

Media release

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## **The Collector Curt Glaser From Champion of Modernism to Refugee**

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Curators: Anita Haldemann and Judith Rauser

The Kunstmuseum Basel devotes an extensive exhibition at its Neubau venue to the Jewish art historian and collector Curt Glaser (1879–1943). Glaser was a central figure on the Berlin arts scene of the 1910s and 1920s and director of the Berlin Art Library. With his wife Elsa, he built an outstanding art collection. After his wife's death in 1932 and the Nazis' rise to power in 1933, his life took a dramatic turn: having been removed from his position in late April, he auctioned off most of his assets in Berlin and went into exile via Switzerland to New York, where he died in 1943. His fate and his collection sank into obscurity.

The Kunstmuseum Basel acquired two hundred drawings and prints from Glaser's auction in 1933 for its Kupferstichkabinett (Department of Prints and Drawings), including major works by Edvard Munch. In 2017, Glaser's heirs demanded the restitution of these works and an acknowledgment that he had been a victim of persecution. As part of the settlement the museum reached with the heirs, the exhibition pays tribute to Glaser and his active commitment to modern artists including Max Beckmann, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Henri Matisse, and Edvard Munch. It is the first time that works from the distinguished collection, which is now scattered all over the world, are reunited.

### **The "Glaser case"**

In 2008, when the heirs' lawyers first asserted their claim to the two hundred works formerly owned by Glaser at the Kunstmuseum Basel, the Canton of Basel-Stadt rejected their demand. When the heirs approached the Kunstmuseum again in 2017, the museum initiated a comprehensive and meticulous investigation of the acquisition's circumstances and presented the matter to the board of trustees for assessment. The review led the Canton of Basel-Stadt to acknowledge that Glaser had sold his assets under duress as a victim of Nazi persecution and to recognize the special responsibility

incumbent upon the canton as the present-day owner of the largest single set of works from Glaser's collection.

In March 2020, the Canton of Basel-Stadt, following the recommendation of the board of trustees, agreed with the heirs on a settlement as a "just and fair solution" in accordance with the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art. The museum retained the works, providing redress to the heirs in the form of financial compensation. The parties also agreed that an extensive exhibition would be mounted to shed light on Glaser's fate.

### **The life of Curt Glaser: from champion of modernism to refugee**

Born to Jewish parents in Leipzig in 1879, Curt Glaser grew up in Berlin. He studied first medicine, then art history and earned a doctorate in the latter field in 1907. In 1903, he married his cousin Elsa Kolker (1879–1932), the daughter of a wealthy industrialist in Breslau. The couple, who had no children, traveled the world and built an outstanding art collection, acquiring modernists as well as works by Old Masters and ancient and non-European art.

Having served as a research associate and curator at the Berlin Kupferstichkabinett (Museum of Prints and Drawings) from 1909 until 1924, Glaser was appointed director of the Art Library, an important institution in Berlin. He was in personal contact with painters like Matisse, Beckmann, Kirchner, and especially Munch, supporting them and their work in manifold ways. At the zenith of his career in the early 1930s, Glaser, in addition to his duties as director of the Art Library, was as an active art critic and public figure. His network in Berlin's cultural scene was arguably second to none. The Glasers' regular Monday salons were a hub of the city's art and museum world.

The unexpected death of his wife in the summer of 1932 marked a deep cesura in Glaser's life. Then, in January 1933, the Nazis' seizure of power brought his career to a sudden end. He was placed "on leave" because of his Jewish roots in April and removed from the director's post in September. By then, he had sold much of his art collection and the furnishings of his spacious home in two large auctions in mid-May.

In late May 1933, Glaser was married again, to Maria Milch (1901–1981). That summer, the couple, having spent time in Paris, settled in Switzerland. Glaser managed to have a small fraction of his assets—a number of paintings by Munch and fourteen boxes of personal effects—shipped to Ticino. Although his life in emigration was characterized by private happiness, his attempts to relaunch his career failed, and he was forced to part with additional works of art. In early 1941, the Glasers emigrated via Cuba to New York. Glaser died in Lake Placid, N.Y., only two years later.

## **The exhibition: the fate of an art historian and his collection**

The exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Basel | Neubau gathers works of art, documents, and photographs to bring to life Glaser's multifaceted work as a curator, busy art critic, patron of artists, and private collector in the Berlin of the 1910s and 1920s. A selection of works from Max Liebermann to Edvard Munch from the collection of the Berlin Kupferstichkabinett, where Glaser oversaw the modern art division for years, attests to his expertise and his efforts to promote contemporary art in a museum setting.

Reunited for the first time since the Glasers' private collection was dispersed in 1933, a selection of almost fifty drawings and prints from the Basel Kupferstichkabinett and twenty-nine eminent works on loan from St. Louis, Minneapolis, New York, Hamburg, Cologne, London, and Zurich illustrate the quality as well as diversity of the collection. As a private collector, too, Glaser was equally fascinated by old art and modernism, from Auguste Rodin and Pierre-Auguste Renoir to the "Brücke" artists Erich Heckel and Max Pechstein. Works by Matisse and Franz Marc later had to make room for portraits commissioned from Munch and Beckmann that bear witness to the two collectors' social standing.

The exhibition also retraces the trajectories of exemplary works from Glaser's collection after its disbandment. With two hundred works on paper, the Basel Kupferstichkabinett now has the largest single cohesive set of objects from the collection; the other works, meanwhile, are scattered all over Europe and the United States. Museums in several countries have responded to the claims lodged by Glaser's heirs in a variety of ways. Some institutions have restituted works or returned them and then bought them back; others have devised different solutions. In that sense, every work from Glaser's collection has its own history.

## **Caricatures by Honoré Daumier in the graphic-art cabinets**

A selection of 105 caricatures by the French artist Honoré Daumier (1808–1879) from the Basel Kupferstichkabinett's Glaser acquisition is on view in the graphic-art cabinets on the first floor of the Hauptbau.

## **The 2020 resolution**

The 2018 historical report and the considerations that led to the 2020 settlement between the Canton of Basel-Stadt and Curt Glaser's heirs as well as other documents have been available to the public through the Kunstmuseum Basel's website since 2020.

**Exhibition catalogue**

An extensive catalogue accompanying the exhibition, with contributions by Joachim Brand, Anita Haldemann, Max Koss, Judith Rauser, Lynn Rother, Andreas Schalhorn, Noemi Scherrer, Joachim Sieber, Jennifer Tonkovich, and Felix Uhlmann, will be released by Deutscher Kunstverlag.

**Sponsors**

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**Imagery**

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