

## GROUP DYNAMICS—THE BLUE RIDER AND COLLECTIVES OF THE MODERNIST PERIOD As part of the program "Global Museum. Collections of the 20th Century from a Global Perspective" of the German Federal Cultural Foundation 2018–2022

After a heated debate in which the antagonists almost came to blows, Wassily Kandinsky, Franz Marc, and Gabriele Münter resigned from the Neue Künstlervereinigung München (New Artists' Association Munich) on December 2, 1911. A mere two weeks after the confrontation, they and their fellow dissenters mounted a counter-exhibition at Galerie Thannhauser in Munich. Alongside their own art, they presented works by August Macke, Robert Delaunay, Elisabeth Epstein, Albert Bloch, David and Vladimir Burliuk, Arnold Schoenberg, and Henri Rousseau. The presentation's full title, *The First Exhibition of the Editorial Board of Der Blaue Reiter*, made explicit reference to the Almanac project: this programmatic yearbook would establish the Blue Rider as one of the first transnational artists' circles.

Two interconnected exhibition projects at the Lenbachhaus Munich showcase the museum's outstanding collection of Blue Rider art in dialogue with modernist artists' collectives from all over the world. Starting around 1900, a startling multitude of collective processes and group formations among artists came into being. In exhibitions and writings, they articulated shared aesthetic stances and their determination to bring about intellectual, spiritual, and social change. A close examination of the phenomena of the collective and group dynamics can spur a fresh discussion of categories such as authorship and artistic autonomy, bringing art into focus as a communal process and vigorous debate.

The artists who came together in the Blue Rider circle regarded art as a universal language. "The whole body of work we call art," they wrote, "knows neither borders nor nations but only humanity." However, as their imagination was constrained by the colonial global order before the First World War, they, like others, did not succeed in implementing an emancipatory praxis of art beyond national affiliations and traditional hierarchies and genres. Still, their credo implied that all cultural production was ultimately of equal rank, and this idea is at the heart of the Lenbachhaus's undertaking. Instead of staging the history of styles or aesthetics as a succession of expressions of rivaling tendencies, our exhibition will shed light on the development of collectives in their historical contexts, reconstructing their political agendas and visions both practicable and, in some instances, utopian. Traces of collective labor may be found in manifestos, exhibitions, periodicals, collaborative creations, newly founded schools, and agitation efforts. The period we have chosen, from around 1900 to 1970, spans both the inception of various modernization movements and, at its other end, processes of decolonization and the emergence of new nations.

Groups are propelled by steadfast loyalties and irreconcilable ruptures. Their dynamic is unpredictable: collaboration, discussions, conviviality, rivalry, friendship, open-mindedness, inclusion, dissociation, weariness, controversy, love, polemics, and enthusiasm are characteristic features of the lives of groups. They provide us with one possible model for an understanding of art that is not grounded in the individual: art does not come into being in a vacuum, it grows out of exchanges of ideas and social interactions.

### Group Dynamics—The Blue Rider Lenbachhaus, March 23, 2021–March 5, 2023

"The whole body of work we call art knows neither borders nor nations but only humanity."

That was how Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky phrased a core belief that underlay their almanac *The Blue Rider*. Published in 1912, the programmatic yearbook put the Blue Rider (ca. 1911–1914) on the map as one of the first transnational artists' circles. The same credo now inspires a presentation of the art of the circle's members—including Gabriele Münter, August Macke, Alfred Kubin, Maria Franck-Marc, and Elisabeth

Epstein—at the Lenbachhaus that considers the works in an aesthetic and historical perspective, but also in their spiritual, social, and political contexts. The Blue Rider circle championed a global and egalitarian conception of art not only in words, but also in pictures and deeds, even if, their imagination constrained by the colonial global order before the First World War, they did not succeed in realizing an emancipatory practice of art beyond national affiliations and traditional hierarchies and genres.

The belief proposed by the almanac that all cultural production has equal inherent value is at the heart of the exhibition. We find it put into practice in the selection of images gathered in the almanac: art from different parts of the world and historical periods appears side by side and largely without distinctions of rank. This pluralism of forms and ideas is the core of the Blue Rider's modernity, which has lost none of its relevance today. For the reconfigured presentation of our collection, this means that the output of the Blue Rider artists is embedded in a narrative framework of art and cultural history that is as global as possible. The exhibition offers the first comprehensive survey of the manifold inspirations that the Blue Rider drew from Japanese woodcuts, Bavarian and Russian folk art, children's drawings, and contemporary music, as well as Balinese, Gabonese, Polynesian, New Caledonian, Sri Lankan, and Mexican art, illustrated by carefully selected works and artifacts on loan. The presentation also rethinks the story of the Blue Rider as it has long been told at the Lenbachhaus, in which a "central cast" around Münter, Kandinsky, Macke, and Marc has eclipsed other important members of the group (Elisabeth Epstein, Maria Franck-Marc, and many others).

The project is supported by the German Federal Cultural Foundation as part of its program *Global Museum. Collections of the 20th Century from a Global Perspective*. The new presentation of art from the Blue Rider collection is followed by a second exhibition titled *Group Dynamics—Collectives of the Modernist Period*, which is dedicated to artists' groups all over the world and scheduled to be on view from October 19, 2021, until April 24, 2022.

*Curated by Annegret Hoberg, Matthias Mühling, Anna Straetmans*

### **Group Dynamics—Collectives of the Modernist Period** **Lenbachhaus, October 19, 2021–April 24, 2022**

Two complementary exhibitions at the Lenbachhaus are devoted to the theme of Group Dynamics: On March 23, 2021, we unveil a thoroughly redesigned presentation of our collection of works by the Blue Rider artists. The circle's groundbreaking utopian idea that the art of all nations and times deserves to be cherished equally is the conceptual point of departure for our subsequent exploration of the history of modernist artists' collectives.

The exhibition "Group Dynamics—Collectives of the Modernist Period" sets out from the observation that the art-historical scholarship on the specific ways in which artists' groups have shaped the evolution of art remains fragmentary and often narrowly focused on the West. Instead of staging a contest of rivaling aesthetic tendencies, the show sheds light on the development of collectives and the historical circumstances in which they emerged, reconstructing their political agendas and visions both practicable and, in some instances, utopian. The ubiquity of similar historical structures and communal strategies in different settings underscores the crucial role that collectives have played in introducing and disseminating central ideas and innovations—within and beyond modernist art.

The exhibition turns the spotlight on exemplary artists' associations in diverse places all over the world, bringing artists, movements, and discourses into focus whose significance has long been undisputed among scholars specializing in particular strands of art history yet which remain largely obscure to broader audiences. It throws into relief these collectives' particular motivations, their specific modes of practice and forms of expression, the historical and political contexts in which they formed, and the influence these movements exerted on the subsequent evolution of the art of their time and place. The study of group dynamics and forms of collective practice also paves the way for a critical revision of established categories such as authorship, autonomy, and canonical aesthetics.

The period covered by the presentation—from around 1900 to 1970—extends from the dawn of plural modernization movements to a period of processes of decolonization and the formation of new nations, which often went hand in hand with the emergence of new artistic schools and artists' associations. The

international selection includes artists' groups that were active in Beijing, Buenos Aires, Casablanca, Khartoum, Lahore, Mumbai, São Paulo, Tokyo and elsewhere.

In preparation for the exhibition, an international symposium with leading experts such as Samina Iqbal & Zehra Jumabhoy, Carol Yinghua Lu, Morad Montazami, Harper Montgomery, Noriko Murai, Teresa Riccardi, Lena Naumann, Nada Shabout, and Aihe Wang—due to the 2020 coronavirus epidemic, the event had to be held via video conference—greatly enhanced our understanding of the issues in question.

*Curated by Karin Althaus, Susanne Böller, Elisabeth Giers, Sarah Louisa Henn, Eva Huttenlauch, Matthias Mühling, Stephanie Weber*

