



Die heilige Nacht (The Holy Night), von Antonio Allegri, gen. Correggio, worked through by Kurt Schwitters, 1947. Collage; paper, fabric, cardboard, photograph, and corrugated board on pasteboard, 20⁷/₈ x 15³/₄ inches. Private Collection, Mannheim. Photo: Inge Bichelmeier, courtesy Michael Herling / Aline Gwose, Sprengel Museum Hannover

That autumn, a number of Merz drawings were included in a collage exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. His work continued to be shown frequently in New York over the next two decades, providing an influential example of the possibilities of collage and found materials to a generation of American artists, among them Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Rauschenberg, and Cy Twombly. In the words of scholar Gwendolen Webster, "The language of Merz now finds acceptance, and today there is scarcely an artist working with materials other than paint who does not refer to Schwitters in some way."⁵

Clare Elliott
Assistant Curator

NOTES

1. Quoted in Isabel Schulz, "Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage," in *Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage*, exh. cat. (Houston: Menil Collection, 2010), 55.
2. Isabel Schulz, *ibid.*, 54.
3. *Ibid.*, 56–57.
4. *Ibid.*, 57.
5. Gwendolen Webster, "The Artchive, s.v. 'Kurt Schwitters,'" <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/S/Schwitters.html> (accessed August 16, 2010).
6. Quoted in *Kurt Schwitters: Merz—a Total Vision of the World* (Basel: Museum Tinguely, 2004), 9.

Merzbau (Merz Construction)

Hanover, ca. 1923–37, destroyed 1943

Although the precise chronology of the *Merzbau* is unclear, around 1923 Schwitters began assembling found material into two "Merz columns," which led, over the course of fifteen years, to an installation that occupied an entire room of the artist's house in Hanover. For Schwitters, the *Merzbau* embodied the ambition that he had worked toward since he first coined the term Merz: "My ultimate goal is the unification of art and non-art in a 'Merz total vision of the world.'"⁶ Indeed, he referred to it as his life's work in letters to friends and colleagues. The *Merzbau* was everything rolled into one: it served as a studio, as a venue for talks, recitals, and Merz soirées, and included a reading and writing room dubbed "The Library." To Schwitters the *Merzbau* was a place where memories, objects, and events could be documented, collected, and transformed into abstract art.

Archival photos from 1933 show the *Merzbau's* evolution into a cave-like environment of planes and volumes constructed out of wood and plaster. Schwitters embellished the overall structure with paint, images, and accumulations of found and constructed objects, many of which he called "grottoes." These grottoes were organized thematically, referring to specific motifs (murder, lust, etc.), friends, historical figures, or personal memories. He was continually changing and adding to the work, which eventually outgrew the studio and crept into adjacent rooms. And as the political situation worsened in the 1930s, the *Merzbau* became the artist's refuge, a place away from the Nazi government's campaign against modern art.

After leaving Germany in 1937, Schwitters attempted two subsequent Merz constructions. In Norway he built *Haus am Bakken (House on the Slope)*, 1940, in the garden of his home in Lysaker, which was later destroyed in a fire. In England, Schwitters started his third and final Merzbau, *Merz Barn*, 1947, in Elterwater near Ambleside, but died only a few months after he began work. Its unfinished fragments are kept at the Hatton Gallery at the University of Newcastle.

Unfortunately, in October 1943 Allied air raids destroyed the Hanover *Merzbau*, the most complete incarnation of the project, along with the entire Schwitters house. However, beginning in 1980, through careful analysis of archival photographs of the space, set designer Peter Bissegger reconstructed the central portion. Despite minor differences between the original and replica, the latter succeeds in conveying the spatial experience of Schwitters's walk-through sculpture. The Menil Collection is pleased to present this reconstruction to United States audiences for the first time.



Hanover *Merzbau*, "Blue Window," 1933 (destroyed 1943). Kurt Schwitters Archive at the Sprengel Museum Hannover. Photo: Wilhelm Redemann

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Organized by guest curator Isabel Schulz, executive director of the Kurt and Ernst Schwitters Foundation and curator of the Kurt Schwitters Archive at the Sprengel Museum Hannover, with Josef Helfenstein, director of the Menil Collection

After its presentation at the Menil Collection, the exhibition will travel to the Princeton University Art Museum, March 26–June 26, 2011, and then to the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, August 3–November 27, 2011.

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage

Edited by Isabel Schulz, with contributions by Leah Dickerman, Clare Elliott, Isabel Schulz, and Gwendolen Webster

This fully illustrated catalogue delves into the relationship between collage and painting in Schwitters's work. Available at the Menil Bookstore. 176 pp., 129 color and 14 b/w illustrations; \$50 cloth; \$40 paper

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

A Conversation with the Curators

Friday, October 22, 2010, 7:00 p.m.

Exhibition curators Isabel Schulz and Josef Helfenstein discuss works in the exhibition.

Kurt Schwitters and the Art of His (and Our) Time

Tuesday, January 18, 2011, 7:00 p.m.

Moderated by Rice University art historian Graham Bader, this panel discussion considers Schwitters's work across media, including poetry, music, graphic design, and installation art, as well as painting and collage.

Front:

Merzbild Einunddreissig (Merz Picture Thirty-one), 1920. Assemblage; oil, paper, wood, metal, fabric, and cotton balls on paper mounted on wood frame, 38⁵/₈ x 26 inches. Sprengel Museum Hannover, Sammlung NORD/LB in der Niedersächsischen Sparkassenstiftung. Photo: Michael Herling / Aline Gwose, Sprengel Museum Hannover

All Schwitters artworks © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

THE MENIL COLLECTION

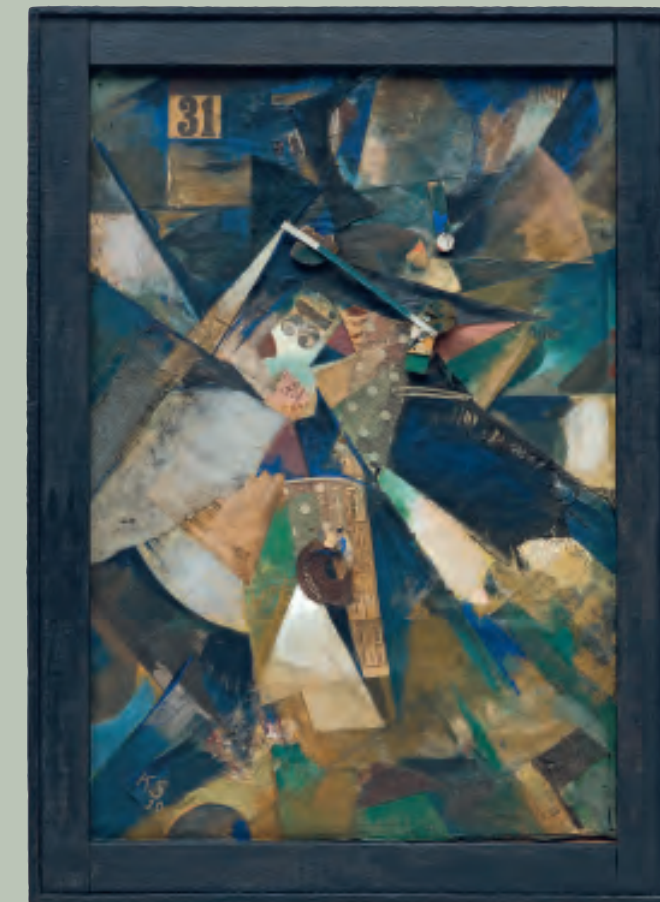
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Kurt Schwitters

COLOR AND COLLAGE



THE MENIL COLLECTION

October 22, 2010–January 30, 2011

More than sixty years after his death, the German artist Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) remains one of the most influential figures of the international avant-garde. Born in Hanover, he spent several years studying painting in Dresden before returning to his birthplace in 1914. In 1918, Schwitters befriended several members of the Berlin Dada group, which had by then been established for several years. Though never officially a Dadaist, the group's embrace of unexpected artistic strategies, in part a response to the devastating effects of the First World War, encouraged Schwitters's own search for new forms of expression. That year he began to create collages out of discarded paper and, shortly thereafter, assemblages into which he incorporated a wide variety of small found objects. For the artist, this was a breakthrough, and he coined the term "Merz" (a fragment of the German word *Kommerz*, or commerce) as a moniker for this method, with the ambition to "make connections, if possible, between everything in the world." Schwitters eventually extended the principles of collage and the designation Merz to all of his activities, including installation art, writing, performance, and graphic design. He never stopped painting, however, and his abstract Merz works almost always include painted elements or areas overworked by brush and oils. "Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage," the first museum exhibition in the United States to focus exclusively on the artist in twenty-five years, explores the relation-



Zeichnung A 3 (Drawing A 3), 1918. Collage; paper on paper, 5¼ x 4¼ inches. Sprengel Museum Hannover, loan from Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung. Photo: Michael Herling / Aline Gwose, Sprengel Museum Hannover

ship of painting to collage in Schwitters's oeuvre from the conception of Merz until the end of his life.

Schwitters used the medium of collage to achieve a variety of effects through both his radical choice of materials and the process itself. He used paste not only as an adhesive, but also as a binder for pigments and a means to adjust the tones and textures of his found material. As art historian Charlotte Weidler observed after watching Schwitters in his studio:

He spread flour and water over the paper, then moved and shuffled and manipulated his scraps of paper around in the paste... With his fingertips he...spread tints of watercolor or gouache around to get variations in shadings of tone... Finally, he removed the excess paste with a damp rag, leaving some like an overglaze in places where he wanted to veil or mute a part of the color.¹

Despite his dedication to Merz, Schwitters never lost sight of his training as a painter. He viewed the two techniques as complementary to each other and combined them in a number of ways. Alongside various scraps of discarded ephemera are papers specially painted by the artist for use as collage material, as seen in *Zeichnung A 3 (Drawing A 3)*, 1918, the earliest work in the exhibition. Other collages, such as *Mz 172 Tasten zum Raum (Mz 172 Probing into Space)*, 1921, include bits of paper or fabric on which the artist had cleaned his paintbrushes. There are also countless examples in which Schwitters painted on top of collaged elements. His practices of painting and collage were so intertwined that it is often difficult to determine if paint was applied to paper before or after it was pasted onto the surface or mixed into the paste itself.

As in his collages, painting is a critical component of Schwitters's assemblages. In *Merzbild Einunddreissig (Merz Picture Thirty-one)*, 1920, one of the largest of the early assemblages, Schwitters arranged a group of planar elements around a central circular focus, a composition suggestive of modern art movements such as Cubism, Futurism, and Expressionism, as well as the Berlin Dada group with which Schwitters was closely associated. The work also demonstrates the complex manner in which painting and assemblage coalesced in the artist's work. As curator Isabel Schulz describes:

Cardboard, printed paper, and scraps of cloth overlap painted areas in several layers and define new geometrical shapes that Schwitters, in turn, reworked with opaque or transparent pigment in such a way [as] to construct a densely interwoven conglomerate. By employing such painterly techniques as complementary and light-dark contrasts, Schwitters produced a dynamic, rotating picture structure; radiating outward are sharp-pointed triangle shapes, their colors equally indebted to the found materials and their overpainting.²



Verschobene Flächen (Shifted Planes), ca. 1923. Oil, glass, and wood on board, 27 x 19½ inches. Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, George B. & Jenny R. Matthews and Edmund Hayes Funds, 1975. Photo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery / Art Resource, NY

After 1922 and continuing into the early 1930s, Schwitters produced a number of assemblages that distinctly reflect his deepening relationship with Constructivist and De Stijl artists, specifically El Lissitzky and Theo van Doesburg. A more rigid geometry and noticeably delineated areas of color against a solid background, as seen in *Verschobene Flächen (Shifted Planes)*, ca. 1923, for example, contrasts with the kaleidoscopic effect of earlier works. Schwitters nonetheless asserts his own voice in the Constructivist idiom, preserving an array of gray tones, refusing to restrict himself to primary colors, and subtly disrupting the rectangular edges.

Along with nearly every modern artist working in Germany, Schwitters fell victim to the rise of the Nazi party and the systematic campaign against avant-garde art in the 1930s. His work was confiscated from German museums and included in derogatory exhibitions alongside quotes from his writings. Opportunities to show his work in his native country disappeared. Finally, in 1937, under pressure from the hostile political situation, he fled to Norway, a country he had visited frequently. For Schwitters, who created his art out of what surrounded him, the move was not without effect. Schulz writes:

During the 1930s, under the influence of his experience of Nordic light during his sojourns in Norway, he developed a new way of working with loose, stippled brushstrokes. He later produced a large number of assemblages with considerable amounts of painting in which he covered the objects with an almost impressionistic dappling of paint. Painting softened and blurred the object's contours and structured their surfaces. [See *Körtingbild (Körting Picture)*, 1932, and *Untitled (Broken Record Picture)*, ca. 1942–45.]³

When the Nazis invaded Norway in 1940, Schwitters once again took flight, this time to England. He stayed in London for a short time before moving on to the rural Ambleside, where he spent the last years of his life. While in England, Schwitters continued to make collages but also began creating small plaster sculptures, such as *Untitled (The All-Embracing Sculpture)*, ca. 1942–45, and *Untitled (Togetherness)*, ca. 1945–47. These modest works can perhaps be best understood in the context of Schwitters's greater Merz project. Schulz observes,



Körtingbild (Körting Picture), 1932. Assemblage; oil, wood, bark, metal, and seaweed nailed to canvas, 29 x 23⅞ inches. Private Collection



Mz x 19, 1947. Collage; oil, paper, and cardboard on cardboard, 6⅛ x 5¼ inches. Collection of Ellsworth Kelly. Photo courtesy Ellsworth Kelly

"In the sculpture he produced in the 1940s, with their rough, brightly colored surfaces, [Schwitters] finally resolved the competition between object and surface that had occupied him as an artist all his life. Here paint and material are one."⁴

Schwitters's late works, especially those of the last two years, are a kind of open-minded synthesis of earlier stylistic developments. Though practically penniless and in poor health, Schwitters was unusually prolific in these final years, producing well over three-hundred collages. *Mz x 19*, 1947, for example, demonstrates a dynamic reprisal of Cubist and Constructivist tendencies. In *Die heilige Nacht (The Holy Night)*, von Antonio Allegri gen. Correggio, worked through by Kurt Schwitters, 1947, Schwitters irreverently applied scraps of newspaper articles, ribbon, and discarded ration cards over a reproduced engraving of an old master painting, recalling his roots in Dada collage and, in a sense, predicting the development of Pop Art. In his last years, painting became an increasingly important aspect of both his collage and assemblage, as evidenced in *Untitled (Merz Picture with Red Ribbon)*, 1947, in which the surfaces of the found objects are united by the application of oil paint.

Schwitters never returned to Germany; he died in England in January 1948, one day after being granted British citizenship. Shortly after his death, his first solo exhibition in the United States opened at the Pinacotheca Gallery in New York (later the Rose Fried Gallery).