

Audio Guide Transcript

Day & Dream

in Modern Germany, 1914–1945

August 26, 2022–February 26, 2023
Gallery 235 and the Sidney S. and Sadie M. Cohen
Gallery 234

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

STOP 1

Gallery 235 or Sidney S. and Sadie M. Cohen Gallery 234

Introduction

Speaker

Melissa Venator

Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellow in Modern Art

Saint Louis Art Museum

Welcome to *Day & Dream in Modern Germany*. My name is Melissa Venator, and I'm the exhibition curator and the Museum's Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellow in Modern Art.

This exhibition features art from the Museum's really fantastic collection of prints, drawings, photographs, and watercolors made in Germany in the first half of the 20th century.

Its theme is "Day and Dream," and it asks the central question: What is the role of the Real and the Imaginary in art? Should art comment on society in a literal and direct way? Or should it inspire us with visions of alternate realities? *Day & Dream* brings together a range of artistic responses.

A few notes about the exhibition:

The art is divided between two galleries. One, titled Day, has more social commentary; the other, titled Dream, is more fantastical. But these labels aren't fixed, and many of the artworks defy easy categorization. So ask yourself as you go through the exhibition: where do you see the Real, where do you see the Imaginary in these works.

Also, look at the labels. I've replaced the standard texts with direct quotes from historical sources, usually the artists own writings, but also period literature, poetry, and philosophy. I hope this will help you to better understand the life and times of these artists. But this is an experiment, so let us know what you think. In the gallery, there are journals where you can leave your feedback.

Enjoy the show!

STOP 2

Sidney S. and Sadie M. Cohen Gallery 234

The Way Home

Speaker

Melissa Venator

**Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellow in Modern Art
Saint Louis Art Museum**

The Way Home shows the artist, Max Beckmann, standing on the right in his bowler hat with a cigar in his left hand, asking directions from a war wounded soldier standing underneath a streetlight.

This could very well illustrate an actual encounter Beckmann had on a street corner in Frankfurt am Main after the end of World War I. The soldier's disfiguring facial injuries and amputated hand were common sights, typically resulted of grenade or shell attacks.

Unable to work, injured soldiers like this one often had no other choice but to beg on the streets to support themselves, where they served as living, breathing reminders of the catastrophic failure of Germany, not only in losing the war, but also in failing to protect its citizens, failing to support its soldiers.

So, Beckmann confronts us with this soldier and forces us to see his suffering. And he asks: where do we go from here? Where is home now? For all Germans, but also for Beckmann as an individual and as an artist.

Beckmann was spared active combat because he volunteered to serve as a medical orderly, where he transported dead and dying soldiers. He knows that this could so easily have been his fate.

And in prints like this one that he made immediately after the war, he paints German postwar society as a kind of Hell, which is the title of this series. He wasn't alone. Many German artists experienced the war firsthand and used their art to show the damage it wrought in people's lives and also in wider society.

STOP 3

Sidney S. and Sadie M. Cohen Gallery 234

Soldier

Speaker

Melissa Venator

**Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellow in Modern Art
Saint Louis Art Museum**

This man's uniform identifies him as a private in the armed forces of the Nazi German Wehrmacht. His youth, the uniform's pristine condition, and the setting in a rural farmyard suggests that August Sander took the photograph after the soldier's enlistment or conscription but before he reported for duty.

When Sander photographed the soldier, he must have thought of his own son, who had been imprisoned by the Nazis since 1935 as an enemy of the state. Erich Sander's crime was to be leader of a socialist political party that the Nazis outlawed when they came to power. He died in prison in 1944.

Soldiers like this young man were responsible for the genocide of more than 6 million European Jews in the Holocaust. Sander opposed the Nazi party, yet he photographed Nazi party members for his life's work *People of the 20th Century*, which he conceived as a collective portrait of German society. He also photographed their victims, including persecuted Jewish men and women and his own son Erich, who appeared in the portfolio both as an idealistic college student and as a death mask.

STOP 4

Sidney S. and Sadie M. Cohen Gallery 234

The Tightrope Walkers

Speaker

Melissa Venator

**Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellow in Modern Art
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Tightrope walkers, acrobats, and trapeze artists were popular subjects in modern art. The three works shown here were all made in the 1920s by artists who approached the same subject—circus performers—from different perspectives.

Otto Dix shows a man and woman in revealing costumes who strike a theatrical pose in unison. They have a look of determination that marks them as the quintessential heroic figures who cheat death with superhuman feats of skill and strength. This is probably the most typical way that we see circus performers represented in art of this period.

Max Beckmann's *Tightrope Walkers* lack the coordinated precision of Dix's couple. The woman performs a leg lift, while the man advances blindly toward her with a sheet hooding his face. His balancing pole tilts dangerously as if he might fall at any moment. These surrealistic details infuse the scene with a mystery that transports it from the realm of the everyday.

But it's August Sander who offers us the most honest look at the daily life of circus performers. His photograph shows a group of artists and ushers from the Barum traveling circus. They're gathered outside the back of a wagon taking a break from work to listen to some music on their record player.

These people spent their lives traveling from town to town performing for adoring audiences. But outside the circus tent, these same audiences treated them as outcasts. It's no coincidence that two of the subjects are people of color. Circuses and other popular entertainments were some of the only employers who would hire non-European immigrants at this time.

So these artworks illustrate how three artists started with the same subject and employed different representational strategies to show different facets of circus life, both real and imagined.

STOP 5

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Unemployment

Speaker

Melissa Venator

**Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellow in Modern Art
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Käthe Kollwitz was born Käthe Schmidt in 1867 in the Prussian city of Königsberg, now Kaliningrad, Russia. Women were not admitted to the imperial art academies in Wilhelmine Germany, so she took private lessons and in 1890, at the age of twenty-three, adopted printmaking as her primary artistic medium.

Her fantastic early prints combined a realist style with contemporary subjects, especially the plight of the working poor. This reflected her socialist political beliefs, as well as her life outside of the studio. Her husband was a doctor who ran a clinic in a poor neighborhood in Berlin. There she witnessed firsthand the devastating generational impact of poverty in the form of malnutrition and chronic disease. She used her art to raise awareness of their suffering.

On the strength of these prints, Kollwitz was hired to teach at the School for Women Artists in Berlin and was admitted to the city's Secession group—an alternative exhibition society that opposed the hegemony of the Academy. Her art became more abstract with a stronger focus on the human form, which she also explored in sculpture.

World War I brought tragedy and a new sense of purpose to Kollwitz's life. She permitted her underage son to enlist in the army, and he was among the first casualties of the war. She never recovered from the loss, and she dedicated herself to the anti-war movement.

After the war, Kollwitz became a leading artist in the newly established German socialist republic. She was the first woman admitted to the Prussian Art Academy, where she also taught as its first female professor. But her professional acceptance was short-lived. She was blacklisted during the Nazi regime and died in 1945, only a few weeks before the liberation of Berlin.

STOP 6
Gallery 235
Self Portrait

Speaker

Melissa Venator
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellow in Modern Art
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So this exhibition *Day & Dream*, was inspired by this portfolio, Max Beckmann's *Day and Dream*, which includes fifteen lithographs. When I first saw it, I was so entranced by the intricate stories it tells. Each print is its own visual world—there's no linear narrative that unites them—but they combine real and imaginary motifs to create these appealing hybrid images.

I'll show you what I mean. Look at the second plate, which is titled *Weather-Vane*, it depicts an actual weathervane in the shape of a mermaid with a trident that was installed on a roof across from Max Beckmann's studio in Amsterdam. So, every time he looked out his window, he saw this weathervane. In the print, the mermaid looks strangely animated, like she's about to harpoon a bird with her spear.

The funniest print in this series is plate 6, titled *I Don't Want To Eat My Soup*. It shows a scene that many visitors who are parents might relate to. A mother is desperately trying to feed her son, who is refusing to eat by burying his face in his high-chair. In the background, the grandmother is knitting. This is a reference to a popular German children's story about a stubborn boy named Kaspar who will not eat his soup. His parents try everything, but still he refuses. And in true German fashion, after five days refusing to eat his soup, the boy dies. Now clearly, children's stories have changed over the years!

These backstories are funny and insightful, but you don't really need to know them to enjoy the image worlds that Beckmann creates in *Day and Dream*. This was his last print portfolio, and it's rare to have the entire portfolio on view at once, so I hope you enjoy it!

STOP 7
Gallery 235
Apocalyptic Mood

Speaker

Melissa Venator
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellow in Modern Art
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Ludwig Meidner was a Jewish artist active in Berlin who was best known for a series of works he made between 1912 and 1916 that are collectively called the “apocalyptic landscapes.” These show cities in flames, bombarded by unknown assailants, populated by fleeing, terror-stricken citizens. And that’s why they’re so famous. Meidner made these works before the outbreak of World War I, but in them he seems to foretell the widespread physical and psychological devastation of the war.

Now, knowing the apocalyptic landscapes, it’s tempting to read this drawing—*Apocalyptic Mood* of 1913—through the same filter. We see a road lined with buildings, but the entire space of the composition is fractured, almost as if a shockwave traveled through it. The title would seem to validate that interpretation, but in fact it originates from the 1960s.

Meidner’s writings suggest an alternate reading. In an essay published the year after this drawing, he exhorted his fellow artists to paint the sights and sounds of the metropolis. He was especially fascinated with the experience of light in the big city, which changed from pitch black to blindingly bright in the space of an instant. He wrote eloquently about light that “seems to flow” and then “explodes over a confused jumble of buildings.” So, perhaps we’re looking at the optical disintegration of a city into planes of light rather than its physical destruction.

Either way, Meidner’s drawing is a virtuosic tour de force. He made it with the simplest materials—graphite on paper—but achieved a wide range of tones, from the deepest glossy blacks to the lightest grays. His frenetic, hatched lines capture all the dynamism and chaos of a busy city street.

STOP 8

Gallery 235

Büchner's Lenz series

Speaker

Melissa Venator

**Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellow in Modern Art
Saint Louis Art Museum**

Walter Gramatté was thrilled when he was commissioned in 1924 to illustrate new editions of two great works of German literature: Georg Büchner's short stories *Woyzeck* and *Lenz*. Of the two, *Woyzeck* is the more famous. This is largely due to the popularity of Alban Berg's operatic adaptation, *Wozzeck*, which premiered in 1925, coincidentally the same year Gramatté's illustrations were published.

But, of the two, Gramatté was more excited about *Lenz*, because he felt a deep identification with the story's main character, Jakob Lenz. In a letter to a friend, he admitted that "I always feel like Lenz, sometimes light and then always deeper and darker. Every day passes like this, so useless, so wasted." Gramatté suffered from episodes of depression that left him unable to work for days or weeks on end. Büchner's captivating account of Lenz's struggles with auditory and visual hallucinations helped Gramatté acknowledge the impact of his own illness.

Gramatté's identification with Lenz resulted in a highly original set of illustrations. Instead of depicting the events of the story, he produced ten views of Lenz's face. Sometimes happy, sometimes sad, the play of expressions and expressive distortions reflect Lenz's erratic mental state. Gramatté bookended these face studies with two landscapes: the first shows a lone pine tree in a storm, the final plate shows the same pine tree broken into two, representing Lenz's final break with reality.

These prints are part of a large gift of more than fifty works by Walter Gramatté that were given to the Museum in 2019 by The Eckhardt-Gramatté Foundation. This is their debut presentation, and we're so pleased to be able to introduce you to the work of this important and underappreciated artist.

STOP 9

Gallery 235

Young Horses series

Speaker

Melissa Venator

**Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellow in Modern Art
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Renée Sintenis's lifelong love of animals began with the horses and foals she grew up with at her rural family home. Horses remained her favorite subject, and she depicted them in countless sculptures and prints. These four drypoints belong to a portfolio of ten that show foals and young horses resting, running, and playing.

It's incredible to me how Sintenis manages to capture in a simple outlined form that gangly awkward grace that's so characteristic of a baby horse. She was primarily a sculptor, and I see in prints like this a sculptor's confident modeling of a three-dimensional form in space combined with exceptional line control.

Sintenis's sculptures received wide acclaim during her lifetime. It's a curious fact that she won a bronze medal for a sculpture of a soccer player at the 1928 Olympic Games, which included sport-themed art competitions until 1948. She was the second woman admitted to the Prussian Academy of Art—in 1931, a full 22 years after Käthe Kollwitz became its first female member. Sintenis's sculpture of a bear cub standing on its hind legs is still the mascot of the Berlinale International Film Festival.

Despite her success, Sintenis felt constrained by society's prejudices of her as a woman artist. Her dealer, Alfred Flechtheim, encouraged her to make small-scale models of cute subjects, like baby animals, which critics praised as appropriately feminine. She was famous as much for her appearance as for her art: tall with an athletic build and stylishly androgynous features, she was photographed as a celebrity artist for glossy women's magazines. It's no surprise that she once stated that she loved animals because they didn't expect anything from her.