

Visitors guide

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The Collection

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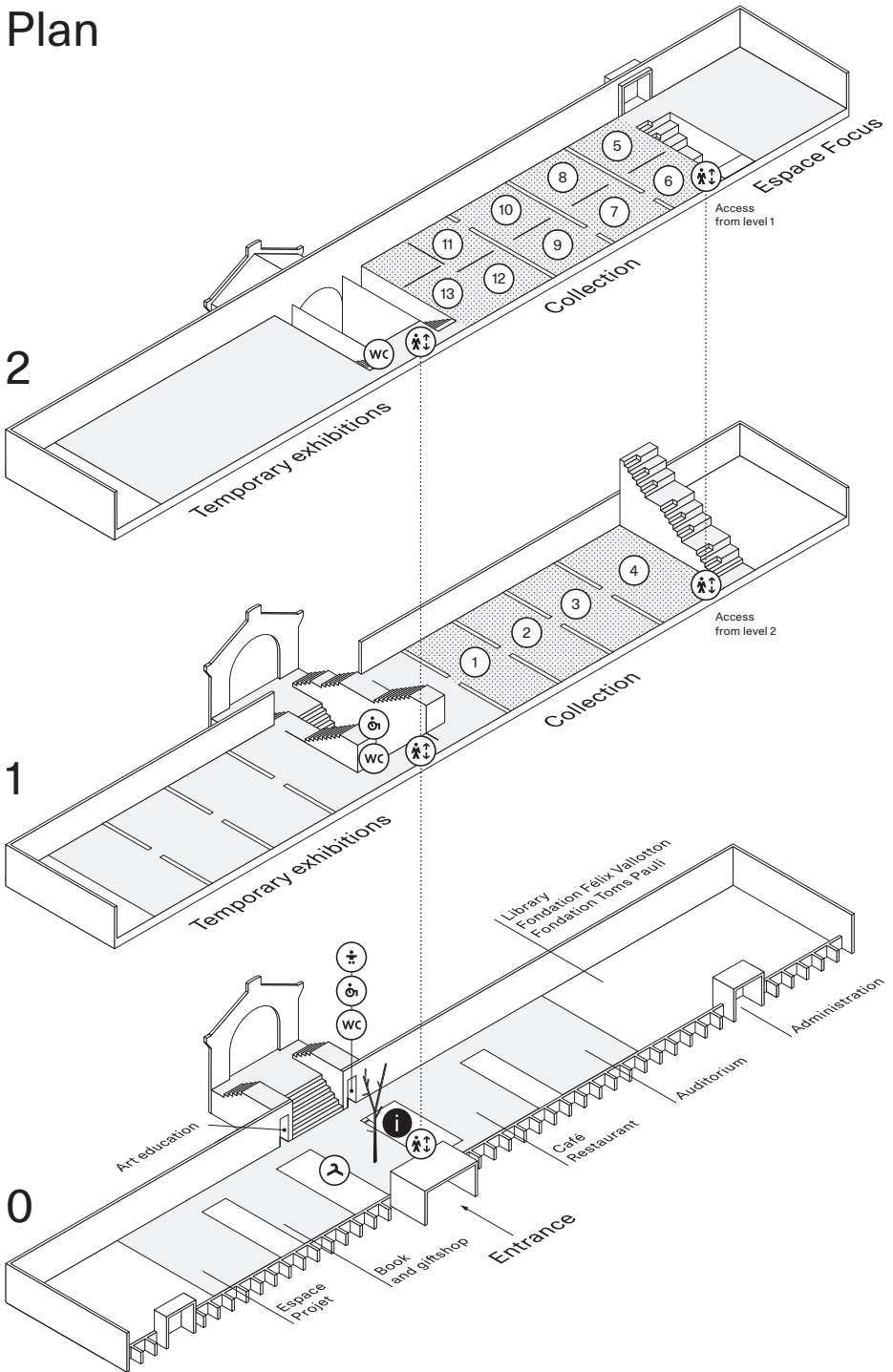
The collection

To see here what cannot be seen elsewhere! This is the guiding spirit behind this hanging of the MCBA's collection. Since 1816, acquisitions, gifts, bequests and deposits have constantly enriched this collection. It allows visitors an opportunity to more fully appreciate the work of artists from the canton of Vaud and French-speaking Switzerland more generally, whether they pursued their careers at home or abroad, and to compare and contrast it with international art trends.

The collection is especially strong in relation to movements such as Neo-Classicism, Academicism, Realism, Symbolism and Post-Impressionism; abstract painting in Europe and the U.S.; Swiss and international video art; New Figuration; Geometric Abstraction; and, in every period, the work of socially and politically engaged artists. It also comprises major monographic collections, including work by Charles Gleyre, Félix Vallotton, Louis Soutter, Pierre Soulages and Giuseppe Penone.

Installed on two levels, the selection from the permanent collection changes regularly, and pieces from the MCBA's holdings are brought into dialogue with work on loan from private collections. In this way, our view of the astounding vitality of art as seen from Lausanne is always renewed.

Plan



1st floor

Room 1

The road to modernity

Religious painting

The 12th century saw the emergence of a new sensibility in pre-Renaissance Europe as artists began to centre their work on the representation of human beings, even though the Bible and the apocryphal gospels remained their main source of inspiration. Sentimental episodes of the childhood of Mary and Jesus lent themselves to a more realistic rendering of individual faces, landscapes and architectural details (**Francesco da Rimini, Circle of Pieter Coecke van Aelst**). The Old Testament inspired ambitious, large-format compositions. After Caravaggio, the Neapolitan School used chiaroscuro to dramatize grand moral themes (**Andrea Vaccaro, Luca Giordano**).

Portraits

Portraits of individuals pervaded the arts in the second half of the 17th century. Under Louis XIV, French portraitists sought to accurately record the physical appearance, social status and distinctive qualities of their sitters, whether members of the nobility or the bourgeoisie (**Nicolas de Largillierre, Hyacinthe Rigaud**). Inspired by Rembrandt, painters in Northern and Central Europe made studies of candlelit “character heads” surging out of the darkness.

Exoticism

At the end of the 18th century, many Swiss artists emigrated to Paris or Italy, seeking renown in the genre of history painting. **Louis Ducros** and **Jacques Sablet** settled in Rome. Ineligible for religious art commissions (reserved for Catholics), they took up other specialities, the former large-format watercolours of ancient monuments and picturesque sites, and the latter open-air group portraits and popular scenes. A generation later, **Charles Gleyre**, who had studied art in Paris and visited Rome, set out for a long eastward voyage that would take him to Greece and down the Nile. After his return to Paris, he devoted himself to classically inspired history painting in a singular style midway between Romantic passion and academic rigour. He also took up teaching; students at his studio included the future Impressionists Monet, Renoir and Sisley.

Landscapes

Starting in the late 18th century, highly meteorological landscape paintings expressed the anxiety prevalent during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. Catastrophe painting, full of storms, shipwrecks and erupting volcanoes, as well as vast, desolate landscapes, contrasted human solitude with the sublime grandeur of nature.

History painting

For Swiss artists, the great challenge resided in the invention of a history painting that would express their country's spirit of independence and democratic ideals and help construct a modern national identity (**Jean-Pierre Saint-Ours, Charles Gleyre**).

Room 2

The triumph of realism

During the 19th century Switzerland went through a step-by-step process that transformed it into a unified federal state. Since the country lacked a centralized art education system and a dynamic market, its artists often went abroad. Their unique qualities flourished in landscape and genre painting. Geneva's **François Diday** and **Alexandre Calame** were the founders of a truly Swiss art featuring its emblematic landscapes. Diday portrayed Alpine peaks, with a monumental and sublime vision still strongly infused with Romanticism. His student Calame, influenced by 17th-century Dutch painting, preferred middle altitude views. The triumph of realism in the second half of the 19th century, from Naturalism to Impressionism, allowed Swiss artists to shine at the Paris Salon. Their work tended to represent the traditions and customs of people living far from big cities, spared from the Industrial Revolution that dissolved traditional communities of farmers and craftsmen. **Eugène Burnand** and **Ernest Biéler** did animal painting and genre scenes in monumental formats previously reserved for history painting. **Frédéric Rouge, Albert Anker** and the young **Ferdinand Hodler** made portraits of social and professional

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archetypes, a genre **Gustave Courbet** also delved into during his exile at La Tour-de-Peilz. The Barbizon School and **Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot's** sojourns in Western Switzerland greatly influenced a younger generation who turned toward more intimate landscapes. A proponent of atmospheric plein-air painting, **François Boccion** took Lake Geneva as his main subject, tirelessly recording the play of sunlight on the water and the passing clouds above. After finishing his art studies in Paris, he spent the rest of his days in his native Lausanne, where he cultivated a local clientele. In the field of portraiture, the Realism introduced by Gustave Courbet inspired painters to represent quiet moments in natural surroundings or bourgeois living rooms. The act of painting became a moment of truth free from social conventions. Models were seen in informal poses, at rest or carrying out leisure activities and other daily pursuits (**Louise Breslau, Charles Giron**). Like the Belgian sculptor **Constantin Meunier** who realistically portrayed men labouring under harsh conditions, Switzerland's **Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen** put his art at the service of his political convictions and his commitment to the struggle against social injustice. Making Montmartre his home, he chronicled the days and nights of the Parisian lower classes whose voice he became.

Room 3

From Symbolism to Post-Impressionism

At the end of the 1880s, a Europe-wide movement called Symbolism invaded literature, music and the visual arts. Its representatives, sworn enemies of materialism and rationalism, sought refuge from modernity in dreams and ideal worlds. They recast all traditional approaches, re-envisioning them through the prism of subjectivity and poetic suggestion. While society overall was becoming more secular, this turn to the spiritual brought back religious painting with the creation of new iconographies in both Catholic France (**Maurice Denis**) and Protestant French-speaking Switzerland (**Eugène Burnand**). Landscapes became a mirror of the soul and privileged surface for its projections, propitious for dreams and suggesting

mystery (**Hans Sandreuter**). Ancient myths were retold, and yet the heroes of these epics were austere and uneasy, embodiments of the fragility of human beings and the vainness of their hopes (**Plinio Nomellini**, **Émile-Antoine Bourdelle**). Favoured themes included Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, fairy tales and enchantment, used to interrogate the increasingly permeable barrier between masculine and feminine (**Ernest Biéler**). The mythic Garden of Eden, a haven from the evils of civilization, was transposed into Alpine expanses that alone had been able to escape industrialization (**Ferdinand Hodler**).

During this transitional period between Impressionism and Art Nouveau, a new graphic style burst onto the international scene, with portraits and landscapes marked by a flat picture plane, synthetism, stylized forms and visual compositions influenced by their musical equivalents. The Nabi artists, admirers of Paul Gauguin, no longer considered a painting a window onto the world, but rather the expression of a vision, expressed by an assemblage of coloured, smooth and juxtaposed surfaces. One member of this group was **Félix Vallotton**, whose youthful production betrayed the influence of Hans Holbein and presaged his critical view of contemporary society. By the 1880s his landscapes and interiors would be characterized by synthetism and uniform, vigorously delimited colour fields.

During the same period in France, a rival current expressed the concerns of artists who came out of the Impressionist tradition (**Claude Monet**, **Edgar Degas**) and Post-Impressionism (**Albert Marquet**). These avant-garde trends, the heirs of Paul Cézanne in painting and **Auguste Rodin** in sculpture, took the first steps in the march toward the autonomy of form and colour (**Henri Matisse**).

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Room 4

From the avant-gardes to the 1950s

In **Félix Vallotton's** mature work, the light becomes more intense. It falls almost harshly on his grey-fleshed, completely unidealized nudes and warmly in his views of Cagnes and the Seine estuary, flittering through the trees and on the water. The forms, supple lines and strong contrasts combine to impart an unreal quality to these landscapes.

In Paris, on the eve of the First World War, **Alice Bailly** and **Gustave Buchet** found an art scene in full effervescence. They discovered Cubism and Futurism and integrated the representation of movement into their aesthetic aims. Buchet pursued his quest as one of the avant-gardes artists influenced by Purism, a doctrine formulated by **Amédée Ozenfant** and Le Corbusier, who advocated a return to order, rigour and formal purity.

Other artists refused to take the now-open road to abstraction and re-interrogated figuration. **René Auberjonois** adorned his models with almost caricatural facial expressions and situated them in constricted settings, all rendered with a dark palette. The Spartan interiors of **Marius Borgeaud** share this same taste for balanced compositions. The style of **Balthus** is equally ascetic. The awkward postures of his models and their vacuous gaze produce a sensation of malaise, also found in the paintings **Francis Gruber** made during World War 2. This artist evoked the harsh reality of those times and of the human condition by shining a cold light on emaciated human figures frozen in oppressive spaces.

Shortly after, **Alberto Giacometti** took up representing the figure to convey his philosophical vision of human life. Instead of sculpting these men and women's physical and psychological characteristics – which proved to be an impossible objective – he brought them down from their pedestal and interrogated their relationship with the viewer and space. These elongated characters, meant to be seen frontally, apparently made of shredded magma, are in fact constructed of vigorously kneaded and gouged material.

Like Giacometti, **Jean Dubuffet** engaged in a physical confrontation with his raw materials. He loaded his canvases with thick layers that he would then scratch away. In search of a new kind of figuration he simplified his practice by adopting the thick outlines and rudimentary drawing techniques that he admired in the work of self-taught artists, especially the so-called “primitives” and people labelled “insane”. Many artists in the first half of the 20th century ruptured with the codified vocabulary inherited from the classical tradition and explored new and more primordial forms of expression. **Paul Klee** searched for a universal language rooted in humanity’s origins, and **Louis Soutter** directly engaged his body in the making of vibrant, powerful and poetic finger paintings.

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Room 5

A more figural abstraction: the 1950s

The postwar period in both France and the United States saw new trends in abstract art quite different than the geometric approach of abstractionist pioneers such as Kasimir Malevitch, František Kupka, Piet Mondrian and Sonia Delaunay. Various labels such as “Lyrical Abstraction” and “Abstract Expressionism” were put forward, but none of them successfully embraced the diversity of these artists. For example, in Paris, **Maria Helena Vieira da Silva** made allusive paintings whose fragmented compositions sometimes suggested architectural forms, while **Pierre Soulages** explored the effects of textures and light using a variety of tools, raw materials and supports. In New York, artists like **Willem de Kooning** sought to communicate an interior subjectivity in both strictly abstract and more allusive paintings. Their vigorously expressive spirit was embodied in their brushwork itself, deliberately left visible. While figuration persisted, artists associated with the CoBrA movement, including **Karel Appel** and **Asger Jorn**, imbued it with a primitive spontaneity.

Room 6

Escape from the canvas: 1960s – 1970s

In the late 1960s, the social revolution sweeping throughout Western Europe erupted in art-making as well. Artists were eager to cast off the weight of tradition. Painting was the first medium to undergo this transformation as Pop Art made consumer society its subject, using vivid colours and slogans evoking the advertising signs permeating the urban environment (**Jannis Kounellis**, **Émilienne Farny**). In Paris, the Nouveau Réalisme artists (**Daniel Spoerri**, **Dieter Roth**) embedded real-life objects in their work. Others, inspired by the Fluxus movement, erased the boundaries between life and art (**Marcel Broodthaers**). With a touch of humour, they absorbed everyday routines, images and objects into their work and appropriated

industrial materials such as neon, phosphorous and plastic (**Tadeusz Kantor, Janos Urban, René Bauermeister**). Video art emerged as a medium for visual and all sorts of experimentation as some artists turned their own bodies into a political statement (**VALIE EXPORT**), while others experimented with the medium itself (**Jean Otth, Nam June Paik**).

Room 7

Spaces of the body: 1980s

During the 1980s a new trend in painting and sculpture arose, a counter current to the austerity of the minimalist and conceptualist movements of the preceding decade. Neo-Expressionism, instead, drew inspiration from earlier twentieth century art. Its avatars in Germany and Austria were the Neue Wilde (New Fauves); in Italy, the Transavanguardia; in the U.S., the Bad Painting artists. Called "figuration libre" in France, and appearing in Switzerland as well (**Luciano Castelli, Martin Disler**), this rough but often euphoric art was the product of a determined, violent attack on a surface, grappling with a quickly emerging image. In sculpture, wood was the favourite material (**Stephan Balkenhol**). This work is left rough-hewn and unpolished, with the marks of its making deliberately left apparent. Drawing and painting lost their distinctive attributes. Charcoal, ink, watercolours and acrylics were applied directly, often on paper, with no preliminary sketch (**Miriam Cahn, Francine Simonin**). The sheet bears the traces of the artists at work (crinkles and folds), their entire body engaged in an intense and immediate moment of creation.

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Room 8

Abstractions

Once they are stripped of all reference to the exterior world, paintings are no longer about anything but their own forms and materiality. This is what **Olivier Mosset**, in 1969, called “the degree zero of painting.” The absence of events is manifest in his large red monochrome done twenty years later.

John M Armleder, associated with the Neo-Geo movement, made what he called “furniture sculptures,” a droll reminder that the purpose of artworks is to decorate living rooms. The thinking of these two artists about the renewal of abstractionism encouraged a strong interest in geometric abstraction in the Lake Geneva region, beginning in the 1980s and continuing today. Instead of bearing the artist’s signature touch, the canvas is covered with a uniform application of paint; subjectivity, neutralized by geometrical forms, is evident almost only in the formal choices. While some artists allude to personal stories in their work (**Jean-Luc Manz**), others stick to a pre-established protocol (**Claudia Comte**) or explore the painting as an object and the sculptural qualities of the surface (**Pierre Keller**).

Room 9

Representing the self and others

Since the beginning artists have represented themselves situated in their workplace – their studio, or used themselves as their model. They stage themselves in various poses and situations, wearing a multitude of expressions, adding another, more personal level of meaning by revealing the way they see or fantasize themselves. The self-portraits brought together in this room represent different archetypes. **Albrecht Schnider** depicts himself with a neutral expression, a skull under his arm and a painter’s palette under his foot, in a sort of *memento mori*. **Valérie Favre** interrogates gender identities by wearing the paper costume made by Dada artist Hugo Ball, just as **Luciano Castelli** celebrates the pleasure of life made up

as his alter ego, Lucille. These full-length self-portraits are very different than **Franz Gertsch's** engraved close-ups of solemn faces, and the stylized portraits with swaths of colour painted by **Alex Katz**. Despite contrasting techniques and styles – the former's paintings are hyperrealist, while the latter adopts a more Pop aesthetics – the work of both artists conveys a powerful presence. The artist's studio, in the paintings of **Thomas Huber**, for example, is sometimes shown empty. It is a symbol of creation itself and of the transformation of raw materials into art.

Room 10

Real Pictures

There are a variety of strategies among the contemporary artistic practices privileging “images of crises,” ranging from simple appropriation and collage and montage to painterly abstraction, all ways of resisting the fleetingness of their presence in the media. As noted by writer Susan Sontag in her interrogation of photojournalism, what characterizes such photographs is not so much that they make people remember events but that people remember nothing but the pictures themselves. With *Real Pictures*, **Alfredo Jaar** offers a kind of meta-examination of images, taking photographs that haunt him and putting them out of sight by placing them in boxes that could be archival storage containers or caskets. On each box he wrote a description of the photo it contains, inducing us to imagine it. These boxes whose contents we will never see are installed in a way that transforms them into very simple sculptures, a fragile memorial to the nearly one million people who were massacred in Rwanda in the spring of 1994. Rather than showing us an unfathomable mass of victims, Jaar evokes individuals, with their own names, identities, families and stories, seeking to give them back something of their humanity.

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Room 11

History, stories

This room brings together the work of artists who, each in their own way, explore what it means to create “facing history”, at the crossroads between grand historical narratives and individual stories. Their approach is the contrary of history painting, a genre that dominated Western art for almost two hundred years, starting with the seventeenth century. Instead, they continue the tradition of more recent politicized artistic practices responding to the irreversible ruptures that marked the twentieth century. Rather than glorifying the march of History, they explore the questions raised by the past. For example, **Christian Boltanski** shifts the focus away from the all-devouring anonymity of History and instead excavates personal stories. Other artists centre on the body and its political implications in terms of identity, vulnerability and violence (**Ana Mendieta**), or interrogate its “truth” (**Bruce Nauman**), while others still conjoin apparently very different histories (**Kader Attia**). When history painting is convoked, it’s in a veiled fashion, letting the artist’s materials do the work, so that the black rain of charcoal (un)covers the unstable strata constituting memory, both individual and historical, alternately threatening to strip it naked or obliterate it entirely (**Alain Huck**).

Room 12

Monuments

In 1982, Maya Lin, then an undergraduate architecture student at Yale, won a competition for the design of the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, black marble walls like notches in the earth, an explicit counterpoint to the triumphal verticalism and whiteness of Washington statuary. Since then many artists have transcribed the complexity of memory processes and their representation by making anti-monuments that emphasize absence, void and loss rather than a unifying narrative. Examples include the *Monument Against Fascism* by Esther Shalev-Gerz and Jochen Gerz (Hamburg-Harburg, 1986-93)

and Rachel Whiteread's *Holocaust Memorial* (Vienna, 2000), but also works made for the museum rather than for public space, like Alfredo Jaar's *Real Pictures* (room 10), and, in a dystopian vein, *Pacific Fiction – Study for a Monument* by **Julian Charrière**. In a more ephemeral format, the video *Plis et replis* by **Silvie Defraoui** exemplifies an anti-monumental approach emphasizing the difficulty of commemorating and doing justice to the violence of the dramatic events that make up history.

Room 13

Words and images

The title of this room is borrowed from René Magritte, who, in an eponymous text written in 1929, described how he used objects and their names for poetic purposes in his work. Almost a century later, this epigram by the Surrealist painter can serve to illuminate the diversity of formal vocabularies artists have developed over the course of their careers. The works on view here represent a few of them, suggesting words to translate thoughts and playing with perceptual illusions to transform forms and meanings. **Chérif and Silvie Defraoui** slice texts vertically so that they become both signs and ornaments, while **Louise Nelsson** combines familiar objects to produce new forms, while neutralising their initial function by painting them black. Certitudes arise and then crumble in **Markus Raetz's** anamorphoses, a distortion also found in the works of **Giuseppe Penone**, who analyses the mysteries of vision and its representation. The series of sculptures by **William Kentridge** creates a vocabulary of objects taken from his previous work. When turned over to the gaze of the viewer, the subjectivity of the artist reveals its universal potential by creating, in a way, the elements of a language.

Publications

Guide to the Collection

With texts by Bernard Fibicher, Catherine Lepdor, Camille Lévêque-Claudet, Laurence Schmidlin, Nicole Schweizer and Camille de Alencastro
A coedition by the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne and Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich, 2020 (separate FR and EN editions), 248 pp, 226 colour illustrations.

Price: CHF 25.– at the MCBA bookshop
CHF 29.– in bookstores

Ça bouge au musée!

Gisèle Comte. A coedition by the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne and La Joie de lire, Geneva, 2019, 20 pp, 14 colour illustrations (FR).

Price: CHF 14.–

For children 18 months and up

Regarde, elles parlent! 15 œuvres du musée te racontent leur histoire

With texts by Gisèle Comte, Sandrine Moeschler, Laurence Schmidlin and Deborah Strebel, with original illustrations by Fausto Gilberti. A coedition by the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne and La Joie de lire, Geneva, 2019, 92 pp, 15 colour and 15 b/w illustrations (FR).

Price: CHF 19.90

For eight-year-olds and up

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AUDEMARS PIGUET
Le Brassus



Musée cantonal
des Beaux-Arts
PLATEFORME 10
Place de la Gare 16
1003 Lausanne

T +41 21 316 34 45
info.beaux-arts@vd.ch
www.mcba.ch
@mcbalausanne
@mcba.lausanne

Visit app

Commentary on artworks and interviews with experts (FR, DE, EN). Comments on a dozen artworks in French sign language (LSF).

Monthly tours

An artwork as seen by...

An expert analyses an artwork in light of their field of study. Every last Tuesday of the month, 12:30-1 pm

Family visits

Every first Sunday of the month, 3-4:30 pm (7 year-old and up, signup required)

Kids workshops

Every first Saturday of the month, 2-4 pm (age variable depending on the workshop, signup required).

Visits for young children

Every first Wednesday of the month, 10-10:45 am (3-5 year-old, signup required)

Class trips

Interactive visits, peer visits, specially adapted educational visits, visitor guides: these tools make the museum collection accessible to all students and help teachers talk about art with their classes.

Full programme

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