art. Her pillows, tablecloths, and rugs feature geometric shapes as well as abstract renderings of animal and human figures. To test the effect of her motifs, Taeuber-Arp works with painted scraps of paper, which she shifts around and assembles in varying combinations.

11 Fragments, 1916–1922

To develop her design ideas, Taeuber-Arp worked with painted paper scraps like these, shifting them around and recombining them in new constellations. The monogram SHT (Sophie Henriette Taeuber) appears several times, including in the bobbin lace. The elegant point-symmetrical semi-abstract *swan* motif and the voluminous *dancer* in yellow and red resurface in a rectangular wall hanging. The other fragments are related to the oval rug.

12 Tapestry, c. 1925

In 1925, Taeuber-Arp was invited to serve on the jury for the Swiss section of the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*. The presentation at the famous expo, which also gave us the term “Art Deco,” featured several of her works, including this wall hanging. We display it together with several gouaches that offer an impression of how the artist developed the elements that went into it. The checkerboard pattern, for example, originated in the fragment showing light and dark areas grouped in star-shaped designs; a face with large eyes can be seen peeking out further down.

13 The Work. Swiss monthly journal for fine and applied arts, No. 3, 1924

Taeuber-Arp was a member of the Swiss Werkbund, founded in 1913. In 1924, the association’s official magazine *Das Werk* carried a picture of her tulle tablecloth. An essay on handicrafts in the same issue is illustrated with an installation view of the 1923 Christmas exposition in Zurich. Taeuber-Arp’s oval rug can be seen in the foreground; the garments in the background were designed by her student Lucie Welti.

14 Sophie Taeuber-Arp und Blanche Gauchat, Guidelines for Drawing Instruction in the Textile Professions, 1927

During her tenure as a teacher in the arts and crafts division of the Zurich Trade School, Taeuber-Arp wrote two essays on questions of pedagogy. The first, a comparatively short didactic treatise, appeared in 1922 in the membership magazine of the Association of Swiss Trade and Home Eco-

nomics Teachers. The second publication, which she co-edited with her colleague and former student Blanche Gauchat, addresses itself to teachers, students, and “all women who enjoy self-determined and diligent work.” The brochure contains exercises and illustrations as well as a well-researched concise study in which Taeuber-Arp also makes a substantial contribution to the theory of applied art.

15 Geometric Forms, Abstract Motifs (tablecloth),1922

This tablecloth is adorned with silk embroidery. One of the motifs scattered across the cloth in an asymmetrical arrangement recalls the abstract wooden heads that Taeuber-Arp had created in the context of Dada. When the catalogue raisonné of the artist’s oeuvre came out in 1948, many of her works could already no longer be located. This tablecloth, for one, is listed in the catalogue. On the whole, however, her works of applied art—a sizable division of her overall output—are underrepresented in the book.

Room 4

Living Spaces. Interiors and Travels

In the second half of the 1920s, Sophie Taeuber-Arp and her husband become French citizens. She regularly spends time in Strasbourg, where she receives a series of commissions to design interiors.

A recurring motif in her works from this period 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 pharmacist André Horn’s apartment.

Photographs she takes on her travels with Hans Arp and artist friends like Kurt Schwitters and Sonia Delaunay-Terk in the 1920s and 1930s attest to her interest in distinctive shapes: in the arcades of Roman architecture, rock formations, and the sea of beach chairs on the German island of Rügen, life in all its variety provides her with inspiration.

16 Five Extended Figures, 1926

This gouache features five figural motifs whose most salient characteristic is their rectangularity, leavened, in two instances, with prominent white circles. The work is connected to a major commission: Taeuber-Arp had been hired to design the ballroom at Hotel Hannong in Strasbourg. The album pages dedicated to the project (also on display here) show

photographs of the historic interior: figures can be made out on the wall to the right; a row of lamps in circular recesses illuminate the room.

17 Composition of Quadrangular, Polychrome, Dense Strokes, 1920

These gouaches show Taeuber-Arp experimenting with distributions of mosaic-like fields of bold color. Some are loosely grouped in shapes and figures on the white paper; others sprawl over the sheet, leaving only slivers of blank ground. The chromatic flutter of tesserae is reminiscent of the artist's beadwork, and it is possible that the gouaches were created in connection with a work of applied art, although we have not been able to identify a specific finished piece.

18 Stained-glass window for the apartment of André Horn, Strasbourg 1928

In 1927, Taeuber-Arp designed several stained-glass windows for the Strasbourg apartment of the pharmacist and art collector André Horn, the brother of the architect Paul Horn. We present two of them together with the corresponding design sketches. The figure with the raised bent arms appears once in isolation and then in several versions. One of the windows has survived with the original knob and hinges.

Room 5

The Aubette. Living Abstraction

The revolutionary visual language of geometric abstraction encounters the fulness of life in Sophie Taeuber-Arp's biggest project in Strasbourg: her designs for the Aubette, an amusement center in the heart of the city, are based on compositions of square and rectangular fields of color. She herself takes on the tearoom, the Aubette bar, and the bar in the lobby, bringing in Hans Arp and Theo van Doesburg, the cofounder of the Dutch artists' association De Stijl, for other components of the project.

Critics later extol the Aubette as the "Sistine Chapel of modernism." The building's contemporary users, however, never warm to the innovative materials and clean lines. Major alterations in the 1930s destroy this *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and only a partial reconstruction can be experienced today.

19 Composition, 1928

This work, which has not been seen in an exhibition in many years, is likely Taeuber-Arp's earliest abstract painting. The composition with its dovetailing blue, black, and white fields was probably inspired by her designs for the floor of the Aubette's arcade; we present an axonometric drawing of the latter for comparison.

20 Aubette Composition, 1928

Taeuber-Arp created this wall hanging, executed in satin stitch, while working on the Aubette commission. The visual language, now thoroughly abstract, is closely related to the ceiling and wall panels in the tearoom "Five o'Clock." In the sketches for the interior, also on display here, the artist had still envisioned a green hue as the second dominant color besides red; she replaced it with blue in this wall hanging and ultimately also in the Aubette designs.

21 Presentation Album, c. 1930

Like many other artists, Taeuber-Arp brought in professional photographers on a somewhat regular basis to capture her works in pictures. The forty-seven removable pages in this clothbound album—compiled for purposes of documentation and for presentation to potential clients—feature a selection of her works from between 1916 and 1930. Of particular interest are the interior architecture projects she realized in Strasbourg in 1926–1928, which no longer exist in their original condition: the portfolio includes photographs of the stained-glass windows for André Horn's apartment as well as the designs for the Aubette.

22 Geometric Vertical-Horizontal Composition (stained-glass windows for the apartment of André Horn, Strasbourg), 1928

Art historians had long wondered where exactly the stained-glass windows on view here fit into Taeuber-Arp's designs for André Horn's private apartment. A photograph taken inside the residence that has recently resurfaced shows walls densely covered with works of art. Examining the ceiling, one can make out a segment of a pattern of squares and rectangles: three of the panels apparently served to embellish skylights. The compositions in colorful squares and rectangles are akin to the design for the Aubette's bar, also on view—an illustrative example of how the artist developed her ideas unconstrained by the requirements of a particular project and then adapted them to different contexts as needed.

New Horizons. Architecture and Painting

The Aubette commission enables Sophie Taeuber-Arp and her husband to buy a piece of land on the outskirts of Paris, and she draws up plans for a modern studio built of local limestone. Moving to France for good, she resigns from her teaching post at the Zurich Trade School.

Taeuber-Arp's designs for interior decorations and furnishings emphasize their functionality with bold colors and clean forms, reflecting a desire for the modernization of all domains of life that unites creative minds all over Europe.

The art critic Michel Seuphor introduces her to his circle of friends, including members of the Paris avant-garde, and she joins the association Cercle et Carré. In 1930, she exhibits her first abstract paintings.

23 Café, 1928

In 1930, the Paris artists' association Cercle et Carré held an exhibition at Galerie 23. Taeuber-Arp contributed three works, including *Café* and *Figures*. The former shows semi-abstract figures sitting at tables and engaged in lively conversation. Red, black, white, and blue-gray feature in areas of solid color, with metallic paints adding a hint of extravagance, and the schematic outlines and unfilled parts lend the work a charming semblance of *non-finito*. *Figures*, meanwhile, reduces the subject to pictographic circles and bodies composed of areas of solid color so bold as to be suitable for poster art.

24 Modular furniture, 1929

Beginning in 1929, Taeuber-Arp made a name for herself as a furniture designer and interior architect: both lines of work are listed on the business card she had printed with her new address in Clamart. She also created elements of the interiors in the studio house she built herself in the Paris suburb. Their functional and unfussy design reflects the widespread desire in the late 1920s for clean and airy residential spaces, tossing out excessive decoration and dusty clutter.

The box-shaped shelving units in wood painted gray or in a few select colors could be combined as desired. The bottom element stands on short legs, making it easier to keep the floor underneath clean.

25 Desk for the office in the apartment of Ernest Rott, 1929

Taeuber-Arp designed this desk for the study in the lawyer Ernest Rott's apartment in Paris. The storage compartments open on two sides. With its metal frame, the piece is reminiscent of contemporary steel-tube furniture by Charlotte Perriand, Marcel Breuer, or Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, whose work Taeuber-Arp had been able to study in expositions.

Room 7

International Avant-Garde

When the group *Cercle et Carré* disbands, Sophie Taeuber-Arp becomes a member of its successor organization, the association *Abstraction-Création*. Her abstract compositions are shown in exhibitions in France and abroad.

Taeuber-Arp's style is a variant of Constructivism, whose very name suggests an architectonic treatment of abstract forms. Her preference for bold colors is unchanged. The rhythmic arrangement of elements in her work conveys an impression of inward motion—perhaps a vivid reminiscence of the bodily experiences of dance and choreography from her Zurich years?

As a coeditor, managing director, correspondent, and layout designer of the trilingual magazine *Plastique/Plastic*, Taeuber-Arp seeks to foster the exchange of ideas between avant-gardes on both sides of the Atlantic.

26 Four Spaces with Planes, Circles, and Crosses, 1932

With its pictorial space segmented by a blue cross, this work brings to mind an architect's ground plan, with movable elements arranged in the rooms. The composition is held in an intuitive equilibrium by the balance between the solid and outlined bars and circles and the blank field on the bottom right. It is one in a series of so-called "spaces" pictures; we also present two other examples featuring six fields.

27 Cercle et Carré, No. 2, 1930

The artists' association and exhibition cooperative *Cercle et Carré*, which was founded in 1929 and counted Marcelle Cahn, Piet Mondrian, Luigi Russolo, and Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart among its members, did

not last long, disbanding in 1930. The group's mastermind, the art critic Michel Seuphor, was also managing editor of the eponymous magazine, of which three numbers were published.

28 Abstraction, création, art non-figuratif, No. 2, 1933

In 1931, the artists around Cercle et Carré launched a successor association, which they called Abstraction-Création. It, too, produced a periodical, of which five numbers went into print. The second, released in 1933, proclaimed that “at a time when free thought [...] is everywhere under heavy siege,” the magazine’s mission was to publish “works and commentaries by independent artists [...] who, each in his own way, seek to meet the cultural demands of the time.” Taeuber-Arp and her husband, who did not agree with the group’s dogmatic condemnation of all representational art, resigned their membership in 1934.

29 Gradation, 1939

Lightly varied wave forms are stacked up before a blue background, some white, others in various colors. This series arguably illustrates Taeuber-Arp’s unerring eye for balance and equilibrium better than any other of her works. Stable and in motion, simple yet complex—the staggered compositions are among her most elegant creations.

30 Plastique/Plastic, 1937–1939

From 1937 until 1939, Taeuber-Arp edited the magazine *Plastique/Plastic*, for which she also produced the layouts and graphic design. The periodical provided a forum for exponents of abstract modernism at a time when their work was menaced by strident hostility from the dictatorial regimes in the Soviet Union and Germany. Five issues were published until the outbreak of the Second World War, each containing essays in German, English, and French. The title pays tribute to Neoplasticism—the vision of a completely new approach to architecture and design championed by the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian and the art movement De Stijl. The last issues also carried work by artists like Max Ernst and Paul Éluard, suggesting the close personal connections between the magazine’s makers and the Paris Surrealists.

Constructivists

In 1937, Sophie Taeuber-Arp has twenty-four works in the group exhibition “Konstruktivisten” at Kunsthalle Basel. Although it is arguably the single most important presentation of her art in her lifetime, only one extant installation photograph includes a glimpse of her work: a segment of *Animated Circle Picture* can be seen between contributions by Naum Gabo, El Lissitzky, and László Moholy-Nagy.

Georg Schmidt, who will later lead the Kunstmuseum Basel, describes the abstraction on display in the exhibition as a universal medium: an unequivocal, truthful, and serene visual language, he writes, it represents a vigorous affirmation of life and optimism amid the contemporary political upheavals. As Basel demonstrates its openness to the avant-garde with exhibitions and dedicated collectors, the same art faces sharp hostility from the National Socialists in neighboring Germany.

31 *Animated Circle Picture*, 1934

Breaking rank is the only rule that these circles obey: the eye instinctively looks for a system governing their arrangement, but to no avail. The best it can do is identify clusters that would seem to be held together by forces of attraction and repulsion. The Basel collector Marguerite Hagenbach acquired the comparatively large painting straight from the 1937 “Konstruktivisten” exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel. After Taeuber-Arp’s death, she became Hans Arp’s second companion; they were married in 1959. In 1968, she made a gift of a considerable part of her collection, including this eminent work, to the Kunstmuseum Basel.

32 *Relief*, 1936

The Basel collector Maja Sacher acquired this work in muted colors with a visual surprise effect from the 1937 “Konstruktivisten” exhibition. It transposes the dynamic equilibrium of forms and hues that is a hallmark of Taeuber-Arp’s paintings into three dimensions. The openings cut into the baseplate integrate the wall behind the work into its appearance; another unusual feature is the black circle that—depending on the beholder’s vantage point—rises from the equally black background or blends in with it.

33 Exhibition Catalog 'Constructivists', 1937

This catalogue was published in conjunction with the 'Konstruktivisten' exhibition organized by Lucas Lichtenhan and Georg Schmidt at Kunsthalle Basel in 1937. In keeping with contemporary taste, it makes very sparing use of the means of typography. The roster of participating artists on the cover reads like a who's who of abstraction. The curators' correspondence in the run-up to the show reveals that Taeuber-Arp consulted on the selection of artists and works and assisted them with her contacts. Aware of the historical significance of the presentation, she also encouraged them to send copies of the catalogue to influential American collectors and museum leaders.

34 "Flight". Round Relief in Three Heights, 1937

The circle figured prominently in many of Taeuber-Arp's works from 1916 on. In 1937 and 1938, it becomes the principle underlying the design of a series of relief tondos. The outlines and colors of the layered strata coalesce in dynamic three-dimensional compositions. The idea of optical depth also speaks from the overlapping curlicues, the curved and wavy lines of the gouaches. The choice of wood as the material for the rectangular and circular reliefs harks back to the artist's receptacles and marionettes from her Zurich years.

Room 9

Lifelines. Drawing on the Run

When Nazi troops invade France and occupy Paris in 1940, the Arps seek refuge in the south of France. After stops in Nérac and Veyrier, they are taken in by friends in Grasse.

The dramatic change in their circumstances, the series of relocations, the food shortages and difficulty of obtaining art supplies not only negatively affect Taeuber-Arp's health, they also leave an imprint on her work: tangled lines exuding a sense of restlessness now become the hallmark of her drawings.

A temporary visa for Switzerland allows the Arps to escape the occupation of southern France. On a cold January night in 1943, Sophie Taeuber-Arp dies of carbon monoxide poisoning caused by a stove at her artist friend Max Bill's house in Zurich.

35 Drawing, Veyrier-du-Lac, France 1940

This drawing was created when Taeuber-Arp and her husband, fleeing Paris for the south, were taken in by the American collector Peggy Guggenheim, who was temporarily living in Veyrier at the time. Colored pencil drawings had always been part of the artist's repertoire; now that the war was raging, however, it became her medium of choice primarily due to the general scarcity of art supplies. The sinuous lines that are characteristic of this final phase in Taeuber-Arp's oeuvre defy the constraints suggested by the shaded areas and intersecting straight lines.

36 Poèmes sans prénoms, 1939

Taeuber-Arp contributed illustrations for two books of poems by her husband: "Shells and Umbrellas" (1939) and "Poèmes sans prénoms" (1941). We present two line drawings from the latter project that served as masters for lithographs. A limited special edition of the book also came with a unique drawing in color by the artist. Art historians have identified eighteen works from the series; four of them are on display here.

37 Dynamic Construction, Penetration of Spirals and Diagonals, 1942

This is one of the very few paintings on canvas Taeuber-Arp created after escaping from Paris. The compositions on display are related to her work on an ex libris for the graphic artist Jan Tschichold, who had designed the poster and catalogue for the "Konstruktivisten" exhibition and the typography of the publication "Shells and Umbrellas." To achieve the uncommon precision, Taeuber-Arp at times worked with a ruling pen and compass and straight edge. They are the artist's last works.

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Opening hours

Di–So 10–18 Uhr / Tue–Sun 10 am–6 pm / Mar–Dim 10h–18h
Mi 10–20 Uhr / Wed 10 am–8 pm / Mer 10h–20h

Admissions

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Jeden Mittwoch im März und April, 17–20 Uhr
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Chaque mercredi en mars et avril, 17h–20h

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