

Museum Folkwang

Address by Prof. Uwe M. Schneede, Guest Curator

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As far as concepts for the inaugural exhibition in a new museum goes, they can hardly be more compelling than the one Hartwig Fischer approached me with at the beginning of 2007: to present, for the first time, cultural heritage objects from the past (and, in part, from the present) to the public in the newly renovated and now sufficiently spacious museum.

There were actually two ideas: the first was to reassemble all the masterpieces that once belonged to the city of Essen, were confiscated under the National Socialist regime and scattered all around the world, and reunite these with the artworks that had remained in the museum or were retrieved, to demonstrate how significant this modern art museum originally was. The second idea was to present those treasures that belong to the Museum Folkwang but are as yet unknown to the public; these are the non-European cultural objects which have, until now, been hidden away in storage rooms, yet which also came to Essen together with the Osthaus Collection. This puts on display the past and present of a unique museum and unites two very different types of collections in a single special exhibition.

Thanks to Karl Osthaus and Ernst Gosebruch, the Folkwang in Essen was the outstanding modern art museum in the 1920s – a matter of public record after the opening of the new museum building in 1929. The plundering of the museum by the National Socialists was therefore all the more devastating. The temporary reassembly of the original collection recalls these atrocities. For this reason, the exhibition ends with a list of all the artists' names whose paintings, sculptures, drawings and prints were removed from the Museum Folkwang in 1937.

If European modern art and non-European traditions are to be united under one roof, how should their relationship be presented in this day and age? To mention just two ground-breaking cross-cultural encounters: the *World Cultures and Modern Art* exhibition on the occasion of the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich was a comprehensive examination of the links between European and non-European art and music of the 19th and 20th centuries: Expressionism and "primitive art", Orientalism in European architecture, French Japonism, art nouveau and the Orient, modern design and Japan... And the *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1984 proved once and for all how modern art had, in very different ways, adopted elements from tribal art forms. These fields had been revised, and, moreover, perspectives had in the meantime changed.

Today the interest lies not in the dependence of cultures but in their equal merit and the respective individual significance of cultures. We take a leaf out of Karl Ernst Osthaus's book here, as we hold in high regard all manner of specific and formal developments that have a commonplace or ritual purpose and admire foreign designs which resemble our own. For the exhibition, this means not creating a confrontation between, categorizing or subordinating cultures, but offering separate presentations that do justice to the respective groups of objects; every one of these ensembles should be viewed with respect to its idiosyncrasies. Our view of foreign cultures is and remains grounded in occidental values nonetheless. The classic understanding of modern art is therefore at the heart of this exhibition. The aesthetic perception as taught by this movement was decisive in the selection, also with regard to the ancient and non-European works. Experts helped us to professionally assess the foreign material, evaluate its respective artistic qualities and come to an appropriate understanding of the ritual connections as well as the reasons why these objects were preserved in such an excellent state for hundreds, sometimes thousands of years.

Nevertheless, they still remain the fascinating unknown, and the foreignness should continue to surround them despite their beauty, as their origins lie not only in geographically but also historically distant social and ritualistic contexts that are often hard to reconstruct in an unambiguous way, let alone understand in a contemporary context. One need merely think of the almost unsurpassable perfection of the prehistoric stone pottery that was buried with the dead, the objects connected to Egyptian myths and burial rites, the overlapping of ancient myth and Christian religion to be found on Coptic textiles, ancestor worship in Oceanic cultures and the influence of the medieval tea ceremony on design innovation in China and Japan.

After all, we were faced with a difficult task; we needed to find a unified setting, an architectural design for the exhibition which provides a consistent format across the two large buildings which house the collections. It must ensure the optimal environment for displaying the uniqueness of all the objects, from the large-format paintings and the fascinating shadow puppets to the tiny Egyptian amulets and the mighty Oceanic Malagan figures, and also form a unified whole in which visitors would be able to immerse themselves. Lorenzo Piqueras conceived a richly structured architectural design comprising two transversal passages that open out into exedrae and one diagonal that draws the visitor's attention to the opposite external area upon entry.

I extend my gratitude to Hartwig Fischer for entrusting me with this first extensive presentation of a legendary collection in this remarkable new setting.