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Neue Sachlichkeit New Objectivity

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Seiten: 304

Erscheinungstermin: 01. März 2025

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Zum Buch

On the eve of its subject's centennial, this richly illustrated and meticulously researched catalogue celebrates - and reconsiders - one of the most significant artistic movements of the twentieth century.

Gustav F. Hartlaub's 1925 exhibition "Neue Sachlichkeit" (New Objectivity) for the Kunsthalle Mannheim was a pivotal event that showcased a new artistic movement in Germany, characterized by its critical realism, social commentary, and detailed depiction of contemporary life; it marked a significant departure from Expressionism's emotional intensity. But it was divided by two philosophies—the unflinching and socially critical Verists (Otto Dix, George Grosz, Georg Scholz, and others) and the Classicists (Alexander Kanoldt, Georg Schrimpf, and Christian Schad) who focused on harmony and beauty. This wide-ranging survey explores the tension between these camps and interprets it as a coherent chapter in art history. Essays by leading experts shed new light on the movement through the lens of regionality while considering a wide spectrum of media: architecture, design, drawings, film, paintings, photography, and philosophy. Their illuminating texts are accompanied by stunning reproductions of works such as Otto Dix's Portrait of the Lawyer Dr. Fritz Glaser; Georg Scholz's Of Things to Come; and Marcel Breuer's Chair B 33. Impeccably produced and researched, this volume captures the ways that the New Objectivity proponents mirrored the Weimar period's cultural, political, and social complexities.

Autor

NEUE SACHLICHKEIT / NEW OBJECTIVITY

NEUE SACHLICHKEIT / NEW OBJECTIVITY

Edited by Olaf Peters

Preface by Ronald S. Lauder, foreword by Renée Price

With contributions by

Regina Bittner

Birgit Dalbajewa

Christian Drobe

Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub

Jürgen Müller

Olaf Peters

Carina Plath

Franz Roh

Rolf Sachsse

Robert Schnepf

PRESTEL

MUNICH • LONDON • NEW YORK



This catalogue has been published in conjunction with the exhibition

NEUE SACHLICHKEIT / NEW OBJECTIVITY

Neue Galerie New York
February 20, 2025 – May 26, 2025

Curator
Olaf Peters

Exhibition Design
William Loccisano

Director of Publications
Scott Gutterman

Managing Editor
Janis Staggs

Editorial Assistant
Liesbet Van Leemput

Book Design
William Loccisano

Translation
Steven Lindberg

Project Coordinator
Cornelia Hübler

Production
Martina Effaga

Origination
Schnieber Graphik, Munich

Printing and Binding
Longo AG, Bolzano

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Prestel Verlag, Munich ▪ London ▪
New York; and authors

Prestel Verlag, Munich
A member of Penguin Random House
Verlagsgruppe GmbH
Neumarkter Strasse 28
81673 Munich

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Control Number:
2024948789

Paper: 170 g Galaxi Supermat



Penguin Random House
Verlagsgruppe FSC® N001967

Printed in Italy

ISBN 978-3-7913-7792-6

www.prestel.com

PAGE 2: Hans Finsler, *Electric bulb*, 1927–28, gelatin silver print. Kunstbibliothek, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

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PAGE 8: Willi Baumeister, *Wie wohnen? Die Wohnung* (How Should We Live? The Dwelling). Poster for the exhibition organized by the Deutsche Werkbund at the Weissenhof Siedlung, Stuttgart, 1927, offset lithograph. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Philip Johnson. Digital Image: © The Museum of Modern Art, New York / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource. © 2025 Willi Baumeister / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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PREFACE

Since its founding in 2001, Neue Galerie New York has been known as a museum of Austrian and German art. Our focus is on the fifty-year period from 1890 to 1940, when so much important painting, sculpture, drawing, and design was being produced in both countries. But, in truth, the museum is often thought of primarily for its Viennese leanings. The two best-known artists in our collection, Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele, are Austrian, as are the leading designers Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser. Our Café Sabarsky is beloved for its *Wienerschnitzel* and superb Viennese coffee imported directly from that city. Perhaps most prominent of all is our extraordinary painting, Klimt's *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* (1907), which has all the rich, sensuous quality of Austrian art from the time it was created, and its history is closely bound up with that of its home country.

However, I am pleased to say that we are just as proud of our commitment to German art of this same period. Over the years, the Neue Galerie has hosted retrospective exhibitions devoted to superb painters such as Otto Dix, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Christian Schad, and our collection contains many important works by these and other major German artists and designers. I have also maintained close ties to Germany through a number of projects, from my interest in the redevelopment of Tegel airport in Berlin to building Jewish schools in that country through my foundation. It should be noted that Germany has become a crucial political ally of the United States, and remains a bastion of artistic creativity.

With the "Neue Sachlichkeit / New Objectivity" exhibition, the Neue Galerie examines one of the most fascinating movements in twentieth-century art. Much of the art that was created in Germany in the 1920s bore the hallmarks of this movement: a crisp, realistic style, often married to a detailed observation of a society in disarray. It is typically animated by a dark, sardonic sense of humor, though some of this art also foretells the horrors that would take place there. This is difficult but vital work, and I have been interested in it almost since I first began looking at and collecting art.

The curator and scholar Olaf Peters has curated a number of important exhibitions for the Neue Galerie. With this show, he gives us the full range of the New Objectivity movement, including a number of major loans from American and European museums. He brings fresh perspectives to the study of this art, and I thank him for his diligent research and tireless efforts. The many lenders have allowed the Neue Galerie to present essential works from their collections, all to show the scope and brilliance of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists. Finally, the Neue Galerie staff, led for nearly a quarter century by Director Renée Price, continues to make me proud by creating exhibitions and catalogues of the highest quality, and in the process shedding light on this art that I have loved for so long.

Ronald S. Lauder
President, Neue Galerie New York

FOREWORD

It is a privilege to continue to share with the Neue Galerie audience the rich, complex, and sometimes demanding world of German art created between the two World Wars. Part of our mission is to present the groundbreaking art of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, encompassing works made a century ago that still speak to us today.

Two recent museum exhibitions in the United States covered this topic extensively. In 2006, "Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s" was presented at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, focusing on portraiture created during the Weimar Republic. And in 2015, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art organized "New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919–1933," an exhibition that covered the entire field but did not travel to the East Coast.

A forerunner to this show at the Neue Galerie was "Berlin Metropolis, 1918–1933," an exhibition presented in 2015 that explored architecture, fashion, theater, cinema, photography, collage, and montage. "Neue Sachlichkeit / New Objectivity" may be considered a complementary presentation, shedding new light on the diversity of the movement. We aim to show a different, more complex picture with our exhibitions on this subject, focusing on paintings and drawings, but also including film, photography, design, and sculpture.

Our exhibition honors the groundbreaking efforts of Gustav F. Hartlaub, an outstanding museum director who was active in Mannheim during the short-lived Weimar democracy. One hundred years ago, in 1925, Hartlaub conceived an exhibition and coined the term *Neue Sachlichkeit*, which became synonymous with the modernity of the Weimar era. We wish to banish the myth that Berlin was the only capital for all things modern in Germany, as Dresden and Hannover played key roles as well. The revolution in art that occurred there also took place in architecture, as domestic housing was transformed to reflect broader social changes. In summary, the *Neue Sachlichkeit* was not merely an art movement, but a new way of living and thinking, a new mentality that arose during a period of confusion and tension. It is our hope that the exhibition and this catalogue contribute to our understanding of the past, but also that this important development holds relevance for the present as well.

We wish to express our sincere gratitude to our lenders, including the Albertinum, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden; Art Institute of Chicago; Frankel Family Trust; Dr. Herbert Giese; Heckscher Museum of Art; Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art; Historische Sammlung Bethel, Bielefeld; Kulturhistorisches Museum, Magdeburg; Kunstbibliothek, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; Kunstforum Ostdeutsche Galerie, Regensburg; Kunstmuseum Moritzburg Halle (Saale); Kunstsammlungen Zwickau; Kupferstich-Kabinett, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden; LVR-Landesmuseum Bonn; Märkisches Museum Witten; Merrill C. Berman; Metropolitan Museum of Art; Minneapolis Institute of Art; Morgan Library & Museum; The Museum of Modern Art; Neue Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; Städtische Sammlungen Freital auf Schloss Burgk; and Sprengel Museum Hannover. Their participation is imperative for the realization of such an ambitious project. My highest praise goes to our curator Dr. Olaf Peters, who has conceived numerous insightful exhibitions for the Neue Galerie, including "Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937" in 2014, "Berlin Metropolis: 1918–1933" in 2015, and "Before the Fall: German and Austrian Art of the 1930s" in 2018. He always brings enormous intelligence and scholarship to these projects. We are also appreciative of our ongoing relationship with Bill Loccisano, whose elegant design approach to our catalogues and exhibitions is consistently exceptional. The dedicated staff of our museum has, likewise, been instrumental to the success of this exhibition, including Scott Gutterman, Deputy Director and Chief Operating Officer; Janis Staggs, Director of Curatorial and Manager of Publications; Liesbet Van Leemput, Manager of Curatorial and Graphics; Stacey Traunfeld, Chief Registrar; Julie Jung, Associate Registrar; and Garth Swanson, Head Preparator.

And last, but never least, I wish to extend profound thanks to our museum's President, Ronald S. Lauder, whose grand vision we are honored to shepherd, and whose enthusiasm and generosity know no bounds.

Renée Price
Director, Neue Galerie New York

studies on the important centers Dresden and Hannover offer specific regional case studies. These texts underscore that *Neue Sachlichkeit* was a broad artistic movement and it reflected a transformed intellectual outlook that resulted in an avant-garde manifestation of Germany's nascent democracy.

Admittedly, this combination of terms may seem self-contradictory and even oxymoronic, because the concept of the avant-garde is always associated with the idea of a small group of progressives ahead of the mainstream. In this view, the broad masses typically develop similar tendencies with a temporal delay and at best manage to catch up. The painter Vasily Kandinsky expressed that using the image of a triangle that moves upward so that the position of its tip is occupied by the base only after an extended period, while the tip is already to be found somewhere else entirely.² The combination of terms is also problematic because the roots of *Neue Sachlichkeit* originate before 1918–19 and hence precede the founding of the Weimar Republic. The movement later had conservative and even reactionary features that could adopt antidemocratic and even National Socialist forms. Both things should be addressed, but they are not the focus of our exhibition and the related catalogue. Instead our attention is directed toward the liberal potential of a pluralistic movement that initiated social change and reflected on it critically.

CHANGES IN DIRECTION IN THE LATE EMPIRE

The history of *Neue Sachlichkeit* can be said to begin in Munich under the German Empire, and it is linked to the former locus of applied arts and architecture, on the one hand, and the birthplace of the Blauer Reiter (Blue Rider), on the other. Looking at the cultural wealth of that era and the associated leg-

end of the 1920s, the philosopher Helmut Plessner observed:

*For as profound as the shock triggered by World War I and its end was, it would never have been possible to call into action so many talented powers if they had not already been there. The caesura of 1918 did not mark the intellectual pendulum swing and new beginning but rather already had a twenty-year history behind it, and it would have been inconceivable without the relatively quickly acquired wealth of Germany's late industrialism, its labor movement, and its new leisure class.*³

Plessner's view is viable, even if one thinks only of the Deutscher Werkbund (German Werkbund), founded in 1907, and its influence on the Bauhaus, which was founded in Weimar in 1919, and on the Neues Bauen (New Building) of the Weimar Republic in general.⁴

But it was not just that the intellectual and economic preconditions that were already created under the German Empire or that the talents born in the 1890s were forged over the course of the 1910s. In the years prior to World War I, the international artistic avant-garde gained acceptance in Germany. Artists' groups, manifestos, and exhibitions represented a new dawn that was evident above all in the movements Expressionism, Futurism, and Cubism and that culminated in abstraction. The concepts and conflicts of the prewar era led to early changes in direction that only became clearly distinct movements after the war. One should recall, for example the famous controversy of 1912 between the painters Max Beckmann and Franz Marc. Beckmann reacted sensitively to the latest trends in painting. There was a debate between him and Marc of the Blauer Reiter in Munich that revealed the fault lines between Beckmann and the contemporaneous

1. Poster for the "Neue Sachlichkeit" exhibition held at the Städtische Kunsthalle Mannheim, 1925. From: *Stationen der Moderne: die bedeutenden Kunstausstellungen des 20. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland*, Berlinische Galerie (Berlin: Nicolai, 1988), 216. Photo: Stadtarchiv Mannheim

REACTIONS TO THE WAR

Defeat, revolution, civil war, hyperinflation—these are the key terms to describe the situation in Germany immediately after World War I.¹⁹ The talk of the end or even death of Expressionism and the question of a new naturalism illustrate an artistic turning point that amounted to a paradigm shift. Admittedly, the new often began under the regime of the old, nor should it be ignored that it was asserted that Expressionism continued to exist. For example, the conservative critic Paul Fechter denied in 1923 that Expressionism was dead; even Hartlaub still questioned the idea in the introduction to his 1925 catalogue on *Neue Sachlichkeit*.²⁰ But these were obeisances or rearguard actions. The Weimar Bauhaus can serve here as an internationally famous symbol of these changes. Gothic and expressive, striving for the new building for art and society, it appeared in the public sphere in 1919 in Weimar, the place where the first German democracy was conceived. In 1923, the director of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius, proclaimed a new unity of art and technology and turned to *Neue Sachlichkeit*, which the widely regarded exhibition in Mannheim in 1925 made a catchword. It was always understood ambiguously and was inherently and fundamentally duplicitous. A distinction was made between a left and a right wing, called Verism and Classicism, respectively. Let us consider first the left wing of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, to Beckmann, Verism, and his critical reflection as a central reaction to World War I.

In 1919, before he was the director of the museum in Mannheim, Hartlaub published his important book *Kunst und Religion* (Art and Religion), which revolved around the question of the possibility of a new religious art. There had been an exhibition on the theme at the Kunsthalle Mannheim.²¹ The attempt to address the shock of military defeat and

the crisis of a new political beginning by turning to religion was all too understandable. Beckmann and Emil Nolde had paved the way for Hartlaub. In the coming years, Beckmann would even become a key figure for him. Hartlaub connected all of Beckmann's new production to his wartime experiences and a new "gnostic-religious" attitude.²² For Hartlaub, Beckmann had a "deeply pessimistic objectivity,"²³ with which he was able to redeem himself. The artist himself spoke at the time in a confessional way about a transcendental objectivity and about the desire to build a new church with his paintings for a deeply disturbed and disappointed humanity [Fig. 5]. With these works and the related graphic art of years from 1917 to 1919, Beckmann became one of the leading Verists.²⁴ The art historian Carl Einstein confirmed this in retrospect when he wrote in the section on Beckmann in his history of twentieth-century art in 1926: "The war came, and several painters finally discerned the physiognomy of the age; it had been completely exposed [...]. They were gripped and through observation resisted a shock that always remained less significant than the occasion for it. Gradually, form grew out of stimulation. [...] Only defense: ascertain ad nauseum [...]."²⁵

Dresden museum director Paul Ferdinand Schmidt titled a text in the journal *Das Kunstblatt* in 1924 "Die deutschen Veristen" (The German Verists).²⁶ He emphasized above all George Grosz (whom he called a "satirist"); Otto Dix (whom he strongly advocated); and Otto Griebel, Rudolf Schlichter, and Georg Scholz, (whom he called "Objectivists")—as revolutionaries of form and content. The revolution—which Schmidt saw as a European one—had been triggered by World War I. Now the avant-garde currents were transformed. Schmidt emphasized Cubism as the

The critic did, however, find hope behind the new art, and he summed it up in an image of the (post)war: "One cannot lose oneself so boundlessly in things without love, though it may remain hidden beneath the loathing for the present, but it is nonetheless strong enough—one day when the rubble has been cleared—to begin building a new world out of the truth."²⁸

The catastrophe of the war demanded a pitiless and undaunted eye. At the same time, the latter perhaps concealed a love that could dedicate itself first to clearing rubble and then to rebuilding. Using Dix as an example, Schmidt briefly sketched the development, still just beginning, from Dadaism to the Verism of *Die Kriegskrüppel* (The War Cripples), which was shown in 1920 at the "Erste Internationale Dada-Messe" (First International Dada Fair) in Berlin and had been acquired by Schmidt himself for the Stadtmuseum Dresden. The line dividing Dada and Verism was still fluid for contemporaries and—if one thinks of the "Dada-Messe" in Berlin, in which Dix, Grosz, Schlichter, and Scholz participated—could indeed not be drawn clearly at all.²⁹ In 1923–24, Dix outdid his own Dadaist works with the large-format painting *Schützengraben* (The Trench) and the *Der Krieg* (War) portfolio of fifty sheets, which represent a high point and temporary end point of the efforts of the artists of Verism/*Neue Sachlichkeit* to come to terms with World War I. Not until nationalist agitation and propaganda began to surge again in the late 1920s were these themes taken up again in painting and film.

The Verist Georg Scholz in Karlsruhe also participated in the "Dada-Messe" in Berlin and produced a significant number of outstanding paintings during the first half of the 1920s. The art critic acknowledged that with these words: "The uniting of stunning confi-

dence in reproducing inanimate objects such as machines, rooms, village streets with a gargantuan immoderation in the human grotesque is surely among the most powerful qualities that German art has achieved since its great renewal"³⁰ [Fig. 6]. In 1923, the first long article on Scholz, written by Hans Curjel, was published in *Das Kunstblatt*.³¹ The author presented the evolution of the new naturalism as having two motivations: first, and initially as an immanent consequence of a formal development that was constitutive of the so-called classical right wing of *Neue Sachlichkeit*. In parallel with this, there was an artistic reaction to the current political conditions, and here Scholz came into play, but Curjel credited him with an artistic development: "The experience of the present resulted in the sharp turn to representational painting around 1920. The polemical elements dominate; unrelenting war is declared against all complacency, all stubbornness, all heartfelt, philistine sentimentality, all jam-packed sexuality, all capitalist rawness, all patriotic stupidity, and they will be fought with brutal openness."³² The critic regarded paintings such as *Der Deutsche Kriegerverein* (The German Soldiers' Association) as contemporary pictorial sermons that brought the "plague boils" to light "that the citizen hesitates to cut out."³³ In Scholz's work, however, there were only a very few paintings in the period immediately after the war that pointed to a nostalgic militarism that seemed outdated and anachronistic. And in the case of a verist like Scholz, art critics rarely addressed the past war openly, even though it was present as a profound turning point. By contrast, a major work such as *Von kommenden Dingen* (Of Things to Come), whose title alludes to a book by Walter Rathenau, the middle one in the group of three business leaders and politicians, has a timeless relevance that is still valid today concerning the distribution of control and power [see Cat. no. 27].

phenomena with a common vanishing point in objectivity as a sign of the epoch.⁴¹

This focused perspective on Hartlaub's epochal exhibition and the planning for it—which was initiated in part by Westheim's questionnaire on the new naturalism—provides additional clarity on the historical discussion:

It is important to me to present in autumn a medium-sized exhibition of paintings and graphic art that could be titled "The New Objectivity." My goal is to bring together representative works by the artists who in the last ten years have been neither Impressionistically dissipated nor Expressionistically abstract, neither purely sensual and external nor purely constructive and internal. I would like to show those artists who have remained avowedly faithful or become faithful again to positive, tangible reality. [...] It will consider both the "right" wing (Neoclassicists, if you will), such as certain works by Picasso, Kay H. Nebel, etc., and the left 'Verist' wing, among whom one could number Beckmann, Grosz, Dix, Drexel, Scholz, etc.⁴²

It becomes clear that Hartlaub was attempting to emphasize a constant or regained fidelity to reality. This identifies the process that several artists did in fact go through when they followed Late Impressionist, Expressionist, and in some cases nonrepresentational tendencies before World War I but then returned to outward reality. It is important here that it not have happened in a "purely sensual and external" way. Impressionism and Naturalism—in the sense of mere reproduction of a retinal impression or a supposedly objective reality—are thereby opposed. Hartlaub suggests indirectly that *Neue Sachlichkeit* can be understood as simply an engagement with reality and its deliberate reshaping as a pictorial object.

That is why the purely constructive and internal picture can be rejected as a subject of his exhibition because it enters the realm of a purely inner reality without connection to the outside world. What remains after these demarcations is difficult to unite under one concept. Hartlaub was always aware of that.

The two-wing division of representational objectivity that Hartlaub's highly differentiated thinking expressed later caused a certain confusion because the politicized art historians and literary scholars of the 1960s and 1970s in particular tended to contrast the alleged reactionaries of *Neue Sachlichkeit* to revolutionary Verism. But they were only confusing themselves by making the overarching term *Neue Sachlichkeit*, which united both wings, the opposite of just one of them, namely, the so-called left wing. As a result, the phenomenon of the Classical right wing is now either taken to represent the umbrella term or expanded to include the European phenomenon of Classicism (including Giorgio de Chirico, Pablo Picasso, et al.). The subtle yet difficult efforts to do justice to a complex, multilayered, and also plural artistic reality were countered by ideologically tinged simplifications: for example, Helmut Lethen, who initially spoke of *Neue Sachlichkeit* as "white socialism," and later adopted the simplifying stylization of the so-called "cold persona," or Benjamin Buchloh, who claimed to be able to decode "ciphers of regression."⁴³

In this project we aspire to counter the inappropriateness of such simplifications by including a pluralism of New Objectivity. We can take up the thread of the remarkable yet underappreciated exhibition in East Berlin in 1974, which under the terms of its title, "Realismus und Sachlichkeit" (Realism and Objectivity), brought together the phenomena of Berlin Dada, photomontage, Verism, *Neue*

