

Museum Folkwang

Architecture in the Museum's History

Karl Ernst Osthaus had his own museum built for his collection in Hagen from 1898. "The Folkwang", as Osthaus baptised it in reference to the old northern poem "Edda", was to serve as a "hall for the people", a gathering place and a center of intellectual and cultural development in a materialistic industrial region. In the Spring of 1900, Osthaus met the Belgian Art Nouveau artist and architect Henry van de Velde. Osthaus dismissed his Berlin architect Gérard and commissioned van de Velde for the entire interior decoration of the museum. At the same time, the artist advised him on his future art acquisitions, laying the foundation stone for the Folkwang Collection. In 1902, the museum in Hagen was opened.

Karl Ernst Osthaus died in 1921. His heirs did not feel capable of maintaining the museum in Hagen, and offered to sell it to another city. Apart from Essen, Düsseldorf was also interested. The mayor of Essen at the time, and later Reichskanzler, Dr. Hans Luther encouraged a consortium from the Essen financial world to raise the 15 million Reichsmarks needed to purchase the collection. This consortium, which included the most important companies in the Ruhr Area, then founded the Folkwang-Museumsverein, which signed a contract with the City of Essen in May 1922 transferring ownership of half of the museum to the city, with the city promising in return to ensure construction, personnel and maintenance. This public-private partnership still forms the basis of the museum today.

In Essen, the collection merged with the Essen Art Museum to form the new Museum Folkwang. Its director was the art historian Ernst Gosebruch, who had headed the Essen Art Museum since 1909. He knew Osthaus well and had begun acquiring contemporary art very early on. The new Museum Folkwang collection was too big for the old site at Grillohaus. The two houses that the brothers Karl and Hans Goldschmidt donated to the city in 1917 and 1922 were not sufficient either. Essen suffered during the post war financial crisis so it was not until 1925 that plans for a new building for the Museum Folkwang were approved, which opened its doors in two stages, in 1927 and 1929, on Bismarkstraße – the site of today's museum. With a well-developed sense of the dramatic, the architect Edmund Körner – who also designed, for example, the Essen synagogue – linked the two Goldschmidt villas with an unobtrusive but original edifice. The new museum provided a large gallery for the paintings, interior courtyards for the sculpture, corridors around the courtyards with natural for the antique and non-European artworks, galleries for graphic works and a large hall for lectures and film showings. The museum, "the loveliest museum in the world" as Paul J. Sachs, a co-founder of the MoMA called it during a visit to Essen in 1932, would continue to develop for less than ten years. Gosebruch's departure, forced on him by the National Socialists in 1933, the confiscations of so-called "Entartete Kunst" in 1937, when over 1,400 works were lost, and finally the destruction of the building in bombing raids brought an end to this unique constellation of classical modern works and antique and non-European art in one of the rare museum buildings from the 1920's.

In 1960, the museum building, today listed, designed by Kreutzberger, Hösterey and Loy was opened. In certain architectural details it recalled Körner's former building, but was especially oriented on Mies van der Rohe. Because of its site, its balanced proportions and varied flow of rooms, its transparency and because of the presence of natural light, the building belongs to one of the most successful museum buildings of the post war period. The old building serves the presentation of important part of the collection, especially 19th and 20th century painting and sculpture. In the basement, which housed the photography gallery until 2007, further exhibition rooms were created as part of the modernisation and adaptation on the new building. In 2010 special exhibitions will be presented here and from 2011 the collection of antique and non-European art will find a permanent home in these rooms.