

HOW TO BRÜCKE-MUSEUM: A LOOK BEHIND THE SCENES

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When people go to a museum to see an exhibition, artworks and exhibits are mounted on freshly painted walls or placed in elaborately designed exhibition architectures. They are informed in various texts about what is on display and, in the best case, leave the exhibition with new knowledge about the topic dealt with in the presentation. As a visitor, one rarely asks oneself why the objects are arranged the way they are, where the information conveyed comes from, or why a particular theme or artist is being examined in more detail. For the most part, it is accepted as it is - the reverence people have for the institution of the museum as the guardian of culture and the knowledge about this culture prevent critical questioning on the part of the public. It is even rarer for the visitors to consider who actually works in a museum and ensures that the exhibition rooms and objects on display are found in the way they are used to and to think about what kind of work the museum employees are confronted with on a daily basis. In recent years, however, some exhibition houses have been trying to make their work processes more transparent to the public. Visitors get more involved in the procedures of the museum staff and thus gain a better insight into the institution's work.

An impressive example of this was provided by the Brücke-Museum in Berlin in the fall/winter of 2022/2023 on the occasion of its 55th birthday. In the exhibition *How to Brücke-Museum: A Look behind the Scenes*, visitors were able to get an impression of the museum's operations and immerse themselves in the different areas of responsibility of the various museum employees.

The Brücke-Museum was opened in September 1967 and initiated by the artist Karl Schmidt-Rottluff - one of the founding members of the Expressionist artists' association *Brücke*, which was formed in Dresden in 1905. While donating some of his works to the state

of Berlin in the 1960s, he had asked the latter to establish a museum for the art of the artists' group. This is how the small museum at the Grunewald Forest in Berlin Dahlem came into being. It is the only institution in the world dedicated to the art of the artists of the *Brücke* à la Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Otto Mueller, Emil Nolde, Max Pechstein and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. The museum concentrates on the examination of the art of the group as well as Expressionism in general, whereby the research and exhibition activities have meanwhile expanded. For example, contemporary artists are repeatedly invited to enter into a dialogue with the works of the *Brücke*. Recently the artist Małgorzata Mirga-Tas was able as Begitka-Romni to refer with her works to the often unreflected racist stereotypes against the Romnja community, which can also be found, for example, in the works of Otto Mueller and have solidified in our collective memory. Today, the museum houses around 5000 works, making it one of the largest collections of German Expressionism.

The exhibition introduced visitors to the cosmos of the institution with the history of the museum's founding and in doing so also reflected on the significance of its opening in what was then West Berlin. Then the collection of the institution was presented through some exemplary paintings and the viewers were able to learn how they came into the possession or care of the museum. Thereby the visitors could inform themselves on how individual the paths of an artwork can be from the artist's studio to the collection of an institution and what the difference is between a (permanent) loan, a donation, and an acquisition.





In further thematic units, different fields of museum tasks and related professions were presented. For example, the museum's provenance researcher, who investigates possible restitution cases, was introduced. Using a painting by Otto Mueller as an example, she explained how she went about her research into the whereabouts of the work during the Nazi era and its legitimacy in the museum's collection. The complexity of provenance research was demonstrated to the visitors in a very comprehensible way with the help of an interview between the intern and the provenance researcher, which was displayed in text form on the wall.

The work of the art mediators in the Outreach Department was presented using the example of the museum's *Various Answers* project - a digital, participatory, and experimental pilot project designed to help formulate and discuss new perspectives on selected paintings in the collection. Feminist or postcolonial aspects, for example, found their way into the debates regarding different ways of looking at, interpreting, and dealing with the artworks.

Other thematic units of the exhibition highlighted the importance of research, conservation and restoration as well as digitization of the artworks in the collection. Using the example of a few paintings, visitors were informed about the research questions currently being addressed by art historians at the museum and they were able to learn how the restorer responsible for the museum had recently proceeded in the restoration of a painting.

With the question "Who decides what is exhibited?" the profession of the curator was introduced. After a brief description of the areas

of responsibility and duties of a curator, each member of the museum team –technicians, interns, administrators, guardians, art educators, curators, etc.– was asked to choose a favorite work from the collection. Short texts informed the visitors about the reasons why a particular painting, wood cut, drawing etc. was chosen by the respective person as their favorite work of art. The wall on which these favorite works were mounted bore the signature of all those working at the museum and not just that of a single curator or curatorial team. In that way the profession of curating could be experienced from a very personal perspective, rather than focusing on the otherwise high scientific standards that this profession entails.

In general, the exhibition helped to introduce the public not only to the different departments and work processes of the institution, but also to present each individual employee in the corresponding thematic units, thus countering the anonymous identity of a museum as an omniscient guardian of culture with a very transparent and personal version of this type of institution. The visitors were given a glimpse behind the scenes and were enabled to become aware of the fact that behind every exhibition of cultural objects as well as the accompanying transfer of knowledge, there are people who have an individual approach to the subject and object under study, who try out different curatorial methods, who take decisions on what the visitors should see and learn and who can make “mistakes” in their decisions. An exhibition such as the one organized by the Brücke-Museum helps to reduce the reverence that visitors often have for the museum as an institution and turn the public into mature participants in the museum business. They can question and criticize the knowledge conveyed in museums, revising the established narratives that museum employees – primarily curators – have communicated to the public over decades. Such a development is desirable in view of a democratization of museums that continues to be called for. Exhibitions that inform about museum operations are one way to get the public more involved in what institutions are doing. However, this is a temporary format. It is important that museums act transparently at all times and establish themselves as places where the knowledge about our culture is researched and communicated by people working in a museum for people visiting a museum, but explored, discussed and revised together. Fortunately, some museums, such as the Brücke-Museum have provided lasting examples of this in recent years.