

PICTURE UNIVERSE #3

# Leipzig in Dialogue

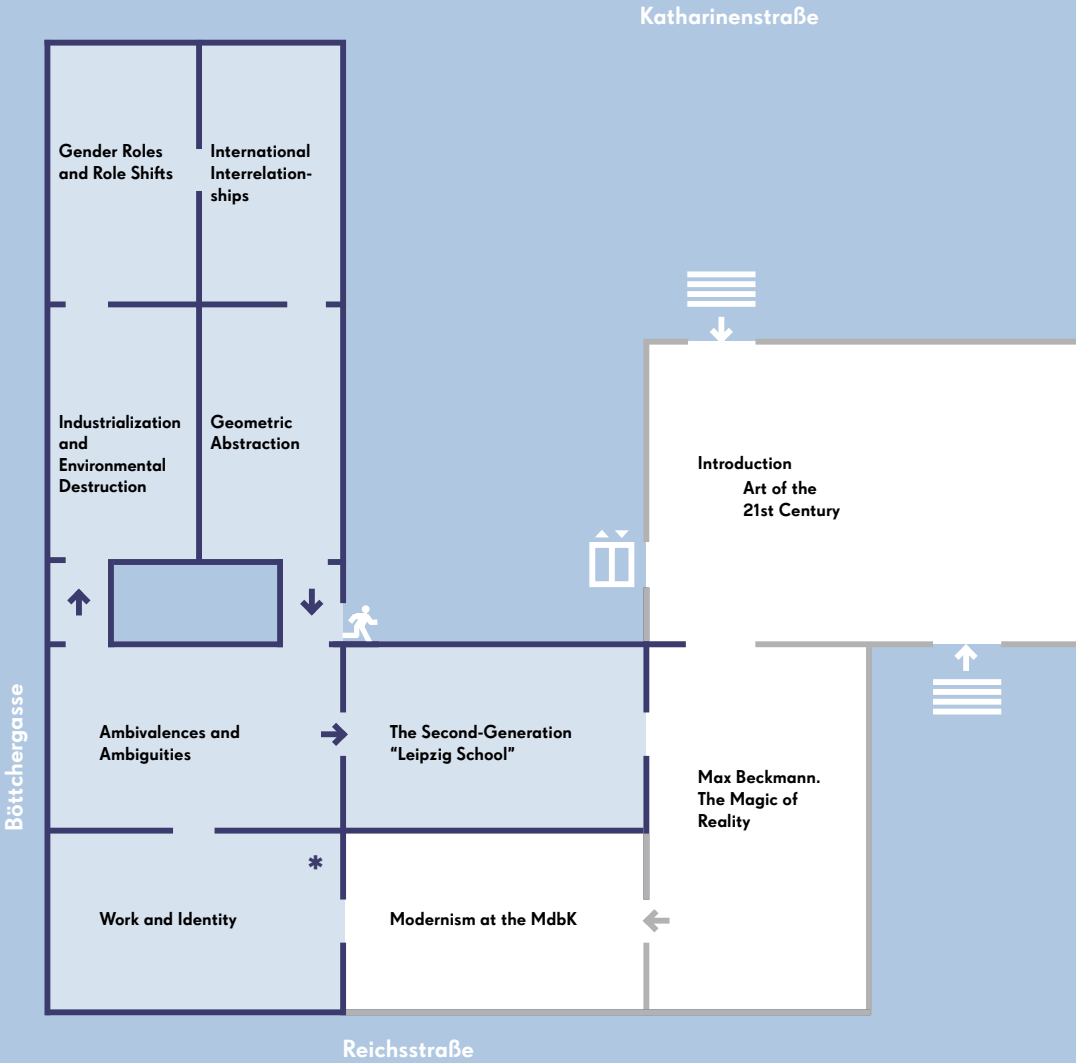
23.04.2026 —  
25.04.2027

MdbK

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Floor plan	3
Introduction	4
Max Beckmann. The Magic of Reality	5
Modernism at the MdbK	6
Work and Identity	7
Ambivalences and Ambiguities	8
Industrialization and Environmental Destruction	9
Gender Roles and Role Shifts	10
International Interrelationships	11
Geometric Abstraction	12
The Second-Generation “Leipzig School”	13
Imprint	14

# Floor plan



\* Art from the GDR



On the third floor of its building, the Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig (MdbK) is presenting one of its most important treasures: the art of the 20th and 21st centuries. In this newly conceived Part Three, the “Picture Universe” spreads out through ten rooms. Beginning with outstanding works by Max Beckmann, it covers a spectrum from the art of modernism to that of the very present, with a special focus on the German Democratic Republic (GDR). For the first time, the presentation of works from the collection not only features painting and sculpture but also integrates photography and printmaking. The “Picture Universe #3” is arranged chronologically, but the linear narrative is repeatedly punctuated by leaps to the past or future, calling attention to thematic and formal connections as well as inter-decade continuities.

The large central hall is devoted to contemporary art. The local art scene, represented by former professors and students of the city’s Academy of Fine Arts, is dialogically enhanced by examples that point beyond Leipzig and emphasize the national and international interconnectedness of the arts. Also on view are our most recent acquisitions of figural painting by André Butzer, Karolina Jabłońska and Cornelia Schleime. Their works bring the tradition of representational painting in the collection of the the MdbK—which got underway with the “Leipzig School”—up to the present.

With its cross-media, dialogical approach, “Picture Universe #3” offers a multiperspectival look at art in Leipzig—a look that highlights its local potency and the presence it radiates to the world.

# The Magic of Reality

Thanks to generous permanent loans, the MdbK has in its holdings an especially extensive collection of paintings, sculptures and prints by the Leipzig-born artist Max Beckmann. The stylistic transformation Beckmann's work underwent after his return from war service in 1915 was first manifest in his prints. Abandoning the expressive mode, he now took to modelling bodies and space with sharp-edged and increasingly massive contours and contrasting zones.

Beckmann expressly embraced figuration and narration, which he combined with his affinity for the symbolic and mythological. He sought to capture the metaphysical dimension of reality underlying the world of appearances and referred to his specific pictorial concept accordingly as "Transcendental Objectivity". His oeuvre would have a distinct impact, also on the art of the GDR.

## BIOGRAPHY

1884, 12 FEBRUARY

Max Beckmann is born in Leipzig. In the 1920s, after studying in Weimar and returning from war service, he advances to become one of the Weimar Republic's most successful artists.

1933

In the wake of the National Socialist accession to power, Beckmann loses his professorship at the Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main. Many of his works are confiscated from German museums, including the MdbK.

1937

Beckmann leaves Germany with his wife Mathilde "Quappi" Beckmann and travels to Amsterdam by way of Paris. The couple will live in exile in Amsterdam until 1945.

1947

Beckmann receives a teaching assignment in the U.S., where he and "Quappi" will spend the final years of his life.

1950, 27 DECEMBER

Beckmann dies in New York.

# Modernism at the MdbK

In 1937, the MdbK suffered massive losses to its holdings through the “degenerate art” confiscation campaign. As a result, modern art is represented here with no more than a few isolated works, albeit outstanding ones. They mirror the expressive, new-objective and metaphysical tendencies prevalent in modernism. In terms of form and motif, entire generations of artists in the GDR took orientation from modernism’s traditions. We encounter traces of those traditions in, for example, the group portrait of 1961 by Harry Blume and Wolfgang Peuker’s 1988 portrait of a woman.

In this room, the focus is on female portraits and depictions of nudes. With few exceptions, they are the work of male artists—that is, products of the male perspective. This selection thus mirrors the unequal representation of the genders in the collection holdings.

#### THE “DEGENERATE ART” CAMPAIGN

In 1937/38, the Nazis confiscated artworks they referred to as “degenerate” from a great number of German museums. They used the denigrating term “degenerate” to label works that did not correspond to the National Socialist concept of ideal art and culture, for example works of Cubism, Expressionism, New Objectivity and Dadaism.

# Work and Identity

The focus on figuration prevalent in the art from the GDR is also manifest in one of its widespread motifs: the worker. The worker portrait genre underscores the high value and identity-forming significance of work in the GDR.

The portraits on view here are distinguished by great diversity: they exhibit stylistic affinities to Expressionism, New Objectivity and Pop Art and reflect the changing modes of depiction over the course of the decades. In the 1960s, the staging of workers as "heroes of work" for ideological purposes was dominant. As time went on, that practice was gradually superseded by the representation of real-socialist reality. Whereas Bernhard Heisig's brigadier, for instance, greets us with a sense of joy and positivity, Doris Ziegler's women workers from the Leipzig yarn spinning mill look tired, even exhausted.

## THE BITTERFELD WAY

The term "Bitterfelder Weg" describes a doctrine propounded by Walter Ulbricht on 24 April 1959 at the authors' conference in Bitterfeld. Ulbricht called for overcoming the divide between workers and artists and placing modern industrial workers at the centre of the arts.

## BRIGADE/BRIGADIER

The employees in the GDR's state-operated factories were organized in so-called brigades. In these units, they were to "work, learn and live socialistically".

## ACTIVIST

In the GDR, the official title "socialist work activist" was awarded to those workers whose performance exceeded the established specifications and norms.

# Ambivalences and Ambiguities

In the art from the GDR, doubts and criticism regarding GDR state apparatus's solutions were voiced now less, now more openly, as were fears sparked by nuclear armament. Wolfgang Mattheuer's painting "Blue Leipzig" (1971) shows how even the most placid townscapes can convey an intangible sense of cold and war. The wispy jet trails traversing the bright blue sky are the residue of military aircraft combat action drills.

Although they put up a non-conformist front in clothing, hairstyle and music, the members of the punk band portrayed by Volker Stelzmann make a decidedly rigid and anaemic impression. Masks and dolls hint at division within and control from without. Views of the landscape testify to the longing for faraway places, perhaps even for freedom, while at the same time questioning the promise of freedom.

## COLD WAR

A serious conflict between hostile states is called a "cold war". There is no military combat; the weapons remain "cold". Instead, the means of war are propaganda, arms buildup on both sides and threats. The term "the Cold War" generally refers to the conflict between East and West that began in 1946/47. It was a confrontation between the two great powers that had emerged victorious from World War II: the USA (West) and the Soviet Union (East). The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought "the Cold War" to an end.

# Industrialization and Environmental Destruction

The GDR of the 1960s and '70s invested massively in industrial development, with severe negative consequences for the natural environment and the cities. Many artists—including those who did not necessarily consider themselves environmental activists—turned their focus to industrial progress and its impact. Gudrun Brüne, for example, portrayed Pulgar, a swathe of land in Saxony where three communities had to make way for lignite mining. In an article appearing in “Anschlag” magazine in 1989, Peter Thieme strikingly documented the destruction of nature in the greater Leipzig region. In view of the predatory exploitation of natural resources, the younger generation was disillusioned about the future, as captured by Günter Glombitza in his painting “Young Couple” (1970). The woman and man gaze into nothingness as behind them smoke pours from industrial chimneys.

#### THE „ANSCHLAG“

The Leipzig “Anschlag” was an unofficial politically-minded magazine published in the GDR. Ten issues of 25 to 40 copies each came out between 1984 and 1989. They contained texts with integrated images in the form of prints, photographs and drawings. The covers were also designed by artists.

# Gender Roles and Role Shifts

In the GDR, men\* and women\* had been equal under constitutional law since 1949 (in Western Germany since 1957/58), but that equality hardly carried over into areas such as housework or career advancement opportunities. All the harder did women artists struggle with role and gender ascriptions in their works—which they undermined, for instance by exchanging the sex characteristics of the persons depicted. A case in point is the Adam-and-Eve-like couple in Angela Hampel's painting "Snake" (1986). And in her "Pas de deux" of the same year, Hampel again questioned gender roles, now by clothing her male protagonist in a tutu. Artist Doris Ziegler, for her part, gave herself androgynous traits in the self-portrait "Leipzig Lovers" (1980). Gudrun Brünes' life-size depiction of a model doll with gesticulating arms and ruffled hair from 1987 raises questions about women's self-determination as well as their representative role.

# International Interrelationships

On 11 September 1973, the socialist government around Salvador Allende (1908–1973) in Chile was overthrown. Under the subsequent military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1915–2006), which would endure until 1990, numerous people lost their lives. One such victim was the singer and musician Victor Jara (1932–1973), seen here as portrayed by sculptor Theo Balden. As a show of solidarity with the fallen socialist government, many artists in the GDR addressed themselves to the brutal coup d'état. The GDR's relationships to its "brother nations" is mirrored in this subject matter, but also in portraits of international students and workers. Above and beyond its diplomatic relationships to these countries, the GDR cultivated contacts by receiving and honouring guests from abroad such as the American musician and human rights activist Paul Robeson (1898–1976).

## CONTRACT WORKERS

Between 1967 and 1986, owing to the increasing shortage of skilled employees, the GDR concluded agreements with a number of "brother countries" for the training and employment of foreign workers. The migrants came from countries like Algeria, Angola, China, Cuba, Hungary, Mozambique and Vietnam. When the Berlin Wall came down in the autumn of 1989, more than 192,000 foreign nationals were living in the GDR.

## BROTHER COUNTRIES/BROTHER NATIONS, also referred to as "socialist sister countries"

This term was used in the GDR for friendly socialist countries, for example the member states of the socialist economic community Comecon (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) and the Warsaw Pact. These included the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The GDR also cultivated close relationships to countries in Asia, Africa and South America, for instance Vietnam, Cuba, Angola and Chile, as an aid to forming military and economic alliances.

## INTERGRAFIK

INTERGRAFIK was a GDR-run international graphic art exhibition presented regularly in East Berlin between 1965 and 1990. It was linked to the country's official cultural and foreign policy. The numbers of artists from African, Asian and Latin American countries taking part in the show increased distinctly from the 1970s onwards. One could participate only on invitation. Preference was given to compositions carried out in the figurative realist style.

# Geometric Abstraction

## ON THE SOCIALIST-REALIST SIDELINES

Abstract compositions inhabited by eyes, heads and body parts are typical of the paintings by the Egyptian artist Mona Ragy Enayat, a resident of Leipzig. A face is also discernible in the painting of hers recently received by the MdbK. It picks up a thread of geometric abstraction that in Saxony goes back to the 1930s. Works by Hermann Glöckner, Karl-Heinz Adler and Irmgard Horlbeck-Kappler testify to the fact that the tradition endured throughout the GDR period, when the figuration of Socialist Realism prevailed. Their foldings, material collages and oil paintings are here juxtaposed with a straw 'painting' by Dresden artist Olaf Holzapfel. He took not only the material from nature, but also the motif: a watercourse near Jüterbog.

### SOCIALIST REALISM

Socialist Realism was an art style dictated by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1932 as a guideline for artists working in literature, music, architecture and the visual arts. It was also official policy in the Soviet-occupied zone after World War II and continued to be followed in the GDR after its founding in 1949. The style is distinguished by realistic, object-oriented and figural representation in contradistinction to abstraction.

# The Second-Generation “Leipzig School”

The professors teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts, among them Werner Tübke, Wolfgang Mattheuer and Bernhard Heisig, passed the traditions of the so-called “Leipzig School” on to their students, including Sighard Gille and Arno Rink. The latter two and many of their colleagues formed the second generation of the “Leipzig School”. Their figural depictions are characterized by pithy physicality. Iconographic references rooted in Christian pictorial tradition also turn up, for example when Arno Rink stages a female nude in the manner of the Crucified Christ.

The oeuvre of Max Beckmann served many artists of the GDR as an important orientation. In 1984, the year marking Beckmann’s 100th birthday, Sighard Gille dedicated the triptych “Encounters” to him, thus paying monumental homage to the once-in-a-century artist.

## “LEIPZIG SCHOOL”

Hans Mayer-Foreyt, Bernhard Heisig, Wolfgang Mattheuer and Werner Tübke were all professors at the Leipzig Academy of Fine Arts from the 1950s to the 1970s and contributed decisively to the teachings there, especially in the painting class set up in 1961. It was in great part because of them that the academy established itself as a centre for figurative and allegorical painting in the GDR. They formed the first generation of the so-called “Leipzig School”.

IMPRINT

PICTURE UNIVERSE #3

# Leipzig in Dialogue

23.04.2026 — 25.04.2027

**MdbK** Museum der  
bildenden  
Künste Leipzig

## EXHIBITION

Curated by: Jenny Graser. Curatorial Assistance: Julia Beckmann

Loan Management: Linda Wagner.

Public Relations, Marketing and Events: Jörg Dittmer, Lena Dahlberg, Sonja Lucia Gatterwe, Samira Hadi, Dirk Kuntze, Ulrike Otto. Conservation and Restoration: Theresa Bräunig, Antje Hake, Sarah Kaminski

Art Handling:

Marko Kloss, Uwe Wagner. Exhibition Display: Dennis Kuhn. Electrician: Karsten Hummel, Leipzig. Painting Work: Enrico Lipfert, Leipzig. Graphic Design: Regina Schauerte, formfellows, Frankfurt am Main. Labels and Lettering: Werbeatelier kompakt, Lehmann & Partner GbR, Leipzig



## TEAM MDBK

Director: Stefan Weppelmann. Deputy Director and Head of Collections: Jeannette Stoschek. Academic Assistant to the Director: Sabine Hoffmann

Collections: Julia Beckmann, Philipp Freytag, Jenny Graser, Tabea Heidelmann (Internship Semester), Jan Nicolaisen, Susanne Petri, Anne Richter, Viktor Tlusty (Internship Semester)

Provenance Research:

Lina Frubrich, Ulrike Saß. Restaurierung: Theresa Bräuning, Antje Hake, Sarah Kaminski, Toya Oerbekke. Loan Management and Collection Registry: Linda Wagner. Collection Management: Marko Kloss, Uwe Wagner

Library

and Artist Archive: Sebastian Stumpe. Evelyn Richter & Ursula Arnold Archiv der Ostdeutschen Sparkassenstiftung im Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig: Jeannette Stoschek, Aurelia Rager

Communication and

Participation: Sylva M. Dörfer. Art Education: Hermine Brietzel, Anna Jäger, Lucas Kreß, Kirsten Lemm, Lea Reinke, Carolin Rothmund. Public Relations, Marketing and Events: Lena Dahlberg, Sonja Lucia Gatterwe, Samira Hadi, Dirk Kuntze, Ulrike Otto. Fundraising and Rentals: Katrin Siegmeyer

Administration: Anne-Kathrin Herrmann,

Tim Sachse, Janet Schirmer. Secretary's office: Rebekka Czarnetzki. Security and Facility Management: Torsten Cech, Sven Hottenrott, Dennis Kuhn, Marcus Schubert, Jens Wuttke

#MdbKBilderkosmos

#MdbKLeipzig

Follow us:



\ MdbKLeipzig

