kunstmuseum basel

Pairings

June 3, 2025

The Im Obersteg Collection

The Im Obersteg Collection is a private collection started in 1916 that was developed in Basel and Geneva. It has been housed in the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004.

The Basel shipping contractor Karl Im Obersteg (1883–1969) and his son Jürg Im Obersteg (1914–1983), professor of forensic medicine, collected international art of the twentieth century for some seventy years. The core of the important collection, which today comprises around 220 works, can be traced back to Karl's interests. In 1916, he acquired his first painting, by Cuno Amiet. Later this was followed by important works by Marc Chagall, Alexej von Jawlensky, Pablo Picasso, Chaïm Soutine, and others.

Following a sustained preference for representational modernism from the French and Russian cultural sphere, Karl and Jürg Im Obersteg began to open up to new artistic trends after the Second World War. Color-determined abstractions, for instance by Jean-Paul Riopelle, and works by Louis Soutter, Jean Dubuffet, and Antoni Tàpies found their way into the collection.

After Karl Im Obersteg's death, Jürg continued to run his father's company and maintain the art collection. Together with his wife Doris Im Obersteg-Lerch (1931–2015), he was—like his father—surrounded by art and engaged intensively with the works. Expanding the collection, he acquired works by Lyonel Feininger, Emil Nolde, and Marianne von Werefkin, among others.

After Jürg's death, Doris Im Obersteg-Lerch established the Im Obersteg Foundation, which displayed the art collection in a villa in Oberhofen on Lake Thun during the summer months from 1995 to 2002. She then entrusted it to the Kunstmuseum Basel on permanent loan. Thus, the collection has returned to the city of its origin, where it can be accessible to a broad public and stands in dialog with a first-rate public collection.

KUNSTMUSEUM BASEL | HAUPTBAU GROUND FLOOR

Pair
ings

By displaying works of art from the private Im Obersteg Collection side by side with works from the Kunstmuseum Basel's holdings, the *Pairings* exhibition establishes elective affinities that transcend generations and stylistic boundaries. What connects the juxtaposed paintings and sculptures? How do they differ? Do the paired works enrich each other through the dialogue?

The accompanying exhibition booklet brings together short texts by authors who have engaged with the works from different perspectives. Visitors can also use headphones to hear compositions performed by local young musicians. The pairings are regularly broken up and rehung to involve the exhibited works in other dialogues. The rendez-vous between the two collections develops into a slowly evolving choreography.

ROOM 1

AUGUSTE RODIN (1840–1917)
La petite ombre (The Small Shade), 1880
Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1461
Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

AUGUSTE RODIN (1840–1917)
La grande ombre (The Large Shade), 1901/1904, cast 1928
Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. P 68
Purchased in 1938

Rachel Mader is an art historian and professor at the Hochschule Luzern—Design Film Kunst.

The Completion of a Life's Work in Fragments

The figure sinks its head down at an angle, its eyes almost closed. It seems to be directed into itself. At the same time, the muscular body exhibits tension, as if pausing in the middle of a movement. The right arm extends without a hand. This is one of the many figures that Auguste Rodin designed for *La porte de l'enfer* (The Gates of Hell) starting in 1880 and eventually also sold as individual works, reproduced in various versions.

The Gates of Hell was Rodin's first public commission. It was intended to be the entrance to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. In the end, the new building never materialized and the artist never described the gate project as completed. The first bronze cast was not made until 1926, nine years after Rodin's death. In the design, three *Ombres* stand on top of the lintel, united in a group, their gazes fixed on the events taking place below. There, Rodin has assembled a dense composition of human suffering, inspired by the bleak diagnosis of humanity in Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* and the intensity of physical representation in the works of Michelangelo Buonarroti, as well as by Lorenzo Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise on the baptistery of the Florence Cathedral.

The opportunity to realize the *Gates of Hell* had been hard-won for Rodin, and not only artistically. After his work had been rejected multiple times at the Paris Salon and in competitions for public commissions, being selected to design the monumental gate marked a decisive turning point. Critics were soon downright euphoric about the lifelike intensity of his sculptures, which only shortly before had been disparaged as *surmoulage* (over-molding, or casting directly from the model's body). In addition to being given one of the coveted government-owned studios, the artist also received more and more commissions. *L'ombre* thus also stands for a life's work full of completed fragments—Rodin's artistic hallmark and a liberating move for the genre of sculpture in the late nineteenth century.

ROOM 1

JEAN-PAUL RIOPELLE (1923–2002)
Composition, 1951
Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1451
Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

WALTER BODMER (1903–1973)
Draht- und Metallplastik (Wire and Metal Sculpture), 1955
Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1978.53
Gift of Margy Bodmer, Basel 1978

Metallplastik (Metal Sculpture), 1965–1966
Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1978.54
Gift of Margy Bodmer, Basel 1978

Ilma Rakusa is an author, translator, and literary critic;
she lives in Zurich.

There Is No Such Thing as Standing Still

Movement as a primal impulse. There is no such thing as standing still. Everything is in a whirl in Jean-Paul Riopelle's *Composition*, made of sprays and dabs and streams and lines of color, a magma that forms rhythms and structures. Random or controlled by hand? The explosive intensity of the process captured here is more like a natural event. Something bursts into a thousand pieces, leaving behind splinters and shreds that come together to form what appears as order, which—on closer inspection—is itself made up of fragments and particles. And these particles move. Only here they are lashed down in a snapshot of a moment. Indeed, the picture does not really want to be a picture. The artist's intention is the act of painting, which amounts to an event without intention. It happens. Given enough paints on hand, the Action Painting develops its own dynamic. With or without a brush or palette knife. On whatever painting surface. And draws us into its vortex. We see surfaces and deep structures, networks of lines and blotches of color, we search for paths for the eye to find its way out of the labyrinth of diverse stimuli that arouse us. Our pulse quickens and suddenly we are no longer sure whether what we see is chaos or order, whether concealed behind the *Composition* is an artistic big bang.

Walter Bodmer's figures create a different kind of tension. Dance-like in their gestural character, they too are all movement, measuring out the space by demanding space. The outstretched arms of the female figure appear not only self-confident, but imperative. Here, the I makes its rounds: make way, don't you come too close to me!

There may be good reasons for this. For instance, to ward someone off. And what is going on with this strange figure threatening to plunge a spear-like spike into the belly of the beauty? She backs away a bit, alarmed by so much importunity. What happens next—we don't know. The halted movement only hints at it.

Bodmer works with wire, which suggests movement instead of volume: through staggered outlines and "limbs." The artfully bent wire produces momentum and rhythm. No coincidence—the artist was also a jazz musician. His sculptures are delicate attempts to make wire, iron, and sheet metal vibrate. And already we are swinging along, hesitantly or not.

ROOM 1

ROBERT GENIN (1884–1943)
Balinesin (Balinese Girl) *II*, ca. 1926
Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1208
Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

THEO MEIER (called Meier aus Bali) (1908–1982)
Kopf einer Balinesin (Head of a Balinese Woman), 1938
Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1978.116
Legat Dr. August Meyer, Basel 1977

Laksmi Pamuntjak is an Indonesian writer who lives in Jakarta.

I See Her as if She Were Glass

They say it is the highest honor to be plucked from one's youth this way—to be singled out, molded, made more special; indeed, to put one's stamp on time itself. I was all of five, and yet they—my father, the *raja*, the *pedanda*— [1] had seen all they needed to see: how agile I was, and how oblivious to the magic I could conjure within the span of my little hands. Being men, they had no use for that thing called ego, other than their own, and I had none to offer.

Tenderly they sent me off to meet my destiny, and through the rooms and corridors of the temple I grew in my eyes, my feet, my fingers what I missed in my childhood—my mother, my siblings, my home—and as I held them there I learned a new language. With a mere flick of my wrist I am able to summon the most dastardly of demons and glue them to their seats. Command the *gamelan* [2] to make music out of the beat beneath my feet. Occasionally someone in the audience might yell how pretty I am even with my headdress askew, and I would just burn him down with my gaze.

Lately however, I have come to covet the sight of a girl who comes to our temple to help us welcome guests. She's no dancer, but I am felled by her proud unfettered womanliness. I see her as if she were glass. The poise with which she holds her head, so different from mine. The coral hair a besotted painter might fan into a flame, the downcast gaze that apologizes for nothing, not even for wearing those hideous studs that make her ears look like mangoes.

I am envious of the stillness of her movements, of her being, as if a gift from the gods bestowed only to the unchosen. Is there is a hint of sorrow in her eyes—has she perhaps love to give but nowhere to go? I might only have dreamed it. What is greatness if you are not allowed the grace of your own making.

There are many kinds of desire, and I wonder if there is between my eternal motion and her ethereal worldliness a place where we can meet in full, where the men are not.

[1] In Indonesia, a *raja* is a ruler, prince or king. *Pedanda* is the name for a Balinese Hindu priest.

[2] In Indonesia, *gamelan* refers to a musical ensemble, usually with traditional musical instruments.

ROOM 1

PABLO PICASSO (1881–1973)
Nu couché (Reclining Woman), 1934
Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1413
Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

GERMAINE RICHIER (1902–1959)
Seated Female Nude, ca. 1944
Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1978.120
Bequest of Dr. August Meyer, Basel 1977

Music

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)
Seven variations for piano and cello
on "Men, Who Feel Love" from
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*

Musicians
Jiayi Liu, originally from China, studies cello with Danjulo Ishizaka at the Basel Academy of Music. She has received major awards and performs both as a soloist—often with contemporary programs—and as a chamber musician. **Yukie Takai** is a Japanese pianist who studied in Tokyo, Freiburg, and Stuttgart. She now teaches in Stuttgart and has received numerous awards. She performs as a soloist as well as in chamber music ensembles.

Isabel Zürcher is an art historian and writer in Basel.

Power and Tenderness

The woman lies there as if washed up on a shore. She throws her head backwards, seeking support against a red cushion adorned with a star. A flowing pink appendage—forget the hand, never mind the feet!—reaches for a flower in white. The right breast bounces up like a ball or a plump fruit, while below the navel, all is swirling in a storm: with a backside seen as if from the front, the painting invents desire, throws ribs down like worn-out brushes, forgets itself in the incarnate, which drifts apart in a cloud of mint and blue. The interior scene behind the waves of this woman seems almost prim, downright stepmotherly in treatment. Dab by dab, the screen leads back into the room, into the picture, into the small format where the great fire of the imagination is about to be lit.

The seated woman has, at first glance, everything to recommend her. Hips, stomach, and breasts curve warmly around the precisely built body. And that is what it's all about, the body: the fullness, the pride, the real presence. The slightly lifted leg anticipates a movement. However, we do not know whether the nameless woman is finding her balance while standing and walking or whether her empty arms are searching impotently for support. It is uncertain, too, if she can see or if her softly modeled mask needs to be lifted to expose her organs of sight and hearing.

Between these nudes lies a decade. And a war. Bullfights were a key motif for Pablo Picasso in the year he produced this small picture. His painting style brings the tempo of movement and the willingness to put everything on the line from the arena to the model in the studio. Germaine Richier, for her part, trained budding artists in the precise analysis of the human body during her exile in Zurich. In her own art, the sculptor would distort her natural models and describe them as storms, taking a surrealist legacy with her into her postwar production. Under her eye, cowering people become grasshoppers, and she discovers the blueprint of real ghosts in a bat. All change begins from within: Under the long shaft that is both snout and nose, the *Seated Nude* reveals a life of its own. In the precise casting, the sculpting hand violates every rigid ideal.

ROOM 1

ANTONI CLAVÉ (1913–2005)
Cristo de Alba de Tormes, 1954
Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1101
Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

RÉMY ZAUGG (1943–2005)
VOIR MORT, 1989
Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1993.5, gift of the Verein Schule und Elternhaus Schweiz (Swiss Schools and Families Association), 1993

Hans Furer is an art collector and the managing director of the Im Obersteg Foundation.

Seeing Death—A History of Basel Images

In 1989, the Swiss conceptual artist Rémy Zaugg mounted an exhibition at the Mai 36 Gallery in Lucerne entitled *VOIR MORT*. It showed twenty-eight identical pictures side by side. Each picture was painted by hand. On our visit to the exhibition, my wife and I experienced both fascination and an admixture of disappointment. Why twenty-eight identical paintings in one exhibition? Isn't that boring? Were these supposed to be twenty-eight dead people (MORT) or twenty-eight sighted people (VOIR)?

The Spanish artist Antoni Clavé was thirty years younger than the collector Karl Im Obersteg and one year older than the collector's son Jürg. Of the fifteen works by Clavé in the Im Obersteg collection, all were acquired by the father Karl, with one exception: *Christo de Alba de Tormes*. This one painting was acquired by his son Jürg in Barcelona in 1955. Why this painting in particular?

Jürg Im Obersteg was head of the Institute of Forensic Medicine at the University of Basel and had the task of examining dead people. This may have been why the work especially appealed to him, but it was probably not the only reason. There was something serious about the character of the Im Obersteg Collection even back then: the portraits of Jews by Marc Chagall, the *Absinthe Drinker* by Pablo Picasso, and the *Meditations* by Alexej von Jawlensky are not cheerful pictures. I am certain that Jürg was motivated to buy the painting in part because of this seriousness, on the one hand, and also because of its connection to the *Dead Christ* by Hans Holbein the Younger, which is a work of such great significance for the Kunstmuseum Basel.

Zaugg knew the Kunstmuseum Basel like the back of his hand, and the paintings of Holbein the Younger inspired him in his own work. But the Basel culture of the dance of death, the seriousness of the Basel carnival, and the city's pharmaceutical research were also more or less part of the artist's DNA. While Jürg and Karl Im Obersteg "collected" death with their somber selection of works, Zaugg engaged with it through painting.

As I write this, I realize how often depictions of death can be found in Basel's art and culture. If, like me, you have lived in Basel all your life and have internalized the culture of this city, you learn that death is part of life.

ROOM 2

ALEXEJ VON JAWLENSKY (1864–1941)
Meditation N. 30, 1934
Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1266
Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

THEASTER GATES (* 1973)
And When She Prayed, Even The Pantheon Said Amen, 2018
Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 2019.39
Gift of the artist, 2019

Music piece

HEDY SALQUIN (1928–2012)
Thème et variations, 1945 (Copy 1984)

Performer
The pianist **Giorgio Agnès** was born in Turin in 2006. He performs regularly as a soloist and chamber musician in Italy, England, Germany, and Switzerland and has already won several prizes at international competitions. He is currently studying at the Basel Music Academy with Claudio Martínez Mehner.

Martin R. Dean is a writer and essayist from Basel.

Dark Prayer

I'm standing in front of this apparently random assemblage, the meaning of which seems dark and incomprehensible to me. Porcelain tiles from a bathroom, a fluorescent tube, and a metal frame on which three indecipherable masks are mounted—they make me think of three lucky rabbit heads, three praying hands, or even three skulls.

Theaster Gates brings together things that are foreign to each other. The tiles come from a gutted house and I wonder if they're from the bathroom where his mother would lock herself away to pray in silence and find some peace and quiet. The black metal frame reminds me of his *Black Madonna*. It seems natural to infer that we are at the center of Gates's work. But the frame that elevates these objects to the status of art is movable.

How can I respond with fixed concepts to Gates's approach of dissolving the boundaries of things? I would have to shape language into a prayer so that the words would open to the sky. The readymades form an altar and at the same time a space of commemoration. An assemblage of artistically and industrially created objects and pieces of rubble. Gates seems to want to tell us: only the broken and the fragmentary offer an inkling of the whole!

This modern "object poem" is juxtaposed with a Meditation by Alexej von Jawlensky: his mask keeps its eyes closed, its gaze turned inwards. Jawlensky called his paintings an "allegory of the spiritual." Painted on the eve of the Second World War, his *Meditation No. 30* is full of foreboding and visionary anticipation of the horror. Gates's work has this horror already behind it. The form of his assemblage is based on the shattering of the promise of salvation, because he too is unsure whether there is a God at all. And if there was a God, or several, to whom his mother prayed, then they would probably be Black.

Julia Rüegger is an author and poet as well as a moderator
and cultural journalist in Basel.

ROOM 3

Who is “Grenouille,” Suzanne?

I

She steps into the tub with a great big step, as if she has to cross a threshold. The tub is big enough that the water makes a sloshing sound when she sinks her body into it. Big enough to make small waves when she paddles with her feet or slaps the water with her hand. Even big enough to soon envelop her completely; her torso, her legs, her arms, her head, so that in the end all of her thoughts circle down the drain.

(The washerwoman’s hands afterwards, those watery, whitish wrinkles, do they remind you, Suzanne, of your mother, who was a washerwoman?)

II

And from what body of water does this stone bather emerge? From the Rhine or the river Wiese? From Lake Maggiore? More likely from the pool of a bathing establishment, perhaps at the Margrethen pool in Basel, which opened in 1903?

She holds her arms protectively around her chest and stomach to shield herself from prying eyes or a cool breeze. Tackles the transition back to land without haste. As if she were still submerged under water, she hears the children’s laughter from afar, the chatter of the other women, the call of the swallows, her own pulse. Feels for the first time in weeks quite clearly that she too is alive, not just the athletic dancers on the diving platforms, who plunge into the pool swift as an arrow.

The drops of water trickle down her calves. How differently her heart is beating now, how pleasantly cool her circulation runs. So still that she is almost dizzy.

III

But the frog, Suzanne: what is this title all about? Is "La Grenouille" the nickname of the bather, the term of endearment of the one for the other? Frog because of the spread thighs, because of the jumping power and the hibernation?

You painted with as much defiance as the defiance that it takes to live, you said once.

And painted as many nudes as you wanted, of women as well as men, without a care for the prevailing taboos.

IV

One of the bathers stands entranced under a swimming cap.
The other wears nothing but her knotted hair.

SUZANNE VALADON (1865–1938)
La grenouille (Frog), 1910
Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1591
Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

CARL BURCKHARDT (1878–1923)
Bather, 1917
Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. P 40
Purchased through the Birmann-Fonds in 1917

ROOM 3

MAURICE DE VLAMINCK (1876–1958)
Côte de mer (Sea Coast), c. 1932
Oil on canvas
Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1602
Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

LEIKO IKEMURA (*1951)
Ur, 1992
Bronze
Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 2019.7
Gift of Catherine and Bernard Dreyfus Soguel, 2019

Undine Stabrey is an archaeologist and historian of science.
She works as a writer and editor in Basel and Zurich.

Ur Sea Being
The Theft of Seeing: Four Pairings

Water makes up some seventy percent of the earth's surface. Seas, oceans, an animated blue-white mass moving skyward—as in Maurice de Vlaminck's painting of the sea. Much of the earth appears to us like this: as a surface. Blue/blue-grey, white spray, dynamic water. Transitions everywhere. And somewhere between earth and sky, in the domain of the sea—Leiko Ikemura's primordial beings (*Urwesen*). One of which stands before you, or rather takes up residence in your eye as a paper flatness, together with the edge of the sea by Maurice de Vlaminck. Primordial beings and primordial sea: first pairing.

In the wild sea, beings often grasp the seas—which are themselves primordial beings—as forms that are both drop-shaped and yet sharp-edged. Just as stones at the edge of the sea are "washed" by water to form channels, so too is the primordial being. Its openings are permeated by water, by the movements of time/the weather, of Vlaminck's essence of the sea. Sea space and seeing space: second pairing.

Sharp-edged organic forms such as plant leaves or horseshoe crabs—such as the head of Ikemura's primordial being; beings of a time entirely without categories such as plants and animals or sea and time. Both Vlaminck's sea and Ikemura's beings, sea space and seeing space, are interwoven here, each a part of the fixed worlds of art: the sea affixed on the wall, the temporal form on a pedestal. The theft of seeing and situated being—artistic thinking and understanding of interior space: third pairing.

From the perspective of digitalization, of current stuff like video or virtual reality art, both works seem archaic. No glow, no electromagnetic state: In the view of digital object worlds, the space-time materializations of 1932 (Vlaminck's transitions between sky and water) and 1992 (Ikemura's temporal depth) are as if from another world—when objects/art were mostly made and grasped by human hands. Art/historicization—the era of knowledge and creation: fourth pairing.

ROOM 3

PABLO PICASSO (1881–1973)
Femme dans la loge (Woman in the Loge)
(*verso: Buveuse d'absinthe* [The Absinthe Drinker]), 1901
Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1411
Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

PIERRE-AUGUSTE RENOIR (1841–1919)
Femme dans un jardin (La femme à la mouette)
(Woman in a Garden [Woman with a Seagull Hat]), 1868
Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1988.22
Acquired with a special loan from the Basel government
and numerous private contributions in 1988

Marius Glaser is a retired fine arts teacher
at the Olten Cantonal School.

Brushstrokes that Caress, Whip, and Cover

In 1868, Auguste Renoir painted a picture of his twenty-year-old lover. Lise Tréhot is seated elegantly in an armchair, wearing a dark, blue-violet Parisian promenade dress and resting her left hand on a small table. In her right, she holds a light-colored glove. The red coral and gold earrings and the blue-grey seagull hat are striking. Renoir has depicted these fashionable details with precision, and they stand out particularly well against the dark foliage in the background, which is rendered in an animated painterly style.

In contrast, Pablo Picasso's *Femme dans la loge* has a wild and expressive effect. Picasso himself was twenty years old when he created the portrait of the seated lady with bright red-painted lips and a lavish hat. Her severely drawn face appears mask-like and withdrawn. Picasso has only roughly sketched the surroundings with energetic, even violent brushstrokes in blue, yellow, and a few shades of red. The face is clearly recognizable, while in other places the work appears almost abstract, like a painterly experiment.

The *Buveuse d'absinthe* on the reverse side of Picasso's painting forms a stark contrast to this wild application of paint. The colors are muted and applied more flatly; the composition appears calmer. The woman's gaze seems to be directed inwards, her crossed arms signaling distance. This melancholy picture depicts the portrait of an absinthe drinker, an unknown woman on the margins of society in Paris during the Belle Époque.

Thanks to their different coloration and application of paint, the three portraits of Parisian women also convey different content in a temporal context. To my mind, the juxtaposition makes it clear that the design and painting style of a work of art can convey meaning as powerfully as its motif.

ROOM 3

BERNARD BUFFET (1928–1999)
Deux oiseaux noirs (Two Black Birds), 1951
Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1055
Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

GABRIEL OROZCO (* 1962)
Fly Stamp, 2010
Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 2010.5
Gift from the artist 2010

Eduardo Jorge de Oliveira, essayist and professor of art and literature.

After-Flying

It is not the air that the fly and the blackbirds share, much less the frame or the hand that brought them to our eyes. Nor is it rest. The fly's body is now immersed in a mass that was once more malleable—a reminder of the air it once crossed. Its flight is over. The birds, on the other hand, perch on roosts, waiting. Perhaps they will fly when the museum is empty, or perhaps they are flying already, within your imagination. For images, after all, are never truly static.

The fly and the blackbirds do not share the same medium or technique. The fly was captured in a photograph, while the birds are rendered in paint. The fly gleams with a metallic green, its body seemingly armored, its wings shifting between transparency and diaphanous paleness. The birds, rich in dark tones, inhabit a world of deep black; they form a pair, united by both color and the painter's gesture. Will they fly? They already have. Now, as images, they wait for the gaze that will animate them once again. And here you are—you've caught them.

Orozco and Buffet both understand that for human imagination to take flight, first a pause is required—a moment of stillness offered by birds and flies alike. *Poor fly!* What disaster, that in Art is called *still-life*. Now it exists at the intersection of artist and spectator, transformed into an image, suspended in its *after-flying*.

And the birds? They have each other. They pause, fixed in the moment of the artist's intervention. *Living models!* Geographically and temporally distant, the two artists —Orozco from Mexico, shooting a fly in 2010, and Buffet from France, painting blackbirds in 1951—converge in this shared space of contemplation.

The fly somehow becomes a living fossil with its eerie buzzing, its hum resonating in memory as we look. The birds evoke something equally familiar, their quiet presence can change suddenly.

Can you hear them?

ROOM 4

PABLO PICASSO (1881–1973)
La guenon et son petit (Baboon and Young), 1951
Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1414
Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

ROSEMARIE TROCKEL (*1952)
Untitled, 1984
Kunstmuseum Basel, Department of Prints and Drawings,
Inv. 1991.220
Gift of Dr. Ernst Vischer, Basel, 1991

Stefanie Manthey is an author, docent, and art educator. She lives in Basel.

Human Animals

People like to make images of practically everything: of themselves and other creatures, buildings or nature. They employ various techniques and dictate the perspectives, which they have learned to use to further their own interests. The ongoing exploration of this visual heritage reveals gaps, losses, and continuities. The tradition of artistic images includes inventions and formats that relentlessly resist disambiguation or undermine totalizing, destructive visual regimes. In this process, animals play roles that have been assigned to them by humans.

What would change if—as Rosemarie Trockel put it in one of her artist books in 1993—"every animal is a female artist?" It would reveal the existence of a hitherto unconsidered (cultural) heritage. Are people qualified to harness this heritage? Due to the history of their civilization, including the production of animal images, they would initially be excluded. Artists would also have to prove their competence anew. Especially those who have used the topos of the "ape as painter" in a caricaturing and self-aggrandizing way. In Pablo Picasso's case, one would need to reevaluate an entire portfolio. Apes appear in his works from 1905 onwards, and a baboon called Monina belonged for a time to the studio community. Picasso also owned works by Congo (1954–1964)—a monkey whom the behavioral scientist Desmond Morris exhibited at the London Zoo in the act of painting. Additionally, we should add to the list the sculpture *La guenon et son petit*, in which Picasso assembled his son Claude's toy cars, fired ceramics, car springs, wood, metal, and plaster into a collage of materials.

What criteria would people need to fulfill to be able to judge art by animals? One was identified in 1997 by Rosemarie Trockel and Carsten Höller in the context of their project *A House for Pigs and People* for documenta X in Kassel: to recognize that their supremacy over other living beings is based on a cluster of custodial authorities, very few of which can be maintained.

Over a decade earlier, Trockel had tried her own hand at drawing monkeys in a series. For the supports, she used the backs of posters and often acidic writing paper, which discolors when exposed to light. Some sections consist of high-gloss spray paint, others appear matte, revealing brushstrokes and traces of drying. The large formats, executed as half and three-quarter portraits, like head studies, couple emotional and mental states and gestures with hybrid bodies. In a manner at once subtle and resolute, these works subvert the mantra of the evolutionary progress of patriarchal order.

ROOM 4

ANDRÉ DERAIN (1880–1954)
Woman with Long Hair, c. 1938/50
Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1154
Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel, 2004

SÜDDEUTSCHER MEISTER c. 1500
Portrait of a Young Man, c. 1500
Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. 676
Museum Faesch, 1823

Mauro Berther is an art educator at the Kunstmuseum Basel.

It's a Match

"Clara and Paul live in the clouds and haven't seen each other for a very long time. When they meet again, Paul asks Clara if she wants to have an adventure with him. Clara is excited to come. Luckily, Paul still has a treasure map at home, which makes it easy to find the treasure. The very next day, they have already found it."

This short story, created in a group activity during the children's workshop "It's a Match" at the Kunstmuseum Basel, establishes a connection between the bronze sculpture by André Derain and the portrait by a South German master from around 1500. The participants in the workshop —children from seven to ten years old—were tasked with looking through a large number of works in the collection of the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel (the Basel Public Art Collection), to find a suitable counterpart for Derain's Woman with Long Hair from the Im Obersteg Collection. The twenty or so children worked together to come up with four suggestions and created different stories to explain them. The young man's long curls most certainly put him on the shortlist. The fact that the painting also turned out to be the most suitable of the selections with respect to conservation provided further impetus after the workshop to display it in the exhibition.

The little story above offers good insight into the kind of interpretive freedom that can be opened up through juxtaposition. The dialogue between the images gives free rein to the imagination. The pairing, however, not only invites free association but also imposes a kind of relationship on the two works, which the young participants in the workshop explored in their own individual ways. The children exchanged thoughts and ideas, linking their imaginative fancies and observations with personal memories. Working in small groups, they agreed on a story that they presented to the other children. In some of the stories, such as "Clara and Paul," the children made the subjects of the two works the only protagonists, while in others they added many additional characters and settings. In each case, contemplating the works led them into fantastic worlds and inspired them to create narratives in which they dealt with questions ranging from the everyday to the philosophical.

ROOM 4

JEAN DUBUFFET (1901–1985)
Effigie rocher fruiteux (Effigy of a Fruitbearing Rock), 1958
Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1171
Deposited with the Kunstmuseum Basel in 2004

JEAN DUBUFFET (1901–1985)
Le crapadeur (The toad), 1959
Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1964.11
Gift of Werner Schenk, 1964

Maira van Dam is twelve years old and attends
the first secondary school in Binningen.

Stony Beings

When I see the artworks next to each other, I think of people. People, like works of art, are different, no two are alike and yet they all have things in common. Two works of art, created by the same artist, with different materials—one seems happier, friendlier than the other, is rounder and looks more homey, perhaps it lives in a big family. The other work is bonier, sadder or more wistful, older and lonelier. But you can't overlook the similarities either. Both have something stony, craggy, both are missing something if you follow their gaze; they are not angular, and both are unique.

If I wanted to meet them, I would look for them in stony valleys and caves. Maybe there would be more of them too? But they could also live in other places, because they are not really made of stone. One guy is made of paint on canvas, the other of papier-mâché. But who says these creatures are male anyway? Perhaps there is no way of knowing because they are extinct? Is that why they look so distressed?

I would like to ask them how they are doing and what they need. Of course, I would be unsettled if I actually met them, but actually I don't think they would do anyone any harm. But you can't really know that. People know nothing about many things. You don't have to know everything to do something special though. Art knows no boundaries, anything is possible. It doesn't just show what you already know. Artists can create something new, mysterious, and unknown. And that is exactly the case with these two works.

ROOM 5

GABRIELE MÜNTER (1877–1962)
Lady and Boy, 1912
Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 1372
Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2004

KITAGAWA UTAMARO I (1753–1806), FORGERY
The Habit of Coddling Small Children,
early twentieth century
(Modern imitation of a depiction from Utamaro's
Seven Bad Habits series)
Kunstmuseum Basel, Department of Prints and Drawings,
Inv. 1942.522
Bequest of Dr. Carl Mettler, Basel 1942

Tomoko Ogawa is Chief Curator at the Nakanoshima Museum of Art in Osaka, Japan.

Mother and Child in East and West

A small painting by Gabriele Münter and an *ukiyo-e* woodblock print created in Japan. This unique pair has the common theme of "mother and child."

In the German painting, a woman dressed in white and a boy in blue clothes are sitting side by side. The flowers depicted are abnormally large compared to the figures. Are they fairies in a flowerbed? The motifs are surrounded by thin black outlines and each part is painted in a single color. The composition is simple and the three-dimensional space is ambiguous. The mother and child are close to each other, suggesting an intimate relationship. The straw hat the boy is wearing resembles a sacred halo. The two figures emit a pure aura like that of the Virgin Mary and Child.

On the other hand, there is an *ukiyo-e* (possibly a forgery) said to have been created by Kitagawa Utamaro, a popular artist active until the early nineteenth century. A mother is holding her baby close, pressing her cheek to the baby's cheek. Although the woman's face is impassive, her gesture of wrapping the baby in the layers of her kimono expresses her affection. The series title, Seven Bad Habits, implies a satire of the over-indulgence of children (after all, women have many other household chores to do, such as sewing and laundry). Many *ukiyo-e* prints that feature children also include female figures. An enormous number of *ukiyo-e* artists created diverse mother-child images during the Edo period.

The German and Japanese works differ extensively, but there may be some hints of similarity. Many Western painters, especially the Impressionists, were influenced by *ukiyo-e* prints. In 1906–1907, Münter spent about a year with Kandinsky in Sèvres, a suburb of Paris, where she was influenced by Post-Impressionism. Dame und Junge was painted in 1912, probably in Murnau, where she was inspired by the religious folk art of Upper Bavaria. She also created stained glass works and woodblock prints there.

Significant differences between the two works include the technique (vivid reverse glass painting and a woodblock print) and the cultural background of East and West. We may find the commonality that they are both small artworks using contour lines and color fields, depicting intimate mother-child relationships in a simple manner.

ROOM 5

Dance at the Varieté—A Significant New Acquisition

"I very much regret that I was unable to accept your wife's kind invitation to come to the Sacharoffs' dance event due to a prior engagement that I had already had to cancel twice." Such was the apology addressed by the artist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner to Karl Im Obersteg in May 1935 after the collector invited him to a dance recital by the famous dancer-couple Clotilde von Derp and Alexander Sacharoff at the Basel Stadttheater. For Kirchner, the performance would remain a missed opportunity.

Despite the mutually appreciative relationship between Kirchner and Im Obersteg as documented in sixteen surviving letters, the family never owned a work by the artist. Jürg Im Obersteg wrote in 1971 to the Ketterer auction house: "I am particularly interested in Kirchner because I knew him well personally from Davos. It is all the more paradoxical that I do not own any of his paintings and that, unfortunately, my father also 'missed the boat' with him."

Today, the Im Obersteg Foundation has an outstanding collection of modern art and copious correspondence attests to the family's close relationships with the artists whose works they possessed. But until now, Kirchner had not been among these. The acquisition of the large-format masterpiece *Tanz im Varieté* of 1911 has filled this notable gap at last. As if a long-planned dance performance had finally come to pass, Kirchner and Im Obersteg now come together in Basel, in their lasting mutual respect and their shared interest in dance.

But the dance we experience when viewing this painting today is different. Over a century after the image was painted, we perceive the events it depicts through a different lens. Today, we not only see the pulsating life of the Varieté in the metropolis, as Kirchner observed it in Dresden in 1911. We also register how our view of it has changed since then. The Black male dancer, in particular, challenges us to carefully reflect on the social context of the time. His face radiates concentration as he performs the "cakewalk" in the spotlight with a female dancer.

This dance originated in the nineteenth century on cotton and coffee plantations in the USA, where the enslaved people used it to parody the stiff movements of their *white* masters. The latter in turn adopted the dance without realizing that they were caricaturing themselves in the process. The cakewalk became a fad that spread to Europe. Here, too, people wanted not only to see it, but to dance it themselves. In 1903, a cakewalk was performed for the

Géraldine Meyer is the curator of the Im Obersteg Foundation.

first time in Dresden by a *white* American barefoot dancer. Kirchner's work of 1911 also documents its performance by dancers of different ethnicities.

However, the cakewalk was much more than just a form of social dance—it was an expression of rebellion, self-empowerment, and ultimately, cultural exchange. Its ambiguity—caught between self-representation and depiction by outsiders, appropriation and recognition, entertainment and emancipation—makes Kirchner's depiction particularly thought-provoking from today's perspective.

The curator and critic of dance and theater Marietta Piekenbrock summarized it aptly when she wrote that the painting *Tanz im Varieté* "transports us to the moment in modernity when things begin to change: gestures, gender relations, forms of power, the relationship to our own bodies and to other cultures."

For me, the inclusion of this work in the Im Obersteg collection is more than just an expansion of the holdings. It is a symbolic act: making up for a missed opportunity, certainly. But above all, it is a sign that the questions Kirchner raised in his art remain part of a cultural history that must continue to concern us in the long term.

ROOM 5

ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER (1880–1938)
Tanz im Varieté (Dance at the Varieté), 1911
Im Obersteg Foundation, Inv. Im 2024.1
Permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel since 2024

ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER (1880–1938)
The Friends (Hermann Scherer and Albert Müller), 1924
Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. G 1956.27
Gift of Olga Reinhart-Schwarzenbach, Winterthur, 1956

ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER (1880–1938)
Skaters, ca. 1924
Kunstmuseum Basel, Department of Prints and Drawings,
Inv. 1938.172
Acquired in 1938

ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER (1880–1938)
Davos in Winter. Davos in Snow, 1923
Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. 1931
Gift of Georg Reinhart, Winterthur, 1944

ROOM 5

Feverish Metropolis—Alpine Landscape

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Tanz im Varieté* (Dance at the Varieté) (1911) and his Davos landscapes constitute a meeting of two vastly different worlds: the cosmopolitan motif of feverish nightlife in Berlin is juxtaposed with depictions of the serene seclusion of the Grisons Alps. However, the two diametrically opposed milieus—here, the urban interior and there, the rural outdoors—are only superficially in conflict. The long-standing claim that Kirchner's abrupt move from Berlin to Davos was accompanied by a striking stylistic change must be put into perspective. In fact, in the first years in Frauenkirch near Davos prior to World War I, the artist continued to pursue the formal language and painterly style he had previously developed, transferring it almost seamlessly to his unfamiliar, new surroundings.

Tanz im Varieté depicts a so-called "cakewalk." The term refers to a dance competition in which the prize awarded to the winning couple is a cake. In the foreground of the picture, a Black dancer and his partner are giving it their all to win. Behind them, three other female dancers and a man wait their turn. The sharp contours of the figures and the starkness of the black, purple, red, and orange colors, as well as the striking diagonal of the dance floor, all contribute to the highly expressive effect.

The Davos landscapes are equally powerful, but with a different accentuation. The colors are full of expressive force. In *Stafelalp, Rückkehr der Tiere* (Stafelalp, Return of the Animals) (1919), the distant mountains glow with intense red and orange tones, while the foreground is dominated by blue and green. And in Davos in Winter (1923), the snow shimmers between light blue, luminous yellow, and pink. These colors are joined by the red of the forest and the green of the clouds, evoking a fantastically visionary atmosphere. The topography in both these landscapes is also depicted in an exaggerated way. The mountains are made to appear much steeper, more rhythmic, and more dramatic than in reality.

The Kunstmuseum Basel found it extremely difficult to acquire Kirchner's works. The only pieces brought into the collection in the 1930s were works on paper donated by the artist to the Basel Kupferstichkabinett. The first Kirchner painting acquired by the museum was *Davos in Winter*. It was a gift from the Winterthur collector Georg Reinhart, who bought it in 1924 at the Winterthur Kirchner exhibition. He had intended to donate it to the local art association, but the offer was flatly rejected. Davos in Winter came to Basel toward the end of 1944, around the same time that Kirchner's *Amselfluh* (1922) was finally purchased after a long period of negotiations. The two land-

Beat Stutzer was for many years the director of the Bündner Kunstmuseum in Chur and now leads Büro K&K, Kunst und Kommunikation in Lucerne.

scapes were supplemented in 1956 by a second gift from Georg Reinhart—the wooden sculpture *Die Freunde* (The Friends) (1924), Kirchner's impressive monument to his two fellow Basel artists Albert Müller and Hermann Scherer from the Rot-Blau group. Finally, Eberhard Kornfeld's donation of the painting *Stafelalp, Rückkehr der Tiere* rounded out the Kirchner collection in Basel to form a coherent ensemble.

As balanced as this group of works appears, until now it has been sorely lacking a representative work from Kirchner's time in Berlin. It is truly sensational that the painting *Tanz im Varieté*, which was long thought to be lost, can now move to the Kunstmuseum Basel, thanks to its acquisition at auction by the Im Obersteg Foundation (2024)—a stroke of luck par excellence. Now it has become possible to place the Davos landscapes in an illuminating juxtaposition, side by side with a work from the era of Die Brücke, which co-founded German Expressionism. *Tanz im Varieté* is part of the artist's work phase including the street paintings and subjects from the circus and vaudeville, which are among the most significant works of German Expressionism.

The Im Obersteg Foundation's role in acquiring *Tanz im Varieté* can be credited to the irony of history. Although Karl Im Obersteg corresponded with Kirchner and knew him personally, he never acquired any of Kirchner's works for his collection. His daughter-in-law Doris Im Obersteg-Lerch suspected that German Expressionism was "too brutal" for him and Kirchner's art "too extreme." Im Obersteg was far from alone in this opinion, but today, his judgment would likely have been somewhat different.

Esther Rapoport and **Magdalena Ritler**
are painting conservators at the Kunstmuseum Basel.

A Dance with Foams

One of the works that Ernst Ludwig Kirchner treasured most and brought with him when he moved to Switzerland in 1917 was his painting *Tanz im Varieté* (Dance at the Varieté). For nearly a century, a handful of black-and-white photographs were all the evidence that remained of this masterpiece. It was not until a very recent auction that the painting came to light again in its actual full-color glory. The luminosity of the color was an important concern for the Brücke artist. But how did he achieve it? What was his secret?

Dresden, 1911: Kirchner cuts his canvas to size and nails it carefully to the stretcher frame. The artist foregoes an initial layer of sizing so the fabric remains absorbent. He prepares a primer of glue, chalk, and linseed oil according to his own recipe and applies it in a very thin layer to the raw canvas. Kirchner uses commercially available oil paint from the tube, which he dilutes himself and mixes with benzene and wax. He foregoes a final coat of varnish. The result is a matte surface characteristic of his entire oeuvre. In 1931, Kirchner would comment in his diary on the particularly luminous color effects of the painting with the proud statement: “No one has these colors as I do.” But at the same time, the painting surface turns out to be extremely delicate.

Dresden—Berlin—Davos—Baden-Württemberg—Munich—Basel: The eventful journey through a turbulent century has left its mark on the painting. Damage to the paint layer caused by the canvas being rolled up for transit, the vagaries of war, and earlier attempts at restoration have all substantially altered the work. Today it is in a fragile condition. One particularly necessary restoration measure involves securing the paint layers, which have become loose in many places.

The fragile layers of the picture are fixed with a particularly age-resistant adhesive—a chemically modified cellulose. This methyl cellulose can be produced in various forms—liquid, gel, or foam. The use of various types of specially produced methyl cellulose foams is a new and innovative method for stabilizing paint layer cavities. Even the smallest paint particles can be saved with a scant amount of adhesive and minimal moisture.

The careful and precise conservation of the animated depiction is also a kind of dance, in this case with foams. They ensure that the *Tanz im Varieté* at the Kunstmuseum Basel will be preserved to the best possible extent.

Music piece

THOMAS HENRY LODGE (1884–1933)

Temptation Rag, 1909

Musician

Pierre-Nicolas Colombat, who has had a passion for ragtime since his youth, is an internationally recognized pianist, répétiteur, and essayist in Basel.

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The Swiss Foundation for Young Musicians (FYM) was founded in Basel in 2012. The foundation supports young musicians on their path onto the concert stage and into professional life, either during or immediately after concluding their studies. The foundation's headquarters, Spalenvorstadt 25, Basel, are regularly host to concerts with young musicians. foryoungmusicans.ch

Selection of the musical contributions and the musicians for the exhibition: **Isabel Heusser**, artistic and administrative director of the FYM.

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