

Media release

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Kunstmuseum Basel Reimagines Its Historical Collection A New Presentation of Art from the 14th to 19th Centuries

Starting June 14, 2025, Kunstmuseum Basel | Hauptbau

In recent months, the Kunstmuseum Basel has undertaken a major reinstallation of its collection in the Hauptbau. The museum is rethinking how its world-renowned holdings—spanning eight centuries—are presented to the public. This effort is part of a larger vision led by Director Elena Filipovic to bring renewed attention to the museum's historical collection, one of the most significant in Europe and the first in the world to be conceived as a truly public collection. The project is supported by the conservation and scientific research of the collection, as well as exciting stories about the history of the artworks and attractive public outreach.

As part of the rehanging, bold new wall colors—carefully chosen to highlight details in the artworks—underscore the museum's fresh approach. A collaboration with the design textile company Kvadrat and artist Nairy Baghramian has brought renewed life to the museum's seating. Kvadrat contributed recycled RE-WOOL textiles, while Baghramian, in dialogue with Kunstmuseum Basel, selected the fabrics and colors and designed new feet for the existing seating, creating a cohesive visual language that echoes the building's materials, the newly painted walls, and the artworks on view.

14th to 18th century: Holbein, Witz, and van Hemessen

The rehang has unfolded in stages. Last June, the postwar collection in the Neubau was rehanged, with an emphasis on highlighting the more diverse strands of the collection and bringing a wider range of artistic voices to the fore. In March of this year, the focus shifted to the collection from the 14th to the 18th century in the Hauptbau. Curator Bodo Brinkmann, shortly before his retirement, distilled decades of research into a new presentation that brings clarity and focus to key artists and themes. Entire rooms are dedicated to Konrad Witz and Hans Holbein the Younger, two artists of central importance to the museum's founding history and identity. Drawings by Holbein are now integrated alongside his paintings, offering insight into his artistic process and

emphasizing the museum's outstanding collection of works on paper—rarely on view due to their sensitivity to light. As part of the rehanging, bold new wall colors—carefully chosen to highlight details in the artworks—underscore the museum's fresh approach.

While the tour remains broadly chronological, the new hanging draws sharper attention to individual artists, families, and genres. Works by Lucas Cranach the Elder are shown together, as are those by Hans Holbein the Elder and his two sons, Hans the Younger and Ambrosius—an artistic family spanning generations with significant influence on art history. Paintings from the 17th and 18th centuries are organized thematically—into still life, portraiture, and history painting—shedding light on shifts in artistic production and patronage and inviting reflection on the changing social roles and contradictions inherent in these genres.

The presentation also brings forward works that had long remained in storage or were little known to visitors. New acquisitions are on view as well, including a rare double portrait by Gabriel Zehender (c. 1525), a Basel-based contemporary of Holbein. Other works of incalculable art historical importance are given more prominence, such as Catharina van Hemessen's *Self-Portrait at the Easel* (1548)—the first known self-portrait of a female artist in Western art history, and the first portrait of an artist of any gender depicting themselves in the act of painting. It marks a turning point in the self-representation of artists and the visibility of women in the history of art.

19th century: Böcklin, Linder, Hodler, and Cezanne

In May, curator Eva Reifert completed the rehang of the 19th-century galleries. Well-known works remain on view but appear in new constellations that invite fresh readings. A central hall is devoted to Arnold Böcklin, including his iconic first version of *Isle of the Dead* (1880). Swiss artists such as Ferdinand Hodler and Frank Buchser are also newly highlighted. A dedicated room brings together works by Paul Cézanne and Camille Pissarro, underscoring the role of artistic friendships in shaping modern painting. And, as part of a broader effort to recognize key figures in the museum's history—including the crucial role women have played in supporting artists and institutions—the Basel artist and collector Emilie Linder, who began donating her collection to the Kunstmuseum in 1841, is now newly highlighted. This tribute complements the room in the 20th-century galleries dedicated to Marguerite Arp-Hagenbach, whose commitment to abstract modern art helped shape the museum's modern collection.

Throughout the galleries, new wall texts reflect a commitment to context and sharing knowledge with the public. Many works in the collection carry complex histories—social, political, and institutional—and the museum considers it important to communicate this history transparently, carefully, and in a scientifically sound manner.

At a time when public attention is increasingly fragmented and the pace of visual culture accelerates, this new presentation affirms the museum's role as a place for sustained looking, historical awareness, and civic reflection. Because "a museum shouldn't be a mere container for masterpieces or cemetery for beautiful things," says Elena Filipovic, "instead, at times like these, times of crisis and complexity, it should be a place that inspires and confronts, that asks tough questions and teaches us how to look closely. A museum has the power to challenge us—and to change us in the process."

Imagery

<https://kunstmuseumbasel.ch/en/museum/media/info/173>

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