

WALL TEXTS

05.07. 02.11.2025**Kandinsky, Picasso, Miró et al.**
back in Lucerne

In 1935, in the midst of the Great Depression, while Europe was becoming ever more totalitarian, works of modernist art were shown in Lucerne. Under the cumbersome title *These, Antithese, Synthese* (Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis), three exhibition makers attempted nothing less than a conflation of the avantgarde's various strands—towards a new, abstract, but not elitist art for everyone!

The people responsible for this extraordinary project were the museum conservator Paul Hilber, the art critic Konrad Farner and the young artist Hans Erni. The exhibition concept is strongly reminiscent of early 20th century ideological ambitions to create a new, better human being. The modernistic Kunstmuseum Luzern, which had been opened only recently, provided the perfect venue for the art of the avant-garde. In 1935, most of the works were delivered directly from the artists' studios; today they are hanging in the world's most renowned museums. Some of them were destroyed, others have been lost without trace. By reconstructing that legendary exhibition we are raising the following questions: What exactly led to that exceptional show?

Why was the art shown in Lucerne of all places? Who selected the artists, and why were no female artists included? What was the response to that art? In addition, what remains of modernism's promise of a better life for all? The reconstruction of *These, Antithese, Synthese* represents a critical evaluation of modernism—motivated by the conviction that only by understanding the historical context can one actively shape the present.

LUCERNE AS THE VENUE

An international art trade had become established in Lucerne in the 1920s. The beauty of the landscape and the wonderful hotels on the lakefront constituted an appropriate scenario for the international clients. In 1919, the Munich Galerie Thannhauser opened a branch in Lucerne; from 1928 onwards, it operated under the name Galerie Rosengart and, together with the auction house Fischer, became one of the prime addresses in the Swiss art trade. More and more galleries opened in the city so that in the 1920s and 1930s Lucerne accommodated an art trade of international rank: collectors and dealers from all over the world bought and sold art in Lucerne.

Political developments in Germany also heightened the attractiveness of Lucerne as a venue. Situated at the heart of Europe, neutral Switzerland offered legal certainty and political stability. Protected by the mountains and sufficiently distant from the country's border, the trade in modern art, having come under pressure in the metropolises in Germany, could be carried on easily in Lucerne. This meant that great artists like Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky or Georges Braque knew about Lucerne through their galleries, were aware of the small city's potential and placed their trust in their local contacts.

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HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Numerous crises were becoming apparent in the mid-1930s: National Socialism in Germany and communist cultural policy in the Soviet Union exerted pressure on the avant-garde art sector. France, the home of artistic modernism, and Switzerland, albeit to a lesser degree, thus became gathering places for the European avant-garde artists fleeing these developments. The Great Depression unleashed mass unemployment and social misery in Great Britain and above all in the United States. At the same time, the Wall Street crash was also having an impact on the art trade.

The exhibition of 1935, therefore, is to be assessed in the context of these crises and the imminent Second World War. Quite apart from the threats, adversities and conflicts, it was these circumstances which actually provided a considerable impetus for the ideas of the avant-garde.

THE MODERNIST RUPTURE

Modern art at the beginning of the 20th century represented something completely new, something that had not previously existed. It was a radical break with the conventions and rules that had prevailed until then. Movements such as Expressionism, Cubism and Surrealism strove to find new form of artistic expression so as to take the new realities, emotions and concepts of life into account. Art overcomes the rigid conventions of the bourgeois era. Depictions faithful to reality give way to abstraction, expressive colours and a reduction to geometrical forms. Cubism, in particular, shaped mainly by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, exerted an enormous influence on subsequent 20th century art movements despite the initially, limited public acceptance. It formed the point of departure for many other abstract styles, like Constructivism, and revolutionized the pictorial depiction of reality.

DEGENERATE ART

National Socialist Germany tried to eradicate modernism because its reactionary ideology rejected all works of art that did not promote its idea of homeland, national pride and German unity. Avant-gardist art along with all works by artists of Jewish origins were declared “degenerate”, removed from museums and publicly accessible collections, partly sold abroad, destroyed or put into storage.

The situation in 1935 was very tense; many of the artists represented in Lucerne had been defamed: Hans Arp, Georges Braque, Giorgio de Chirico, André Derain, Max Ernst, Fernand Léger, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Pablo Picasso. In the rabble-rousing Nazi propaganda exhibition *Entartete Kunst* that toured Germany between 1937 and 1941, their work was exposed to public scorn and ridicule.

Many, therefore, were forced to emigrate to Switzerland or else to bring their objects to Switzerland and sell them there in order to pay for their keep and a possible getaway. Some put their artworks and cultural assets into storage in Swiss bonded warehouses or art museums to prevent them being seized by National Socialist Germany. Art was also stored in the Kunstmuseum Lucerne; for example, the two works by Fernand Léger *La liseuse, mère et enfant* and *Contraste de forme* were taken directly from the museum depot for the exhibition *These, Antithese, Synthese*.

FACTS AND FIGURES

These, Antithese, Synthese (1935)

- Duration 5 weeks
- 3 curators: Museum conservator Paul Hilber (1890–1949), art historian Konrad Farner (1903–1974), artist Hans Erni (1909–2015)

- 99 works
- 23 male artists, 1 female artist
- In 1935 most of the works for the exhibition came directly from the artists' studios.
- Only 3 works were sold during the exhibition.
- Three works by Georges Braque, Paul Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh are missing from the original catalogue because they were only included in the exhibition at very short notice.
- The catalogue, designed by Jan Tschichold, was a source of inspiration for later generations.
- Media response: 24 articles

Kandinsky, Picasso, Miró et al. back in Lucerne (2025)

- For 5 years, a team of art experts researched which works were shown then, where the works are today and who they belonged to between 1935.
- 69 works were identified, 26 works are lost or not identified, 4 are believed to have been destroyed
- 22 male artists, 2 female artists
- 90 works, of which 43 are originals, 47 alternative works from the corresponding period
- The 90 works on show are from 47 different lenders in 15 countries.

MODERN SCULPTURE

In the 20th century, the concept of sculpture underwent a radical change. Sculpture became autonomous. It no longer had a function—either as a cult object, a monument demonstrating worldly or religious power, or as a source of enjoyment for the bourgeoisie. Sculpture became the free expression of the individual. This new freedom was also expressed in the form. Since Antiquity, western sculpture had been associated with the idea of the body—be it carved, modelled or moulded. In the 20th century, modern sculpture became detached from the body and its representation. Abstract and organic forms emerged, as in the sculptures of Hans Arp and Barbara Hepworth. New materials such as sheet metal, wire, wood and oil paint, as well as new techniques were used. Instead of making plaster models, Hepworth began to work directly with the stone using the “direct carving” process. Sculptures were not necessarily placed on a plinth, but could hang from the ceiling, as in the case of Alexander Calder's work. The sculptures embody the aspiration to activate a new way of seeing.

EQUALITY

The exhibition of 1935 did not fulfil modernism's promise that all human beings were to be equal—at least not from a feminist viewpoint. The new world that was to be expressed in a new society and a new image of the human being also promised gender equality. For the first time, restrictive gender norms were being questioned. Yet in art, which presented itself as particularly progressive, innovative and avantgardist, deeply rooted western notions of femininity and masculinity prevailed.

In 1935, the exhibition makers deliberately ignored art by women or people of non-European origins, thereby entering the exhibition in the international white male canon. The only female artist included then was Sophie Taeuber-Arp, and the exhibition makers only agreed to show her works under pressure from her husband, Hans Arp. Barbara Hepworth, by contrast, was not invited to take part in the exhibition despite requests made by her partner and later husband Ben Nicholson. Acknowledging that refusal, the exhibition *Kandinsky, Picasso, Miro et al. back in Lucerne* is presenting a larger group of works by Hepworth so as to critically address the theme of male dominance in the canon of the historical exhibition.

SYNTHESIS?

The synthesis announced in the 1935 exhibition title demanded a new progressive art that suited the new image of man. The communist concern of the art historian Konrad Farner was that art should address not just elites, but everyone. In conservative Lucerne of all places, the intention was to succeed with something that so far had not been achieved either in the Soviet Union of the Working Class or in Paris of the avant-garde: a liaison between the educated bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia and the proletariat towards creating a new human being.

The aspiration behind that synthesis can, however, also be seen in a more modest way. The arrangement of the works of art aimed to visualise a synthesis of the individual artistic trends. However it soon becomes obvious that Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger, Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Alberto Giacometti, among others, are difficult to allocate to just Abstraction or Surrealism. Accordingly, it is unclear which positions should then stand for the “thesis”, the “antithesis” or the “synthesis”. Farner’s intellectual approach contrasts strongly with his communist idea of an art for everyone.

RESONANCE

The reviews in 1935 called the exhibition *These, Antithese, Synthese* an impertinence, though some also acknowledged the art-historical aspiration. For example, the article *Kunst am Anfang oder am Ende* (The beginning or end of art) praised the beauty of the paintings’ expressive colours, although it also lamented that in some paintings it was not possible to recognize anything. Contrary to the modest public attendance and the limited media response, *These, Antithese, Synthese* had a huge impact in the long-term. To this very day, the exhibition is regarded as “legendary”, “inimitable”, “unbeatable”. In the city of Lucerne, the exhibition is still remembered as an amazing masterpiece. It is still very well known among experts because it can be seen as the point of departure for other projects in Switzerland. Yet the actual impact the exhibition strove to have—the synthesis of different avant-garde art movements—was just as unsuccessful as the creation of new human being. The project remained elitist, and instead of appealing to a broad public, its reception was limited to expert circles. The reconstruction of *These, Antithese, Synthese*, therefore, under the heading *Kandinsky, Picasso, Miro et al. back in Luzerne* is a critical self-reflection on the part of the institution and its history.