

Museum Folkwang

Address by Dr. Hartwig Fischer, Director of the Museum Folkwang

Press conference, 18 March 2010 at 11:00 a.m.

The Museum Folkwang is in a state of flux. For the first time in decades, we are able to present the museum's collections in a manner befitting their significance. This is due to the New Building, which was inaugurated in January 2010, designed by David Chipperfield Architects and made possible by the Alfried Krupp von Bohlen and Halbach-Foundation chaired by Berthold Beitz, and also because of the newly renewed Old Building from the 1960s. At this time of new beginnings, it is an appropriate moment for us to look back at the history of this pioneering museum for modern and contemporary art so that we can acknowledge our origins and refine the criteria for our future work.

When Paul J. Sachs, the American art historian, Harvard professor, collector and founding member of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, visited the Museum Folkwang in December 1932, he described it as "the most beautiful museum in the world". Scarcely two months later saw the rise to power of the National Socialists, a group which had denigrated the museum for many years. In 1937, 1456 of the museum's works were confiscated for being "degenerate", and many of these were later sold. These works are often considered the highlights of the public and private collections to which they now belong. The Museum Folkwang was able to retrieve some works after 1945, while others were destroyed or have been lost. After 1945, Heinz Köhn and Paul Vogt took on the task of rebuilding the collection. Since then, the Museum Folkwang is once more considered one of the most important institutions in Germany when it comes to 19th and 20th century works, as well as for its ever-increasing section dealing with contemporary art. This has expanded greatly since 1979 thanks to the addition of the Photographic Collection and, since moving into the New Building, thanks to the German Poster Museum.

For four months, our exhibition brings together once more in Essen the most significant works which once belonged to the museum and which were confiscated in 1937. They are reunited with the major works which remained in the museum and which survived the war in storage, while the Essen Folkwang Building of 1929 was destroyed by bombing in 1944/45. This phenomenal overview of European art between 1850 and 1930 complements the works of ancient and non-European art which were once an essential component of the collection on display and which were the public face of the Folkwang for many years, though after 1960 they increasingly disappeared into storage: works from Egypt, Moorish Spain, the Middle East, Mesopotamia, Java, Korea, China, Japan and Papua New Guinea. They are being presented here once more for the first time in decades and, after the exhibition, will again find a permanent place in the museum's halls.

Our exhibition takes as its starting point the Essen-based Museum Folkwang that Paul J. Sachs admired so greatly in 1932. But how did the collection come into being? It was opened in Hagen in 1902 by Karl Ernst Osthaus with the support of his wife Gertrud and with the tireless assistance of Henry van de Velde. It took only a few years for the Museum Folkwang to become one of the most significant European collections of modern and contemporary art, and featured major works by Daumier, Renoir, Rodin, Cézanne, van Gogh, Gauguin, Seurat, Signac, Matisse, Hodler, Munch, Kandinsky, Marc, Nolde, Kokoschka, and an outstanding Graphic Collection with early works by Schiele and Klee, among others. Intended as a comprehensive collection from the outset, the Museum Folkwang showed Modern Art and African sculpture side by side as works of equal merit from 1912 onwards, long before all other institutions. Osthaus believed in the power of art to change society: his guiding principle was "Change through Culture, Culture through Change".

After Osthaus's premature death, his heirs offered the collection for purchase to the city of Essen in 1921 in order to keep it together. A consortium of companies and art patrons acquired it in 1922, established itself as the Folkwang Museum Society and concluded an agreement with Essen on 29 May 1922. This saw half of the assets transferred to the collection and, in return, the city would provide the building, upkeep and staff. The collection of Essen's art museum, under the management of Ernst Gosebruch since 1912, merged with the Osthaus Collection to make the new Museum Folkwang. This opened in May 1929 in a new building by Edmund Körner, one of the few museum buildings constructed in the 1920s.

After its move to Essen, the Museum Folkwang remained a dynamic and forward-thinking institution. Gosebruch, an early supporter of German Expressionism who also added works of the New Objectivity movement to the collection, commissioned Kirchner and Schlemmer to paint the Brunnenraum and Festsaal halls. By 1930, Kurt Wilhelm-Kästner, curator from 1923 onwards, had already held important photographic exhibitions that had caused a sensation.

Hans Luther, the mayor of Essen from 1918 to 1924 and later Chancellor of the Weimar Republic, was a driving force behind the acquisition of the Hagen-based Folkwang Collection. He encouraged the cooperation of private art patrons and public sector with his political vision and strategic ability. Luther recognized that even in times of crisis – and the Ruhr area certainly had a number of pressing matters to overcome in that post-war period – the presence of such a collection, of such a museum, would serve as a focal point for identification, for understanding, for self-awareness, as well as for international renown. It is for this reason, and thanks to the cooperation between the city and the museum society, that the Folkwang developed into one of the most significant museums in the country; it is for this reason that it was able to overcome the dreadful losses inflicted by National Socialist expropriation; it is for this reason that we have such a brilliant future ahead of us.

Such a complex exhibition requires the combined work of many. Our thanks go to the lenders for their generous cooperation. One cannot merely assume that they will be prepared to loan out

significant works for several months just so that they can temporarily return to the Museum Folkwang.

It was always our intention to create this exhibition with an outside curator who would develop the project through dialogue with us. With Uwe M. Schneede, Director of the Hamburg Kunsthalle from 1991 to 2006, we acquired a guest curator who is not just an experienced museum administrator but also a respected scholar. We are deeply indebted to him for his outstanding cooperation.

Many works, especially those from ancient and non-European cultures, were scientifically re-examined by specialists, and many received restoration treatment under the watchful eye of Silke Zeich. This is an important step when it comes to interpreting our collections.

We would also like to thank Lorenzo Piqueras for the excellent and customized architectural design he carried out for this complex project. Gratitude is also owed to Dieter Deichsel and Claudia Juny from Plan Forward for its efficient implementation, and to Klaus Wolff as well. Silke Zeich, Ernst Bielefeld and the Technical Service of the Museum Folkwang displayed exemplary skill when installing the numerous fragile objects.

Thanks must also go to the authors who give intellectual rigour to the catalogue and essays with their research and new insights, and thereby impart greater weight to the exhibition. We thank Gerhard Steidl and his team, particularly Sarah Winter, for designing and producing the publications, and Tanja Milewsky for the editing. Hans Hansen took new photographs of all the pieces from the non-European cultures, these beautiful pictures are published for the first time in the catalogue. The printed matter relating to the exhibition was designed by Christian Boros, with whom we also developed the museum's new corporate design.

As always, the board of the Folkwang Museum Society provided invaluable assistance in carrying out this project. We must give particular thanks to Chairman Henner Puppel, Treasurer Ulrich Blank and legal advisor Jürgen Simon for their support.

Special thanks must go to our colleagues at the Museum Folkwang for their commitment: Esra Aydin, Wilko Beckmann, Hendrik von Boxberg, Susanne Brüning, Tobias Burg, Stefanie Dixon, Ute Eskildsen, Lutz Frank, Barbara Hütten, Asja Kaspers, Ineke Klosterkemper, Heike Kropff, Hans-Jürgen Lechtreck, Mario-Andreas von Lüttichau, Holger Peters, Christiane Schneider, Silke Zeich, Kay Zetzsche and the members of the Technical Service. They all performed sterling work.

This project would not have been possible without the support of a large and experienced sponsor. We cannot thank E.ON Ruhrgas enough for the 25 years of commitment and for the faithful partnership.

Last but not least, we offer sincere thanks to the Federal President of Germany, Dr Horst Köhler, who distinguishes this exhibition by virtue of his patronage.