

Press Kit

Berlin, Hanover, Dessau-Roßlau in May 2016

Otto Maximilian Umbehr, alias UMBO (1902–1980)

Estate purchased as a complete portfolio

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**BERLINISCHE
GALERIE**
MUSEUM FÜR
MODERNE KUNST

SPRENGEL MUSEUM HANNOVER

Berlinische Galerie, Sprengel Museum Hannover and Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau purchase the artistic estate of the photographer UMBO

Berlin, 9 May 2016

The work of Otto Maximilian Umbehrr (1902-1980), alias UMBO, will now be preserved as a complete portfolio. Thanks to the generous assistance of fourteen patrons and sponsors, the estate of this famous photographer of the modernist period has recently been acquired from three different provenances by the Berlinische Galerie, the Sprengel Museum Hannover and the Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau. The complex purchase deal was pushed forward with tireless commitment by Galerie Kicken, Berlin, together with the artist's daughter, Phyllis Umbehrr, and her husband, Manfred Feith-Umbehrr, as well as the Kulturstiftung der Länder. Generous assistance was given by Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien, the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung, and the LOTTO-Stiftung Berlin, among others.

UMBO's works are a substantial gain for the collections of the three museums. For the Berlinische Galerie, his work from the 1920s and the early 1930s offers a representative picture of a culturally significant period of the Weimar Republic, maybe the most important years of modernism in Berlin. For Hanover, the purchase signifies the reclamation of a piece of the city's art history. It also constitutes an important new cornerstone and a high-profile expansion of the photographic department, especially with regard to the history of photojournalism. The Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau receives the part of the UMBO estate that is directly related to photography at the Bauhaus. The UMBO works significantly strengthen the photographic section of the collection.

UMBO - Photographer of Modernism

Besides László Moholy-Nagy, Otto Umbehrr is the most important photographic artist to have emerged from the Bauhaus and his work still stands for modernist photography today. Influenced by his early association with the back-to-nature 'Wandervogel' movement, Umbehrr attended the State Bauhaus in Weimar from 1921 to 1923. In 1926, encouraged by his friend Paul Citroen, he set up a photography studio in Berlin. UMBO's early years as a photographer centred on the bohemian world of actors and artists. The melancholy of the big city became his main theme. In capturing urban landscapes, he trod a very personal path, guided by an aesthetic in which the formal principles of the objectivist "New Vision" were combined with the expressive approach of Johannes Itten, his former teacher at the Bauhaus. During the Second World War, UMBO's studio - and with it his archive - was destroyed in a

bombing raid on Berlin. After the war, the artist and his family settled in Hanover. In the 1950s, he created photograms, portraits and photo documentaries, many of them for British clients. UMBO subsequently remained involved in art as a teacher of photography and an employee of the Kestner-Gesellschaft, an art society, but his work slipped into oblivion. Then, in 1979, Spectrum photo gallery in Hanover held UMBO's first solo exhibition since the Second World War. The reappraisal of his work during the 1980s, which began shortly before his death in 1980, is largely thanks to his agent, gallery owner Rudolf Kicken, who had promised him to preserve his life's work and to try to find a place for it in a German museum.

Provenance

UMBO assigned the exclusive agent's rights to his works from before 1945 to Gallery Kicken, which also received UMBO's photographs from Paul Citroen's estate. For several decades, Rudolf Kicken was unstinting in his efforts to secure the preservation of the complete body of work in a way that would make it accessible to the public. He worked on this project in close collaboration with the artist's daughter, Phyllis Umbehr, who owned another part of the estate with her husband, Manfred Feith-Umbehr. They made all these works available for study, which enabled art historian Professor Herbert Molderings to write a seminal monograph on UMBO. In 2000, the collector Thomas Walther acquired a significant part of the artist's estate. He too was interested in making this acquisition available to a German museum in the long term. The purchase of the works by the three museums was the fruit of seven years' preparation. Not only did financing have to be arranged, but also the details of bringing together items from the three different provenances. In addition, Phyllis Umbehr's donation of a large quantity of related archival material now allows the comprehensive scholarly appraisal of UMBO's oeuvre.

Future Activities

The three museums have agreed to undertake the scholarly appraisal and dissemination in close cooperation and to make their parts of the collection mutually available. A joint exhibition by the three institutions is planned for 2019, focusing on the main subject areas in each case.

UMBO and the Photography of Modernism

The photographer's significance in art history

UMBO is considered to be one of the most significant photographers of the modernist period. His photographic oeuvre merges the formal principles of the "New Vision" movement with the expressive influence of his teacher, Johannes Itten.

Born Otto Maximilian Umbehr in Düsseldorf in 1902, UMBO studied under Johannes Itten from 1921 to 1923, on the preliminary course at the State Bauhaus in Weimar. A few years later, in Berlin, he took up photography as a profession. It was the city's artistic and acting milieu that he chose to depict in his early photographic portraits, beginning in 1926. Equipped with a travel camera, UMBO straightaway devised a new form of the close-up portrait: He combined the technique of the cinematic close-up with the compositional forms of the panel painting as defined by the principles taught at the Bauhaus. His pictures influenced many contemporary photographers, including Helmar Lerski, Florence Henri, Werner David Feist, Lucia Moholy and László Moholy-Nagy.

Another theme that UMBO explored was the melancholy atmosphere of the metropolis. In his images of urban landscapes, he developed a photographic language that blends the formal principles of the Neues Sehen (New Vision) movement with the expressive aesthetic of his former teacher at the Bauhaus, Johannes Itten. UMBO's poetic visual documentaries made him a pioneer of modern photojournalism. He was a founding member of the photo agency DEPHOT.

The seizure of power by the National Socialists put a serious brake on UMBO's career. After closing the DEPHOT agency, which had effectively been his sole outlet in the 1920s and early 1930s, he continued to work as a photographer in the areas of dance and music hall. In addition, he created experimental natural history images for popular science magazines and took photographs with a new type of fish-eye lens on behalf of AEG. Between 1933 and 1938, UMBO had Jewish interns working in his studio and he himself worked on commissions from publications owned by Ullstein; in 1940 he worked as a reporter for *Signal*, a National Socialist foreign affairs journal.

During the Second World War, UMBO was assigned to Libya and other places as a photographer for the Wehrmacht. While he was away, a bomb destroyed his studio in Berlin, along with his entire archive of approximately 60,000 negatives. After the war, he moved to Hanover and made a new start as an advertising photographer and as a reporter for local newspapers. He was also commissioned by British-based agencies and the successor to DEPHOT, besides working as a photographer for exhibitions held by the Kestner-Gesellschaft. In the early 1950s, he undertook a photo reportage journey through the United States.

After decades of oblivion, UMBO was living in comparative poverty in Hanover when, thanks to the local art scene, he began to receive the recognition that he deserved. At the age of almost eighty, his artistic photographs from the 1920s and 1930s were rediscovered.

Today, the Berlinische Galerie, the Sprengel Museum Hannover and the Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau consider his estate to be a national cultural asset.

Scholarly Preparation

Exhibitions and catalogue in 2019

The Berlinische Galerie, the Sprengel Museum Hannover and the Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau plan to carry out the scholarly preparation of the complete portfolio in close cooperation. By 2019, an exhibition with core topics specific to each of these locations will be produced, which will be accompanied by the publication of a catalogue. In the longer-term perspective, it is also intended to make UMBO's entire oeuvre accessible online.

The contents of the portfolio were apportioned by mutual agreement with regard to the collecting and research activities of the three institutions concerned, also taking into account the phases of UMBO's artistic career in Dessau, Berlin and Hanover.

The basis of the scholarly appraisal is an agreement between these institutions. This governs the proportional distribution of the photographic works as well as the other materials and documents for the purpose of studying UMBO's life and work. The terms of the agreement also cover reciprocal lending arrangements for parts of the portfolio and the mutual provision of the scholarly findings made by each party.

With a themed approach specific to each location, the presentations planned for 2019 will introduce UMBO's legacy to the public from a variety of perspectives.

The Sprengel Museum Hannover will kick off the comprehensive presentation of UMBO's work. The exhibition is planned as part of the Bauhaus centenary celebrations in 2019 - a project in which the federal state of Lower Saxony is an official participant. The Sprengel Museum Hannover will interpret Umbo's oeuvre in the light of an artistic career influenced by the 'Wandervogel' movement and the Bauhaus, but thwarted by the Third Reich, according to Reinhard Spieler, the museum's director.

From Hanover, the exhibition will travel to the Berlinische Galerie in the spring of 2019. "Here," says its director, Thomas Köhler, "the focus will lie on UMBO's central significance in the unprecedented explosion of artistic production that took place in 1920s Berlin. The artist was one of the most important innovators in this metropolis of modernism and the pictorial language that he developed influenced many contemporary photographers who are famous today."

The Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau hosts the UMBO exhibition in the autumn of 2019, when it will coincide with the opening of the new Bauhaus Dessau Museum. Claudia Perren, director, is looking forward to presenting UMBO's early photographs, whose aesthetic has its roots in his time at the Bauhaus and his study under Johannes Itten, in the new museum. "Besides László Moholy-Nagy, UMBO is still regarded as the Bauhaus photographer. This exhibition will enhance the opening of our museum; we are delighted with the estate and with the excellent cooperation with our colleagues in Berlin and Hanover," says Perren.

Financing

Fourteen patrons and supporters make the purchase possible

The complex purchase of the UMBO estate was successfully completed after seven years of preparation. Fourteen dedicated patrons and supporters were involved in facilitating the purchase and thus keeping UMBO's work in Germany in its entirety.

Just under half of the cost of the portfolio was borne in equal measure by the Kulturstiftung der Länder, Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien, and the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung. Each of the three museums benefited from this financial contribution to the same extent. To cover the remaining expenses, each of them managed to raise funds from other partners.

National supporters of the purchase

Kulturstiftung der Länder

Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien

Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung

Further supporters of the Berlinische Galerie

LOTTO-Stiftung Berlin

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