



Richard Ziegler, Knaabe im Sandkasten, 1926, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023

Art in Berlin 1880 – 1980 Permanent Exhibition

Berlin is always changing. The city's art scene constantly reinvents itself, too. Narrating this eventful history from the dawn of Modernism around 1900 into the 1980s is the theme of our permanent exhibition "Art in Berlin 1880–1980". The Berlinische Galerie has devoted over 1000 square metres to presenting its collection. Waiting to be discovered among the roughly 250 works on show are paintings, prints, photographs, architecture and archive materials rarely or never displayed before.

Walking around this exhibition is like time travel and takes visitors through Berlin in 17 chapters: the Kaiser's era, the Weimar Republic, the Nazi dictatorship, the new beginnings after 1945, Cold War in the divided city, and the counter-cultures and unconventional lifestyles that evolved in East and West under the shadow of the Wall. In East Berlin, an alternative art community developed from the late 1970s. In West Berlin from the late 1970s, aggressive art by the "Neue Wilden" placed the divided city back in the international limelight.

Exhibition chapters

Conservatives and Modernists

In 1871 the German territories united and Berlin, Prussia's commercial hub and royal residence, became the capital of the new German Reich. With advancing modernisation, it grew to become the biggest industrial conurbation in the country. The Kaiser's court, the aristocracy and the conservative industrial classes primarily supported traditional art forms and continued to promote conventional genres such as history painting, portraits and nudes. Progressive artists in Berlin formed an association in 1892 called the Vereinigung der XI. This first group of modern artists was the cradle for the Berlin Secession, created in 1898/99. Similar in many ways to the Secessions in Munich and Vienna, it facilitated the dawn of Modernism.

Lovis Corinth (1858–1925) was closely involved in Berlin's venture into modern art. From 1900 he championed the cause of the Berlin Secession, where he regularly exhibited. In 1913/14 he created a spectacular 11-part cycle of wall paintings for the wealthy Berlin entrepreneur Ludwig Katzenellenbogen and his first wife Estella. It was made for the dining room of a manor house (no longer standing) at Freienhagen near Oranienburg. Six of the paintings are now in the Berlinische Galerie.

Embracing Modernism. Big names from the Stadtmuseum Berlin

The Stadtmuseum Berlin boasts outstanding works by eminent modernist painters. Twelve highlights from its premium collection will be guests at the Berlinische Galerie. They bring new tones to the permanent in-house exhibition, sparking a conversation with resident works. The paintings to be hosted at the Berlinische Galerie are by Max Beckmann, Theo von Brockhusen, Lovis Corinth, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Walter Leistikow, Max Liebermann, Edvard Munch and Lesser Ury. All of them were important figures who enriched the city's art scene in the early 20th century.

Der Sturm – a stage for the avant-garde

In March 1912 Herwarth Walden (1878–1941) opened his gallery “Der Sturm” in Berlin. For a decade and a half it was to be a leading stage for modern art. Its very name, “the storm”, conveys the energy and pace with which its founder brought the European avant-garde to Berlin. Walden's interests centred initially on fairly unknown young Expressionists, Futurists and Cubists. In the 1920s, with his strong feel for new visual forms, he showed the Hungarian Constructivists and the Russian Ivan Puni (1892–1956) and gave a forum to Merz artist Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948). He was tireless and pugnacious on behalf of “his” artists and so “Der Sturm” came to epitomise progressive art in general. The history of this avant-garde gallery is told through numerous artworks along with original documents from our Artists' Archives.

Dada in Berlin

For a long time, these works, which are among the most precious in our collection, were out on the road. Now the anti-art of the Dadaists is on show at home again. The Dada movement began as a political reaction by artists to the First World War. Its key protagonists in Berlin were Hannah Höch (1889–1978), Raoul Hausmann (1886–1971), John Heartfield (1891–1968), George Grosz (1893–1959) and Johannes Baader (1875–1955). Through their works the Dadaists vented radical opposition to German nationalism and militarism. Dada devised new forms of artistic expression with an instructive component. The provocations and shock tactics – in visual art formats and stage performances alike – were intended to make society think about itself.

Faces of the City

From the early 1920s, a loose-knit group of artists in Germany began responding to life's often harsh realities. Their style soon became known as New Objectivity. Its proponents were not united by any kind of manifesto. Instead, they took their cue from the visible world, casting aside both Expressionism with its formal disarray and Dada with its anti-bourgeois stance. These portraits from the 1920s illustrate a wide range of personal styles. People and objects tend to appear cool, sober and isolated within the setting.

Berlin in the Nazi Era 1933–1945

During the Weimar Republic, avant-garde artistic diversity was already coming under threat from many sides, including from supporters of National Socialism. When the Nazis took power in 1933, modern culture was no longer able to develop. The character of urban Berlin changed as oppressive measures were imposed by the state. Jewish, oppositional and other “undesirable” artists were excluded from the art world when they were banned from exhibiting or exercising their profession. Many Modernist works were defamed as “degenerate”, removed from public collections, sold off and sometimes destroyed. Many artists emigrated or were forced by brutal persecution to flee. Many of those who failed to reach safety in time were detained and murdered.

Herbert Tobias – Photographs from the 1940s

The photographs taken in Russia by Herbert Tobias (1924–1982) are among the most notable war pictures to emerge from the Second World War. In 1943 he was deployed to the Soviet Union to fight as a German soldier on the Eastern Front. At the age of 19, Tobias was already a talented amateur photographer. Like many soldiers he took his camera to war, but the metaphorical quality and symbolic content of his pictures offer far more than the usual souvenir snapshot. These empathetic images not only expose the brutality of the campaign, which left an indelible mark on Tobias's world view.

A City in Ruins

The battle for Berlin in April 1945 heralded the end of the Second World War, which had been unleashed by Nazi Germany. Wars and oppressive regimes around the world had caused millions of people to perish, uprooted them or scarred them physically

and mentally for life. Broad swathes of the city lay in ruins. Photographers captured the final battles and destruction. Painters and sculptors gave vivid expression to terror and death, grief and despair, but also forged symbols of hope and a new beginning.

Berlin Architectural Plans in Photomontages 1965-1975

To present important planned projects in East and West Berlin, several architects in the post-war era turned to techniques familiar from the worlds of art and advertising. By cutting, combining, and pasting photographs and found materials, they produced images of designs that were supposed to be realistic. The goal was to obtain approval for building projects by means of appealing illustrations. These days, computer-aided design (CAD) replaces this arduous manual method. Artistically ambitious architects also used cinematic means to present their projects. They edited audio and video materials and combined them into a lively narrative. Two examples by the artistic team of Georg Kohlmaier and Barna von Sartory are shown in digitalised form.

In the Shadow of the Wall

A new confidence pervaded the arts of the 1960s and early 1970s in West Berlin. There were debates about artistic techniques and anti-bourgeois lifestyles and much political reflection. Many artists distanced themselves from the non-representational art that had dominated the post-war years, seeking closer links between art and reality. In Berlin, the Wall had been a ubiquitous presence since August 1961. It divided the city until it fell in November 1989. Many artists in East and West saw it as a symbol of social and political fossilisation. In the shadow of the Wall, the 1970s and 1980s were rife with alternative ideas about how to live together and run society. In West Berlin, the fauvist art of the "Neue Wilden" gave vent to an aggression inspired by Berlin's rock, punk and New Wave movements. Berlin was restyling itself with a new myth.

Art photography in the GDR of the 1980s

From the late 1970s East Berlin was the most important base for the alternative art community in the GDR. Young artists in particular rejected the concept of socialist realism, which was ideologically framed. Instead they created their own counter-positions, undermining its claims to offer a faithful depiction of everyday life under socialism. More and more young photographers insisted on a subjective perception of

the world and called for an uncompromising gaze on life in the GDR. In the 1980s, the exhibitions organised in galleries, clubs and culture centres, although small, were extremely significant for the photography scene in the GDR.

Artists (selected):

Johannes Baader, Otto Bartning, Georg Baselitz, Max Beckmann, Theo von Brockhusen, Lovis Corinth, Rainer Fetting, Naum Gabo, George Grosz, Raoul Hausmann, John Heartfield, Jacoba van Heemskerck, Werner Heldt, Hannah Höch, Lotte Jacobi, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Georg Kohlmaier, Oskar Kokoschka, Engelbert Kremser, Fritz Kühn, Walter Leistikow, Ute Mahler, Jeanne Mammen, Ludwig Meidner, Arwed Messmer/Fritz Tiedemann, László Moholy-Nagy, Manfred Paul, Nicola Perscheid, Iwan Puni, Alexander Rodtschenko, Eugen Schönebeck, Kurt Schwitters, Sasha Stone, Fred Thieler, Herbert Tobias, Hans Uhlmann, Umbo (Otto Umbeh), Dieter Urbach, Anton von Werner, Heinrich Zille

Collection Online

To find out which works are currently on display, visitors can consult the Collection Online in the Permanent Exhibition section of the museum website (berlinischegalerie.de): sammlung-online.berlinischegalerie.de

On the path to an accessible museum

The permanent exhibition can be experienced with different senses: tactile models and an audio guide with 17 listening points in German and English permit an inclusive tour through 100 years of art in Berlin. This can be downloaded as a free app or accessed on the museum website. All the texts in the exhibition have a high-contrast layout and are available in large print for the visually impaired. Tactile floor guidance helps visitors to find their way around the building, and there is barrier-free access to the permanent exhibition.

Exhibition architecture and colour design:
david saik studio



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Admission 10 €, concessions 6 €
(prices may vary during
temporary exhibitions)

Wed–Mon 10 am–6 pm
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