The Collection

Exhibition guide

MUSÉE CANTONAL
DES BEAUX-ARTS
LAUSANNE

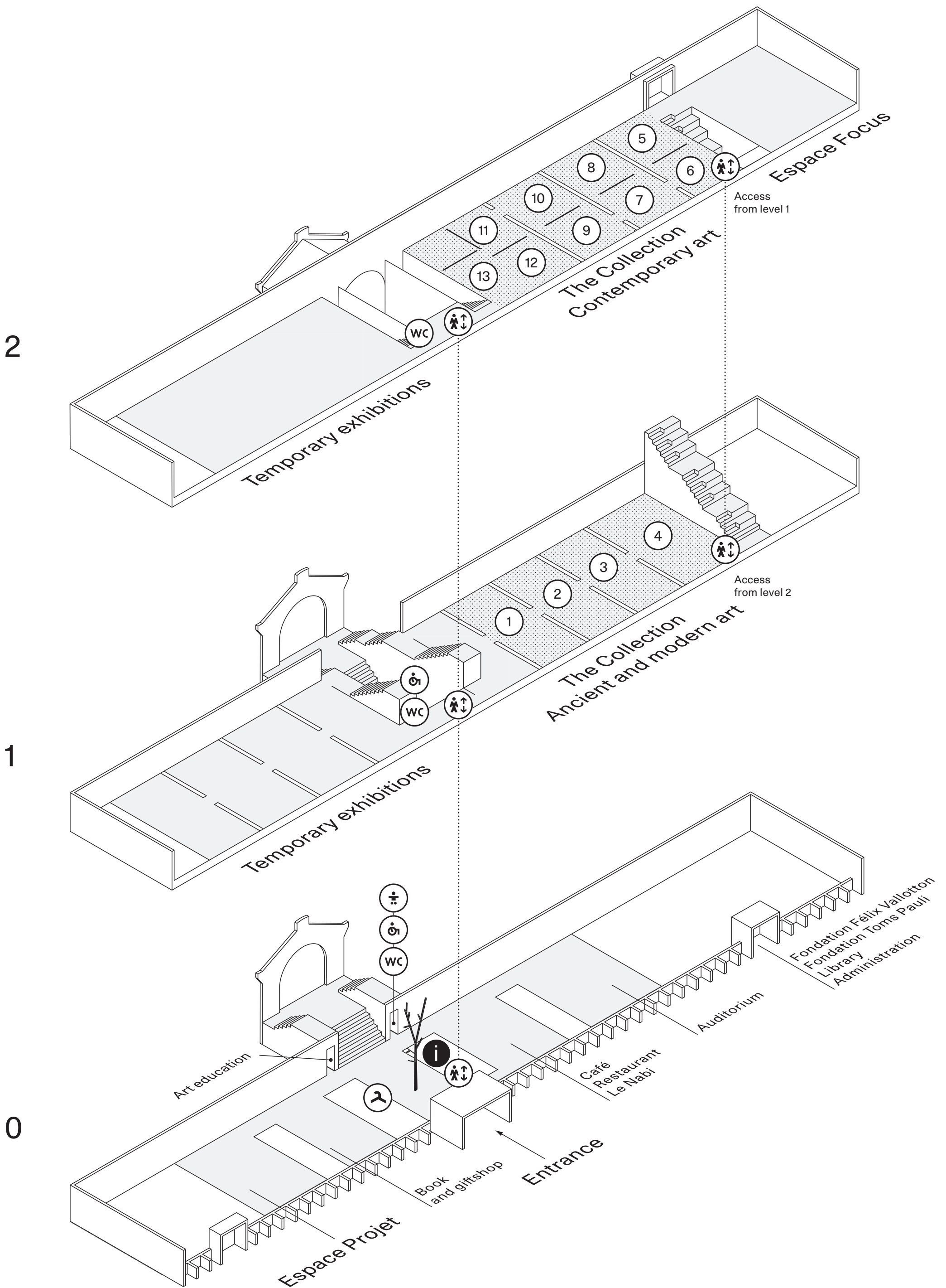
The collection

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

Colonialism and Humanism

Starting in the Renaissance, European expansion overseas fundamentally altered the way the world was depicted. Their imaginations fired by tales of exotic travel and the many artistic goods coming in from distant lands, European artists dreamed up works that show the allure of the exotic (*The Concert* tapestry) for them and their patrons. The Bible remained a major source of inspiration in history painting and its ambitious compositions done in quite large formats. Nevertheless, humanism offered a new, more naturalist interpretation that initially emphasised human beings and soon after their emotions. Following in Caravaggio's giant footsteps, the Neapolitan School turned to the technique of chiaroscuro to dramatise the great moral subjects (Andrea Vaccaro, Luca Giordano). Individual portraiture swept through the arts during the second half of the 17th century. In the France of Louis XIV, portrait painters also sought to realistically capture the physical appearance, social rank, and distinctive qualities of their sitters, whether bourgeois or noble (Hyacinthe Rigaud).

Emigration

At the end of the 18th century, many Swiss artists emigrated to Paris or Italy, seeking to make a name for themselves in history painting. Louis Ducros and Jacques Sablet settled in Rome. Ineligible for religious art commissions (reserved for Catholics), they specialised in other genres, the former in large-format views of ancient monuments and picturesque sites, and the latter in 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 and erupting volcanoes, as well as vast, desolate landscapes, contrasted human solitude with the sublime grandeur of nature (Louis Ducros, Charles Gleyre).

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 and Albert Anker painted portraits of social and professional archetypes, while also looking to the world of children for inspiration. The Barbizon School and the long stays in

Western Switzerland of Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot and Gustave Courbet (living in exile in La Tour-de-Peilz) greatly influenced a younger generation who turned toward intimate landscapes. A proponent of atmospheric plein-air painting, François Bocion 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, Impressionism and Art Nouveau invited painters to represent quiet moments in natural surroundings or bourgeois drawing 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 (Ernest Biéler, 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:
Post-Impressionism

At the end of the 1880s, the Impressionists (Claude Monet) were eclipsed by a new generation of artists. Many new styles and movements appeared during this transitional period in the years leading up to the avant-gardes of the 20th century.

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-envisaging them through the prism of subjectivity and poetic suggestion. The portrait became introspective and focused on the mood and mental state of individuals, which it revealed in symbols, absent expressions, and ambiances that are infused with unease and melancholy (Ferdinand

Hodler, Augusto Sartori). Landscapes became a mirror of the soul and privileged surface for its projections, propitious for dreams and suggesting mystery (Edmond Bille, Alexandre Perrier). Ancient myths were retold and yet the heroes of these epics were stern and uneasy, embodiments of the fragility of human beings and the vanity of their hopes (Plinio Nomellini). Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, fairy tales and stories of enchantment were held in high esteem. They made it possible to question the increasingly permeable barrier between masculine and feminine (Ernest Biéler).

During the same period, a new graphic style burst onto the international scene, employing, even in portraiture and landscape painting, a flat picture plane, a preference for combining disparate elements, stylised forms, and a musical organisation of the composition. The Nabis, under the influence 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 paintings show the influence of Hans Holbein and already reveal the artist observing contemporary society with a critical eye. Vallotton also adopted this new aesthetic and in his landscapes would remain, into the early years of the 20th century, attached to two-dimensionality and constructing the image through colourful pictorial planes.

In sculpture, Auguste Rodin proved the most remarkable innovator of an art form going through revolutionary change between the classical tradition and modernity. He was utterly focused on the human figure and exalted its movement, which lent concrete form to idea and emotion. His heirs, sculptors like Émile-Antoine Bourdelle, went a step further by working with cuts, crevices and mutilations; pedestal and base were made an integral part of the volume's design.

Room 4:
From the avant-gardes to the 1950s

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.

During the interwar years, a significant number of artists rejected the race of the avant-garde towards abstraction, and, haunted by the need to return to the human, reexamined figurative art. The work of Félix Vallotton's mature period is actually in tune with magic realism. In his landscapes, light gains in intensity, pallid in his views of Honfleur, warm in Cagnes and before the Seine estuary, flickering in forest undergrowth. The rejection of Expressionism is obvious in the work of Niklaus Stoecklin, who adopted the critical cool of the Nouvelle Objectivité (New Objectivity), and in Félix Labisse's output, which was akin to Surrealism, enlisting a hyperrealist style to help create a dreamlike world. 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.

2nd floor, 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. Europe also attracted American painters. In Italy, Cy Twombly developed an intimate and erudite abstraction steeped in references to antiquity. In Paris, Beauford Delaney was experimenting with the possibilities of a queer abstraction, both fluid and luminous. The impetus of the creative project itself finds expression in the freedom of the artist's gesture, which goes as far as saturating the pictorial space, as Kimber Smith's painting testifies.

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. 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).

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 mouvements 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, this rough but often euphoric art was the product of a determined, violent attack on a surface, grappling with a quickly emerging image. Drawing and painting lost their distinctive attributes. Charcoal, ink, watercolours and acrylics were applied directly, often on paper, with no preliminary sketch, as in the work of Miriam Cahn, Günter Brus, and Birgit Jürgenssen. The sheet of paper shows signs of the artists at work (crinkles and folds), their entire body engaged in an intense and immediate moment of creation. Although the body or a trace of it is clearly present, other artists make use of an altogether personal mythology to signify it. Hélène Delprat, for example, adopts a type of figuration that references totemic forms in her pictures from the 1980s, while Albert Oehlen reappropriated motifs that are full of associations in a gestural painting that rejects any and all technical constraints.

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).

Rooms 9–10:
Reclaiming the stage

Throughout history, many artistic positions have been marginalised or rendered invisible. This is particularly true of queer practices, which draw their political significance and aesthetic strength from the history of non-normative communities, without constituting a stable, fixed category. On the contrary, by refusing to promote a normative system marked by binarity, the artists brought together in these rooms place the fluctuating and multifaceted nature of our identities at the heart of their thinking. Beyond their diversity, these forms of expressions are united by the same drive to regain visibility.

Often incorporating elements from the world of design, Tom Burr's work focuses on the erosion of public areas and our status as viewers before a fantasised space. The two platforms look like theatrical spaces that are free of (re)presentations and demonstrations, like a set waiting to be activated. Humorously reappropriating the trompe-l'oeil technique by including fragments of the body, Sarah Margnetti questions the political dimension of the domestic sphere and its architecture. The complex dynamics that exist between the individual and the collective, the private and the public, interior and exterior are at the heart of these strategies of visibility. Pierre Keller's work in photography captures from life the erotic odyssey of the gay scene in the 1980s, which was marked by its underground reality. In contrast, fascinated by the mechanisms of celebrity and the images it generates, Nina Childress immortalises the androgynous figure of Swiss singer Patrick Juvet in a defiant pose that suggests self-affirmation. Parodying the biopic genre, the performative element also gives substance to Guillaume Pilet's series of autobiographical drawings.

Finally, the practice of Pauline Boudry / Renate Lorenz is based on a "queer archaeology" that revives forgotten drag figures by superimposing images. The film *Normal Work* is inspired by archival photographs taken in England in the 1860s by Hannah Cullwick, who worked her entire life as a servant. She is seen posing in her work clothes but also in "class drag" and "ethnic drag", that is, dressing up as a bourgeoise or a black enslaved woman. Re-enacted by the performer Werner Hirsch, this gesture raises the question of crossing boundaries laid down by social norms and, to borrow the title of a book by the philosopher Judith Butler, of the visibility of "bodies that matter".

Rooms 11+13:
Words and images

The title of these two rooms comes from René Magritte, who described in a 1929 text titled "Les mots et les images" the poetic use to which he was putting objects and their names in his work. Almost a century later, this turn of phrase by the Surrealist painter invites us to discover the diversity of formal vocabularies artists have developed over time. The works on view here represent a few of them, both suggesting words that translate thoughts and playing with perceptual illusions that alter and transmute forms and meanings. As an introduction, visitors pass through Renée Green's *Space Poem* that is made up of coloured flags sporting lines of a poem written by Laura Riding in the 1930s. In the work of Chérif and Silvie Defraoui, writing is cut horizontally to become both sign and decoration. Louise Nevelson, on the other hand, 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.

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 in this case 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 a particular public space. Alfredo Jaar's *Real Pictures* (1995-2007) and *Gurbet's Diary* by Banu Cennetoğlu come to mind, and in a more dystopian vein, Julian Charrière's *Pacific Fiction – Study for a Monument*. In their way, all these works are part of an anti-monument approach to memorialisation while making plain the difficulty of lending concrete form to both the commemoration of violence and the great tragedies of history.

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).
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.
CHF 14.–
For children 18 months and up

Regarde, elles parlent !
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.
CHF 19.90
For 8 years old and up

Association des Ami·e·s du MCBA

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Digital

Visit app:
Commentary on artworks and interviews with experts (FR, DE, EN). Comments on a selection of works in French sign language (LSF).
A selection of artworks discussed and analyzed by women who have experienced immigration first hand.

Artworks discussed:
Over 300 illustrated texts
→ mcba.ch/collection

Web files:
Two signal works of art closely examined. *Luce e ombra* and *Le Massacre de la Saint-Barthélemy*
→ mcba.ch → Collection

Guests of the collection:
Works on loan from private collections are put in dialogue with the MCBA collection.
→ mcba.ch/invites-de-la-collection

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Intergenerational workshop
0–100 year-old

Kids workshops

Adults workshops

Visits for young children
3–5 year-old, accompanied by an adult

Publics and private visits

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