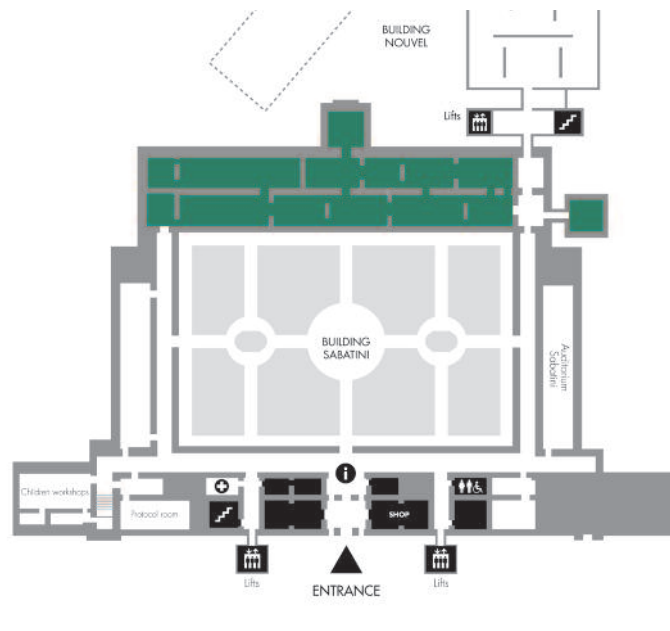


**Barnett Newman**  
*White Fire II*, 1960  
 Mixed media on unprimed canvas  
 Kunstmuseum Basel, purchased 1973  
 © Barnett Newman Foundation/New York, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015

by artists of the first generation of Abstract Expressionism like Mark Rothko and Franz Kline, but his interest became progressively focused on the more radical options which modified the legacy of those pioneers through a colder aesthetic with more speculative intentions, from post-pictorial abstraction or the 'hard edge' tendency to the first conceptual works based on a refinement of the notion of painting. Cases in point are Barnett Newman, Agnes Martin and Robert Ryman. This choice from among the many proposals available in the sixties and seventies established a kind of visual rhyme over time with the purism of the Cubist collection and the geometric abstraction of the early decades of the century.

There is a clear link between these painters and the rise of minimalism, and one of the salient features of the acquisitions of Franz Meyer's period is his preference for works of a cold and distanced nature, precisely at the moment when the European market was openly embracing the warm enthusiasm of the pop aesthetic (also acknowledged by the museum, though less fervently, as shown by the presence of Andy Warhol). The inclusion of works by Donald Judd and Carl Andre enhanced the collection's personality and led to a representative gathering of the less theatrical variety of *minimal* sculpture, related more to questions of space and visual perception. One prominent instance, given his broad representation in the collection, is Bruce Nauman, younger than the first major figures of minimalist art but soon one of its most outstanding practitioners. Nevertheless, his inclusion was a bold step for the Kunstmuseum Basel to take at that period. Today, time and successive acquisitions have enabled his work to be recognized as departing from an affiliation with "what you see is what you see", one of the minimalist maxims, to connect with the practices of a conceptual art that spread relentlessly in the sixties and seventies. Such a turn of events is underscored also by the works of artists like On Kawara and Walter De Maria.

Since its origins, an effort has been made to keep the collection of the Kunstmuseum Basel closely linked to the present. It currently holds various works by many artists who are active on today's international art scene, such as Gerhard Richter, Pierre Huyghe, Steve McQueen and Fischli & Weiss, who are setting up new dialogues with the historic collection and keeping its discourse up to date.



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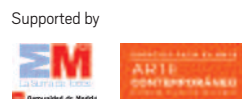
**White Fire.** *The Modern Collection of the Kunstmuseum Basel*  
 Guided tours of the exhibition for adults  
 Fridays at 7.15 p.m. and Sundays at 12.30 p.m.

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 Monday to Friday from 10.30 a.m. to 1.30 p.m.  
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**Exhibition** 18 March – 14 September 2015  
 Sabatini Building, Floor 1

# White Fire

## The Modern Collection of the Kunstmuseum Basel



**Hans Arp**, *Flèche de nuage* [Arrow Cloud], 1932. Painted wood relief  
 Kunstmuseum Basel, Gift Oskar and Annie Müller-Widmann Collection, 1965  
 © Arp Jean/HANS ARP, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015



kunstmuseum basel

The Kunstmuseum Basel is considered the first municipal public museum in the history of art. Its collection spans two main periods, with works dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries on the one hand, and art of the 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> centuries on the other. While the Swiss museum is undergoing extension work, a selection of one hundred 20<sup>th</sup> century masterpieces is now being exhibited at the Museo Reina Sofía. This exhibition therefore offers both a display of key works of modern art and an analysis of the history and criteria that have configured what is today one of the world's foremost modern and contemporary art collections.

The origins of the Kunstmuseum Basel collection lie in the social and institutional dynamics of the city of Basle. One factor was public initiative through municipal institutions, which began a collection in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that was focused on art of the present. Another was private participation in the form of contributions over the course of time by leading collectors belonging to the Swiss bourgeoisie, many of whom gave or lent their personal holdings to the museum. The tastes and criteria of those who contributed to its growth are clearly perceptible, as is the formation of a homogeneous and at the same time fragmentary narrative that includes important chapters in the history of modern and contemporary art. The collection is furthermore intimately linked to the reality of Switzerland itself, with a Protestant world view, the rise of a bourgeoisie active in the cultural sphere, and a specific set of territorial and aesthetic conditioning factors. This local component is evident in the inclusion of Swiss artists, enabling a narrative in which local case studies are complemented by leading names on the international scene. One indication of this is the selection of two works by Arnold Böcklin and Ferdinand

Hodler and their specific approximations, respectively, to symbolism and the application of avant-garde language to landscape, a genre with a deep-rooted tradition in Switzerland.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century art collection of the Kunstmuseum Basel contains first-rate pieces related principally to two periods: the historic European avant-garde movements of the early decades of the century, and the art which evolved in the United States in the second half of the century, with a particular emphasis on the development of abstraction after Abstract Expressionism.

The group of Cubist works which makes up the donation of Raoul La Roche contains works signed by Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Juan Gris, which reflect the early development of the movement whose visual speculations were to alter the modern gaze forever. However, the specificity of this section lies in the inclusion of trends that added fresh nuances to Cubist postulates, from the machine aesthetic and new formal rotundity of Fernand Léger to the still lifes of the Swiss artists Amédée Ozenfant and



Fernand Léger  
*Les deux figures (Nus sur fond rouge)*  
[Two Figures (Nudes on a Red Ground)], 1923. Oil on canvas  
Kunstmuseum Basel, Gift Raoul La Roche, 1965  
© Fernand Léger, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015

Le Corbusier, which display a new distilled purism intentionally laden with an architectural coldness. The work of these two artists, who acted as advisors to La Roche on his collection, is seen as largely linked to the importance of technical drawing in the Swiss schools, and indicates a preference for an art with a constructive appearance.

In 1939, the Nazi regime held an exhibition of *Degenerate Art* in Munich which ridiculed international avant-garde artists, especially those from Northern Europe. While this was happening, the Kunstmuseum Basel, under the

direction of Georg Schmidt, was showing firm support from Switzerland for these new languages, and saw an opportunity in the public sale of works from that exhibition to increase its holdings by purchasing some of the works vilified by the German government. The work of Lovis Corinth acquired on that occasion, now displayed alongside that of other Northern European artists, makes it possible to trace the branches from the common trunk of Primitivism and Expressionism through the pieces of Emil Nolde, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Edvard Munch, Max Beckmann and others.

With the donation made by Marguerite Arp-Hagenbach in memory of her husband, the artist Hans Arp, the museum's collection is decisively impregnated with avant-garde abstract tendencies. The works of Arp, a fundamental figure of Dadaism in Zurich and of early Surrealism, show how the new role of aleatory composition sacrifices expressiveness to a certain sense of the ludic. The rest of the Arp-Hagenbach donation reflects the most constructive and speculative aspect of abstraction. The pieces by Vassily Kandinsky, more closely linked to geometry, are related to his experience at the Bauhaus, whose influence is also felt in László Moholy-Nagy, Josef Albers and Max Bill, all active in the German school. The Neo-Plasticist art of Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg and Georges Vantongerloo, a project for the reduction of painting and sculpture to a minimum in a quest for an objective art, engages in a dialogue with the international expansion of Constructivism as represented by Antoine Pevsner.

The work of the Swiss-born Paul Klee is one of the museum's strengths thanks to the donation of Richard Doetsch-Benziger. Klee's search for a spontaneous painting lacking in rhetoric and his early



Antoine Pevsner  
*Construction surface developable*  
[Construction with Developable Surface], 1938. Copper  
Kunstmuseum Basel, Gift Oskar and Annie Müller-Widmann Collection, 1965  
© Antoine Pevsner, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015

independence from the various avant-garde movements make him a specific case that finds a later correlative in the *art brut* aesthetic of the years immediately after the Second World War. Artists like Jean Dubuffet connect with Klee in their vindication of a rudimentary art that rejects such notions as technical skill, turning instead to art by children or the mentally ill as a proposal for spontaneous and unsophisticated creation stripped of any ceremonial or search for beauty.

On long-term loan to the collection is a quarter of the original holdings of the Alberto Giacometti Foundation, a Zurich-based foundation that contains much of the

Swiss artist's legacy. Giacometti's sculptural and pictorial investigations are here combined with the specific contributions to early Surrealism of works by Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy and André Masson, which are marked by a tension between abstraction and figuration associated with "Les Champs magnétiques", the foundational text by André Breton and Philippe Soupault which was the precursor of the first Surrealist manifesto. In this way, the Alberto Giacometti Foundation loan contains pieces related to his Surrealist affiliation as well as later works that show how the sculptor crossed the border of the second half of the century, tackling new images of the human that had arisen from Existentialism. The inclusion of Giacometti reveals the echoes and crossovers permitted by a collection that unfolds over time, and which is constituted, despite its fragmentary nature and diverse origins, on the basis of firm criteria that give it a definite personality.

Alongside this cross-section of the European avant-garde movements, the second major section of the Kunstmuseum Basel collection is made up of artworks by American artists of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The museum remained attentive to the evolution of art after the transfer of its center of gravity from Europe to the other side of the Atlantic, when the territorial and stylistic dynamics of the pre-war years were altered for the rest of the century. In 1962, Franz Meyer became the director of the museum and decided to bring his predecessor's constant acquisition policy up to date. Meyer remained at the helm of the institution until 1980, and it was during those two decades that he built up the American section of the collection, which was completed by his successor, Christian Geelhaar. Meyer acquired work