

Daimler

Art Collection

Classical : Modern I

Classical Modern Art from the Collection

April 12 – September 17, 2006

Renate Wiehager

Foreword

The Daimler Art Collection was first interested in artists from southern Germany, starting with pictorial works by teachers and students at the Stuttgart Academy like Adolf Hölzel, Oskar Schlemmer, Willi Baumeister, Jean Arp and Max Bill. They all shared an artistic interest in an interdisciplinary dialogue between fine art, applied design, architecture and graphic design, as inherited from the Bauhaus. The Daimler Art Collection is still committed to this exploratory artistic thinking, always concerned about people, their imagination and their innovative powers. The Daimler Art Collection has established a clear profile with a sound art-historical basis by consistently expanding its abstract-constructive and minimalist positions and developing these focal points systematically in terms of content.

The group of Classical Modern works in the Daimler Art Collection, which was established in 1977 with the purchase of a painting by Willi Baumeister, includes mainly painting, but also sculpture, wall objects and graphic art. They present an image of the development of art to the 1960s, drawing mainly on south-west Germany. Two compositions by Adolf Hölzel date from the first decade of the 20th century, thus representing the beginning of the collection chronologically. Hölzel was appointed to the Stuttgart Academy in 1905, and among his pupils achieving later distinction are artists like Willi Baumeister, Camille Graeser, Otto Meyer-Amden, Oskar Schlemmer, Johannes Itten, Adolf Fleischmann and Ida Kerkovius; they figure with series of works or individual pieces—following the pattern of their development. Schlemmer—who is particularly important in the Daimler Art Collection, featuring with nine works from three decades—taught at the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau from 1921–28. Josef

D

A C

Albers, whose biography was also crucially shaped by studying and teaching at the Bauhaus, emigrated to the USA in 1933, where he became a leading teacher. Four works in the Collection identify important stages of his development in America.

Max Bill is another key artist in the Collection. Bill studied at the Dessau Bauhaus under Schlemmer, Kandinsky and Klee, and was the co-founder and first rector of the 'Ulmer Hochschule für Gestaltung' in 1950. In Paris Bill had joined the 'abstraction-cr ation' group in 1931, to which Arp, Baumeister and Vantongerloo, who also figure in the Collection, belonged as well. With Camille Graeser, Verena Loewensberg and Richard Paul Lohse, the last-mentioned formed the core of the 'Zurich Concrete' group, whose spokesman and theorist Bill remained until the 1960s. Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart—a student at the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau for a short time, member of 'De Stijl', co-founder of 'die abstrakten hannover', a friend of Bill and later teacher at the Hochschule f r Gestaltung in Ulm—was in contact with all these circles and can be considered the most important exponent of concrete art in Germany.

The 'Classical : Modern I' exhibition follows four principal lines. First come about 30 works showing the progress of the Stuttgart H lzel circle, starting with two paintings from H lzel's early Stuttgart years (1908/09) and followed chronologically with works by his above-mentioned students. These range from Schlemmer's oil study *Rote D cher – Jagdschlo  Grunewald*, 1913, painted while he was still studying under H lzel, and on to works by Johannes Itten and Camille Graeser dating from the 1950s/1960s. A second line of argument explores aspects of monochrome work and color-field painting dating from 1950 to 1994 in monographic groups of works by Adolf Fleischmann, Rupprecht Geiger, Josef Albers and large-format individual works by G nter Fruhtrunk. The third main strand is devoted to examples of constructive and concrete art. Here Richard Paul Lohse's 1949 stripe picture sets the chronological starting-point, and the line extends to Max Bill's 1972 *caput mortuum*.

The fourth line of argument follows the principle of Daimler Art Collection exhibitions—whether these are thematic presentations on the company's premises, stops on a world-wide tour of museums or exhibitions in Daimler Contemporary Berlin—, which is to place Classical Modern works and pieces by post-war avant-garde artists in a dialogue with works of contemporary art. So for example G nter Scharein's *Sehnsuchtstriptychon*, 1987, is placed alongside the color-field painting group. Four pictures by the Stuttgart painter Ben Willikens dating from 1984 to 2004, who also designed the color concept of the exhibition, and a floor

D

A C

work by Philippe Parreno are placed in a rigorous intellectual exchange with works by Albers, Arp, Vordemberge and Vantongerloo. We have tied current works by Reyle, Rockenschaub, Hiepler, Gillick and Monk, who can be related in different ways to the formal vocabulary and analytical pictorial concepts of the classical artist, into the context of constructive and concrete art.

D

A C

At the opening of the 'Classical : Modern I' exhibition,
Daimler Contemporary, Berlin, April 11, 2006

Modernism born in Stuttgart in 1906

Books on 20th century art history tend to suggest that non-representational art was born in 1910, in the form of Kandinsky's first abstract water-color. But in fact the Russian Kandinsky, who was living in Munich at the time, was not an inventor. All he was doing was summing up developments in the years immediately before him. So to start with, the step into non-representational art is linked with the name of Adolf Hölzel, whom Kandinsky knew from his Munich period and who had been professor in Stuttgart since 1906. Hölzel's work had the characteristics of 'Jugendstil', but as early as 1905 he had combined the play of line and surface ornament with impressions from nature, and condensed them in quasi abstract forms. A radical step from which his subsequently famous pupils Baumeister, Schlemmer, Itten, Fleischmann, Graeser and Kerkovius benefited. And then as early as 1907 the young August Macke wrote in a letter about his attempts to 'place colors together on a board, without thinking of a real object'. In Austria, looking through a microscope helped the young Alfred Kubin to the shocking insight that the visible world is by no means as free of questions as our view of nature would have us believe. In his novel 'Die andere Seite', published in 1909, he makes a young painter dream of painting "new formal structures following secret inner rhythms". And the Lithuanian painter-musician Ciurlionis reflected about fusing sounds and rhythms in music and color around 1905, and used the idea to produce abstract pictorial compositions of 'painted music'.

Within the groups of work by Adolf Hölzel in our exhibition, this kind of characteristic 'abstract musicality' is to be found above all in his 1930 *Komposition (Glasfensterentwurf)*. When looking at his early paintings with religious motifs, which we meet at the start of our tour here in Haus Huth, it is hard to understand at first how there could be a path from here to the stereometrically reduced quality of the figures in pictures by Schlemmer and Meyer-Amden via Baumeister's surreal color forms to the mathematical-concrete pictures of an artist like Camille Graeser. But it is the case: the key is to be found in Hölzel's austere rational figure compositions and the crystalline surface structure of his pictorial backgrounds

D

A C

on the one hand, and then in the systematic of his theory and lectures, based on color theories and formal developments. If in our imaginations we abstract the characteristic painterly style from Hölzel's pictures, which identifies him as coming from the Munich school, then the linear two-dimensional choreography of an artist like Schlemmer seems to shimmer through the layer of paint. It may be that Baumeister found Hölzel's shifting between the abstract play of lines and two-dimensional art charged with associations and motifs stimulating. But Ida Kerkovius spins her teacher's fable-making tone of voice into a narrative art inspired by fairy-tales, myths and Biblical figures.

Hölzel's specific modernity as both a painter and a teacher has to be addressed at a practical level—and thus also the pioneering nature of his work in German abstract art development history—though this can be done only by taking account of the doctrinaire, formulaic quality of academic theory rooted in the 19th century, as predominant at the time in other German cities. For example, Franz von Stuck in Munich was insisting on an austere regime that meant failing his pupil Kandinsky's more self-confident drawings. In Dresden, Georg Grosz suffered under his teacher Richard Müller, who forced him to labor over slavish copying. Georg Tappert had to struggle against the unsophisticated concept of humanity that his teacher at the Akademie Burg Saaleck, the later NS ideologue Paul Schultze-Naumburg, wanted to thrust upon him. Rudolf Schlichter called Walter Conz, his teacher in the master-class at the Karlsruhe Akademie, the "greatest peddler of kitsch on the art horizon here", but preferred him to professors Wilhelm Trübner and Hans Thoma, who were teaching at the same time and tried to impose their ideas and subject matter on their students. Adolf Hölzel's progressive teaching and art were massively attacked in Stuttgart itself by the academy director, Hölzel's fellow artist Robert von Haug, a history painter obsessed with detail: murals by Hölzel's pupil Pellegrini were covered up or even destroyed.

As a teacher, Hölzel deliberately eschewed intervening in his pupils' work with corrections, thus supporting the individual qualities of each student's personal development. He taught through weekly lectures with practical examples, and these concentrated on fundamental creative resources: line and form, light-shade and color. The ideas were then discussed using color charts and schematic drawings, and also by analyzing old masters: "The fact is that everyone can take what he wants to take from these lectures, whereas I would be exerting a certain compulsion by intervening in a picture with corrections, something actually linked to my personal sense of unnecessarily imposing on the pupil". (Adolf Hölzel, in: ex. cat. Hölzel und sein Kreis, Kunstverein Stuttgart 1961.)

D

A C

The Hölzel circle I

Itten, Schlemmer, Kerkovius, Baumeister. Albers's special role

“Art and people must be united! Art should no longer be for the enjoyment of the few, but the happiness and life of the masses”, proclaimed Walter Gropius in 1919 in the manifesto he had written for the foundation of the Weimar Bauhaus. The idea of training a new human being for a new society is one of the Bauhaus’s founding Utopias. And to a very considerable extent it was Hölzel’s pupils who disseminated this revolutionary spirit, which was to make itself felt throughout the 20th century in the wider world, from Weimar and Dessau, and later from Berlin. Johannes Itten, born in 1888 in the Bernese Oberland, studied under Hölzel from 1913 to 1916, and was considered his unofficial assistant. Itten immersed himself above all in Hölzel’s teaching, and from it he developed the famous ‘Vorkurs’, the preliminary course that was compulsory for all Bauhaus students, after he was appointed to teach at the Weimar Bauhaus in 1919. It revolutionized art teaching methods in many respects. The two works by Itten in the Daimler Art Collection show that even in his late work he was still addressing dark-edged color forms or ‘through-lit’ color architectures of the kind he had got to know in Hölzel’s stained glass designs.

Oskar Schlemmer, born in Stuttgart in 1888, joined Hölzel’s master-class in 1912, and was able to come back to it during the war for occasional study leave and joined the class again full time in 1918. The main idea that Schlemmer absorbed from Hölzel was the intimate connection between strict rules and intuition, the parallel nature of objective pictorial laws and subjective sensations from which artistic concepts grow, and that have to be rebalanced constantly. After joining the Bauhaus as a teacher in 1920, Schlemmer took Hölzel’s doctrine of artistically anchoring of figure and space in a picture further with geometrically simplified spatial compositions in which people act freely as art figures, following their own laws. While *Rote Dächer – Jagdschloß Grunewald*, 1913 tries to connect Cézanne’s influence with Hölzel’s teaching, the 1919 *Relief H* in aluminum already shows the constructive-symbolic faceting of the figure that is typical of Schlemmer at this time, and the way it is tied into an abstract spatial concept. Schlemmer was forced into passive resistance when the National Socialists seized power; his 1935 *Frauenkopf* and the *Zwei Köpfe* dating from 1943 treat the classically stylized head in a pictorial format with a tight border as a symbol of intellectual freedom at a time of agonizing political and human constraint.

D

A C

Ida Kerkovius provides a third bridge from Hölzel to the Bauhaus. She was born in 1879, was working under Hölzel as a pupil as early as 1903 in Munich and joined his Stuttgart master-class in 1910. She taught Johannes Itten for a brief period in 1913, then, Kerkovius attended the 'Vorkurs' at the Bauhaus in her turn seven years later. She worked in Klee's and Kandinsky's painting classes and in the weaving department at the same time. Kerkovius was closely linked with Hölzel as a friend and colleague until he died, just as her work fed on her teacher's powerful use of color and religiously permeated figure concepts throughout her lifetime.

Hölzel's pupil Willi Baumeister formulated in retrospect how liberating, positive and pioneering his teacher's approach had been: "You created an exemplary and beautiful atmosphere in Stuttgart, as a human being, an artist and a teacher. You gave us a school of artistic conviction that was at least equal in value to the most famous Parisian schools. Heads were smoking full of deeds as yet undone. There was rare concentration of people and ideas. You brought up problems that provide useful pointers in themselves. This faced us with a wide horizon, loosened us up and led us to purely artistic matters. I remember details that were unique signposts for me - and an overall approach that constantly insisted that art was research on the plateau of the ideal. The results of this research, the works, make a great school for the eyes of mankind, to whom these new insights are presented in this way, through visual quality". (W.B. to Hölzel, 28.1.1933, in: see above ex. cat. Stuttgart 1961.)

Josef Albers, the third legendary Bauhaus teacher alongside Schlemmer and Itten, certainly had no direct contact with Hölzel, but is closely linked with the history of abstract art in Germany through teaching and contacts. Albers became an abstract artist almost overnight on entering the Weimar Bauhaus. He made works in glass from found items, made functioning furniture from geometrical wooden sections, designed typefaces and constructed metal objects for everyday use, experimented in all artistic media, and from 1920 until it was forced to close in 1933 he was the most influential teacher at the Bauhaus, and the one who worked there longest. Albers then has emigrated to the USA with his wife Anni Albers, where he taught at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina until 1949. He was head of the Yale University art department from 1949 to 1959. He also held numerous visiting lectureships (at institutions in Harvard, Havana, Santiago de Chile and Ulm). His four works in the Daimler Art Collection represent the artist's two most important work groups. The *Structural Constellations*, produced in the 1950s, unite antagonistic spatial perspective constructions in

D

A C

two dimensions to form a lucid graphic black-and-white grid. Albers was 62 years old when he embarked on his monumental *Homage to the Square*-series in 1950, and produced about a thousand variations on it before he died in 1976.

The Hölzel circle II

Ackermann, Fleischmann, Graeser

Max Ackermann, born in Berlin in 1887,—like Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky or Albers—studied under teachers including Franz von Stuck in Munich before coming to Stuttgart in 1912. Studying Hölzel’s theories promoted his first abstract compositions, dated around 1918. He took private lessons under Hölzel in 1919–20, and the insights he gained in this period affected his Stuttgart seminars on ‘Absolute Painting’ from 1930. Adolf Fleischmann was born in Esslingen in 1892. He travelled extensively in Europe in the first half of the century, and was thus able to make contact with the major artists of his day. Presumably he was already in touch with Hölzel’s teaching, and in person, in 1914, while he was training in the Stuttgart Graphik-Werkstätten, and then again after his military service in 1915–17. Fleischmann found the right place in which to live in 1952, in New York. One characteristic of Fleischmann’s paintings derives from his work on Mondrian’s idealistic pictorial concept of horizontal-vertical order as a fundamental expression of life, and the theme of color in vibrating motion. Camille Graeser, who was a key figure in the Zurich Concrete movement, defined his artistic programme like this in 1944: “Concrete means strictly logical creation and design of works of art with their own inherent laws. Concrete means removing everything subconscious. Concrete means purity, law and order”. Graeser’s programmatic austerity is based on a combined study of interior design, graphic art and product design in Stuttgart, followed by a year of artistic training under Adolf Hölzel in 1918–19.

Organic abstraction and lyrical construction

Arp, Fruhtrunk, Geiger, Scharein

The biographical links between Hans Arp (1887–1966) and the above-mentioned artists in our exhibition are many and various: during his repeated periods at the Weimar Bauhaus and in Berlin from 1922–24 he met Schlemmer and Itten among others, in the course of his Paris years and as co-founder of the ‘abstraction-cr ation’ group of artists, he worked with Bill, Vordemberge-Gildewart, Vantongerloo and Baumeister. Arp’s work fits in with the great

D

A C

artistic movements in the early 20th century: Dada, Surrealism and the abstract tendencies of the 1930s. Arp made equal impact as a poet and as a fine artist from 1916 onwards. His associative games with linguistic ambiguity find their pictorial counterpart in the collages, sculptures and reliefs. One of Arp's great admirers, and his assistant in his Paris studio for several years was Günter Fruhtrunk (1923–1982). Fruhtrunk's work is characterized by extremely austere design in relation to color and form, influenced by his work in the studios of Fernand Léger and Arp from 1952 to 1958. *Epitaph für Arp*, 1972, is one of three paintings that Fruhtrunk dedicated to Arp, his friend and mentor for many years.

One of the great loners of lyrical abstraction in Germany is Rupprecht Geiger, who was born in Munich in 1908. He first worked as an architect, and then taught himself to paint, before embarking on a kind of abstract color-field painting as early as the 1950s, comparable only with parallel phenomena in America. He finally arrived at the monochrome picture object via his earlier concentration on glowing shades of red.

In comparison with the aggressive and vivid luminous power of color in Fruhtrunk's and Geiger's pictures, it seems right to call the chromatic color sequences used by the Berlin painter Günter Scharein (b. 1949) spiritual meditation panels. Scharein has combined his color research conducted with academic rigor with a spiritual charge via his picture titles and motifs echoing Grünewald or the Romantics. This is the background for the *Sehnsuchtstriptychon* in the Daimler Art Collection, which releases the concrete story of salvation into expanses that have to be colored individually and emotionally.

Space-pictures and picture-spaces

Special guests: from Ben Willikens to Anselm Reyle

There is probably no painter of our day who has explored the history of the picture space in Western painting so meticulously and with such academic vigor as Ben Willikens, from Saenredam's church interiors in monochrome light to Josef Albers's 'Meditation panels for the 20th century', from Raphael's rationally constructed spatial lines to Malevich's revolutionary icon of 1913, the black square on a white ground. The spiritualized lucidity of Raphael and Albers has flowed into Willikens's 1984 *Raum 37*, while the denunciatory reversal of Modernism under Fascism has withdrawn into the blackish-grey door rectangle of the *Zeppelinfeld Nürnberg. Eingang zur Transformatorstation* in 1996. Willikens's latest study of Modernism's pioneering artists' spaces, Lissitzky's 1923 *Prounen-Raum* and Erich Buchholz's Berlin studio space of 1922, has opened up his palette, hitherto restricted to color values

D

A C

between black and white, to color, though to a moderate and definitely conceptual extent. Willikens's study of the painted picture space, the 'picture in space' and the 'space as picture', schooled by the history of Classical Modernism, led us to ask him to provide a color concept for our 'Classical : Modern I' exhibition. The result of this for viewers is that it is possible to walk through the exhibition space itself as if through a sequence of pictures: various nuances, from light grey to dark greyish-blue, provide a painterly framework, as it were, for the thematic facets from the Hölzel circle to the aspects of Concrete Art. In this way, Willikens's theme of emancipating the panel picture so that it can become a space picture has become a three-dimensional argument in its own right.

Drawn into this dialogue between the classical avant-garde and contemporary positions, we have some young artists who can be read as contemporary interpreters of the formal repertoires and of the Utopian concepts of Concrete Art. While Gerwald Rockenschaub animates his graphic abbreviations with Techno music, Esther Hiepler takes the idea of a mathematically objective pictorial composition into the temporal duration of a performing, subjective finding process. The stripes of color in Liam Gillick's floor sculpture seem like a minimalist 'applied' response to Richard Paul Lohse's 1949s stripe picture. Silver foil neon colors, mirrors, disco lighting—Anselm Reyle's works tempt viewers with artificially painterly surfaces, linking up with European Zero Art or Op Art and Informel, and at the same time intimidate them with gigantic formats quoting American Abstract Expressionism. Jonathan Monk's jigsaw demontage of Malevich's black circle and red square, conspiratorially juxtaposed with Olivier Mosset's 1974 'circle painting' brings the categorical pictorial concepts of the 20th century into an endless loop, in which the process of asserting and negating the 'last', the 'absolute' picture constantly overtakes itself.

(from the publication: 'Classical : Modern I. Classical Modern Art from the Collection', Stuttgart/Berlin 2006, pp. 3-5; 11-14. You can purchase this book online.)

Daimler Contemporary

Haus Huth Alte Potsdamer Str. 5 10785 Berlin

daily 11 am - 6 pm

D

A C