

# „Anna Blume and I“

## Drawings by Kurt Schwitters

September 23, 2011 – January 8, 2012

Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) was one of the leading protagonists of 20th-century art. He revolutionized the art of collage with his so-called Merz Pictures that he assembled out of all sorts of found materials such as newspaper cutouts, advertisements, fabric, metal, and even rubbish. His Merzbau (Merz Construction), an architectural-sculptural structure that he began to install in his Hanover studio in 1923, is regarded as a predecessor of contemporary installation art. Moreover, Schwitters was an innovative draftsman. His graphic work comprises various styles ranging from dadaism and constructivism to drawings revealing an inclination to surrealism as well as realistic landscapes and portraits. In all, his drawings make up one fifth of his surviving work. For a long time his figural and realistic drawings were not considered as a relevant part of his oeuvre by art history because they appeared, at least on the surface, to have nothing to do with his Merz art that helped secure Schwitters a key position in modernism. And furthermore, the artist himself only seldom exhibited his drawings. This exhibition seeks to take the first steps in making up for these shortcomings in a collaborative effort of the Kunstmuseum Bern and the Ernst and Kurt Schwitters Foundation in Hanover with its curator Isabel Schulz. Therefore, we are showing, for the first time, an overview of Kurt Schwitters' graphic work, from his beginnings as an artist until his death, presenting approximately 100 selected drawings from private collections and from the estate of the artist. The works have, to a great extent, never been shown publicly.

### Room 1

The exhibition commences with the Merzbild (Merz Picture) *Ausgerenkte Kräfte* (Dislocated Forces, 1920) from the Kunstmuseum Bern's collection. In 1961, Max Huggler – the then director of the Kunstmuseum Bern – proposed to the members of the board that the work be purchased. It belonged to the son of the artist Ernst Schwitters and was consigned to Klipstein and Kornfeld for auction. However, it was not sold. Ernst Schwitters was, however, prepared to sell the work for 124'000.00 Swiss francs through the auction house to the Kunstmuseum Bern. Unfortunately the Kunstmuseum was unable to purchase the work because the treasurer was against it, arguing "that such an action was not

publicly justifiable." However, in circumstances of great hardship, Max Huggler was finally able to acquire the Merzbild with private funds and donated it to the Kunstmuseum in 1966 in the form of a foundation. Today Schwitters' Merzbild is the heart of the museum's collection. Therefore, we have dedicated the exhibition to Max Huggler for its duration in the Kunstmuseum Bern.

### Room 2

*"These are my abstractions. I sought to harmonize the elements of pictures still as I had previously done in the academy, although now for reasons of expression and not to represent nature."*

Kurt Schwitters' artistic beginnings focused on an area of art that preoccupied him all his life: the study of nature and landscape painting. Up until 1908 when he started studying at the Hanover School of Applied Arts, and during his training at the Royal Academy of Arts in Dresden (1909-1915) he executed mostly realistic views such as *Aq. 52. Harzburg* (Water Color 52., Harzburg), almost impressionistic landscapes such as *Schmelzender Schnee / Tauwetter in der Masch* (Melting Snow / Thaw in the Masch Meadows), as well as sketches of flowers and academic drawings.

Schwitters began to explore art movements current at the time (futurism, cubism, expressionism) when he was no longer a student after the First World War. In 1918 Schwitters produced a series of pencil, crayon, and charcoal drawings that reveal a new visual vocabulary of a cubo-futuristic art typical for artists such as Franz Marc, Umberto Boccioni, or Lyonel Feininger who were part of the circle associated with Herwarth Walden's "Der Sturm" Gallery in Berlin. The sheets in the artist's **Z Series** conform to expressionistic iconography by predominantly engaging with urban subject matter such as the anonymity of city life and loneliness. They typically bear titles such as *Z 38 Vorstadtgarten* (Suburban Garden) or *Z 82 Hütten* (Huts). The objects have been simplified to pointed, angular forms. He used expressive hatching that forms a rhythmic, three-dimensional and abstract composition. At the same time he produced drawings that were blatantly nonfigurative. Schwitters grouped them together under the general title of *Abstraktionen* (Abstractions). In the sheets Schwitters apparently experimented with purely ornamental visual language and form.

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The series of drawings from 1918 marked a significant phase on the artist's road to abstraction. Whereas Schwitters' first sheets were still dependent on legitimizing through nature or expression, in the Abstractions we can clearly see that he had adopted a new approach in his art. Art was neither to represent nature nor be just expressive – but be totally free, having no purpose whatsoever.

### Room 3

*"Poetry arises from judging elements in relation to one another. Meaning is only essential if it is also considered to be a factor. I assess meaning in relation to nonsense. I prefer nonsense, but that is a purely personal thing. I feel sorry for nonsense because it has so seldom been molded into art, and that is why I love it."*

In 1918 Schwitters discovered the art of the dada movement and became acquainted with its protagonists (among them Hans Arp, George Grosz, Raoul Hausmann, and Hannah Höch). He was very enthusiastic about their novel ideas, the way they questioned accepted aesthetic notions and cultivated nonsense. Schwitters' water colors and stamp drawings exude the anxiety and eagerness to experiment prevalent during the period anticipating the First World War. Playfully he put together a very individual repertoire of clichés of reality: The laws of gravity and perspective are no longer valid, and, moreover, humankind appears to have lost control over its inventions. Therefore human heads are whirled together with their scientific and technological achievements – windmills and coffee grinders, wheels, locomotives, and airplanes are hurled about in dynamic and disordered confusion. In the water color *Aq. 21. Anna Blume und ich.* (Anna Blume and I.) (1919) Schwitters portrays himself in a stiff collar with a rotating dada wheel on his chest. Possibly the heart in the bottle symbolizes Anna Blume. The fictional character Anna Blume crops up in Schwitters' work in various contexts. In 1920 he published a dadaistic love poem entitled *An Anna Blume* (To Anna Blume). It caused quite a sensation. The conservative art world, however, strongly criticized Schwitters because of it.

Script plays the key role in his **Stempelzeichnungen** (stamp drawings). In these works he uses rubber stamps normally reserved for business correspondence, which he found in the office of "Der Sturm" Gallery. By applying stamps alien their actual purpose, in his drawings Schwitters established a relation to reality beyond an art context. Simultaneously the stamped words function as purely compositional elements. They are part of a picture that, besides words, is likewise comprised of abstract and representational elements. Combined in a new way they sometimes produce nonsense, sometimes witty and ironic associations.

The first **Merz Drawings and Pictures** – works out of found materials (string, wire, wood, paper rests, etc. etc) – were executed in the winter of 1918/19. With them Schwitters revolutionized the collage. Calling them "Merz" art, in 1919 they were exhibited for the first time in "Der Sturm" Gallery. What the found objects are or their function (bread-ration stamps issued by the German Reich, stamps with numbers, newspaper cuttings, wrapping paper, bus and train tickets, envelopes) is not the central concern of his Merz Pictures. Instead, the important thing about them was the way they have been used in art – they were chosen for aesthetic

reasons alone and then combined. The found materials have lost their original meaning and united to form an abstract composition.

It turns out that the medium of drawing was a key factor for Schwitters while developing his idea of Merz art around 1919 which he defined "as a new form of creation that, in principle, involves every kind of material." Drawing was pivotal for two key aspects of Merz art: Firstly, for transgressing the traditional boundaries that separate the genres painting, drawing, prints, and script; and secondly, for dissolving drawing's traditional function of a preliminary study, devising conceptions, reproduction, or description.

### Room 4

Early in the 1920s Schwitters' work revealed abstract geometric and constructivist leanings. He was able to concretize his basic ideas on Merz art and on the autonomous artwork especially from his exchange of ideas with De Stijl artists (especially Theo van Doesburg) as well as through joining artistic circles such as "abstraction, creation, non-figurative art" and "Cercle et Carré." His art expresses the search for clear-cut principles of design and an "elementary kind of art." In parts often reminiscent of other artists' work, it correspondingly experiments with various characteristics of constructivism and organic forms. While the colored-pencil drawing *Ohne Titel (Eiformen)* [Untitled (Egg Forms)] reminds us of Hans Arp's playful compositions, his pencil sketch *Ohne Titel (Skizze Abstrakte Komposition mit zwei Kreisen und zwei Dreiecken)* [Untitled (Sketch of an Abstract Composition with Two Circles and Three Triangles)] could easily be attributed to his interest in László Moholy-Nagy's work. In the late 1930s and during the 1940s he additionally produced sheets with irregular non-geometrical forms such as *Ohne Titel (Skizze Abstrakte Komposition mit amorphen Formen)* [Untitled (Sketch of an Abstract Composition with Amorphous Forms)]. This kind of art indicates that Schwitters was turning away from the clear-cut visual language of constructivism.

Further abstract studies such as *Ohne Titel (Abstrakte Komposition 5)* [Untitled (Abstract Composition 5)] and *Ohne Titel (Skizze Abstrakte Komposition 2)* [Untitled (Abstract Composition 5)] appear to simulate spatial situations such as we know from the close-up photographs of his architectural construction in Hanover called the Merzbau. The studies were possibly made in conjunction with the construction of a new Merzbau that Schwitters set out to build in 1937 during his exile in Lysaker near Oslo.

### Rooms 5 and 6

*"I am not of the opinion that painting should no longer be engaged with nature as isolated phenomena (...) a new, objective, dispassionate study of nature together with depicting the results in a picture is not only allowed, but, in conjunction with abstract design, important."*

Schwitters painted and drew numerous realistic portraits, still lifes, and landscapes while living as an exile in Norway (from 1937) and in England (from 1940).

Presumably the **still lifes** were executed as autonomous creations and not commissioned work or studies for paintings, while many of the portraits were painted so that Schwitters could earn a living. In particular during the period from 1940 to 1941, Schwitters portrayed many of the other internees while impounded as a refugee in Hutchison Camp in Douglas on the Isle of Man. His aptitude in representation constantly grew, and he was apparently quite successful with these portraits. Placing the faces directly in the middle of the picture, he mostly set off the contours of his sitters with strong outlines, and his hatching for the modeling comprises broad, densely set lines. Schwitters only very seldom portrayed himself. *I. myself* is one of three surviving self-portraits. He executed it on July 31, 1946, in Ambleside. At the time he was living as a recluse for over a year in the Lake District and was in dire financial trouble while also troubled by health problems. The harsh and broken lines of the drawing, seemingly both questioning his identity while reassuring the artist of himself, can feasibly be attributed to a state of nervous tension in his precarious situation.

Kurt Schwitters' **landscapes** are ultimately the key constant factor in his graphic work. The main themes in his art from the 1930s onwards were his impressions of the Norwegian countryside and, from the mid-1940s, of the mountainous region of northern England. Schwitters was a city person and an artist who found his material in what civilization had to offer. Nevertheless, he had always felt a yearning for nature. This can be seen in the fact that he never gave up studying nature alongside his interest in abstract approaches to art. Nature remained an important source of inspiration for the artist and a welcome testing ground. At the same time his artistic isolation while living in exile – far removed from the great European art centers Paris and Berlin – forced him to earn a living with landscapes. In this vein he often spent his summers in the Norwegian alpine valley of Djupsvasshytta, where he sketched landscapes and sold them to tourists.

The landscapes Schwitters predominantly preferred were of still largely uninhabited, barren countryside. He was fascinated by rock formations and structures modeled by nature, such as overlapping peaks of mountains, layers of rock, and branches of trees. His landscape drawings can be divided into several different groups: Sheets with finished compositions that were drawn, to a great extent, forcefully with black crayon, containing motifs that were characteristic for the region, such as a pier in the harbor of a township in Norway (*Halmstad*, 1938), a lonely house in the mountains (*Haus am Djupwand und geographische Skizze* [House near Djupwand and Geographic Sketch], 1935/36 ), or an old barn in the Lake District (*Gill Side View*, 1942). His simple and commanding landscape drawings make up another group. In these works the lines are essentially more freely and expressively sketched while still maintaining topographic correctness (as in *Station Romsdalshorn*, 1939; *Nerdalen*, 1937/39; *Blick von Hjertoya auf die Romsdalsalpen* [Romsdals Alps Viewed from Hjertoya], 1937/39). In addition, a staple of quick sketches has been passed down to us. They are impressions of landscapes that Schwitters made while traveling. Their typical abbreviated form of describing reality entails a high degree of abstraction (e.g. *Skizze Wasserfall in Norwegen* [Sketch of a Waterfall in Norway], ca. 1938; *Skizze Feld mit drei Bäumen* [Sketch of a Field with three Trees], ca. 1938). The sketch of *Kirkston Pass* is his only work that

is dated 1948 and therefore very probably the last piece of art he executed before his death. With soft and often broken lines Schwitters drew Kirkston Pass in the Lake District from memory.

*Curator: Claudine Metzger*

## **Biography Kurt Schwitters**

**June 20, 1887**

Born in Hanover

**1904**

Produced his first works on paper

**1908/09**

Studied at the Hanover School of Applied Arts

**1909-1915**

Studied at the Royal Saxon Academy of Art in Dresden

Wrote his first poems and prose

**August 1911**

Participated in his first exhibition in the Kunstverein Hannover, showing there regularly until 1934

**October 5, 1915**

Married Helma Fischer

**1918**

His work increasingly engaged with abstraction; executed the first abstract drawings of his "Z" Series

The Kestner Museum in Hanover purchased 18 of his drawings

**June 1918**

He participated for the first time in an exhibition in Herwarth Walden's "Der Sturm" Gallery in Berlin

**Fall 1918**

Established ties to the dada movement. Produced his first collages

**November 16, 1918**

His son Ernst was born

**Summer 1919**

Publication of the programmatic text *Die Merzmalerei* (Merz Paintings) and the poem *An Anna Blume* in *Der Sturm Magazin*. Executed his first Stamp Drawings

**1923**

Presumably commenced work on his Merzbau in Hanover  
Publication of the first issue of his *Merz* journal (published until 1932)

**1924**

Founded the Merz Advertising Office where he often worked in the following years as a typographer

**1927**

Co-founder of the group "The Abstract Hanoverians"

**1929**

Became a member of the artists' society Cercle et Carré in Paris

**July 1929**

First trip to Scandinavia

## 1930-1936

Annual trips to Norway; sojourns especially in the North-West on Lake Djupvand and at Moldefjord (Hjertøya Island). Made numerous landscape sketches. Transformation from a constructivist style to organic forms.

## 1931

Became a member of the artists' association "abstraction-cr  ation" in Paris

## 1937

Travelled to Oslo on January 2. Due to the political situation he did not return to Germany. Living in exile he became increasingly pre-occupied with representational art  
The National Socialists confiscated his art and branded it as degenerate

## April 9, 1940

Germans invaded Norway. Fled to Scotland

## 1940/41

Interned, last station thereof in Hutchinson Camp in Douglas on the Isle of Man. Depicted many portraits; became a member of the Free German Artists' Union in Great Britain

## December 1941

Moved to London; met Edith Thomas, who was later to become his partner

## October 8 / 9, 1943

House in Hanover containing the Merzbau was destroyed

## 1945

Moved with Edith Thomas to Ambleside in the Lake District in North-West England

## 1946

Physical collapse and temporary blindness

## 8. January 1948

Died in Kendal Hospital

## Special Events

**  ffentliche F  hrungen:** Sonntag, 11h: 25. September, 16. Oktober, 6. November, 11. Dezember 2011, 8. Januar 2012 und  
Dienstag, 19h: 27. September, 11. Oktober, 22. November 2011, 3. Januar 2012  
Ohne Anmeldung, Ausstellungseintritt

**«Man nehme kurz alles». Schwitters' Materialkunst als Kunstmaterial.  
Eine Live-Collage von Julia Haenni, Natalie Keppler, Micha K  chler und  
Thea Reifler:**

Sonntag, 12h: 6. November, 11. Dezember 2011, 8. Januar 2012  
Jeweils nach den   ffentlichen F  hrungen.

**«Zeitfenster Gegenwart»:  
strukturelle   ffnungen – Performance von Heinrich L  ber:**  
Dienstag, 29. November, 18h

## Catalogue (in German)

**«Anna Blume und ich», Zeichnungen von Kurt Schwitters.**  
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## The exhibition is a co-production with:

SPRENGEL MUSEUM HANNOVER

where the exhibition was shown from  
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KURT UND ERNST SCHWITTERS STIFTUNG

Isabel Schulz, curator Sprengel Museum Hannover and Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hannover