BASEL, SWITZERLAND

Kunstmuseum Basel: Masterpieces

Twenty works from Kunstmuseum Basel, from Konrad Witz and Holbein's dead Christ to Hodler's Lake Geneva, Braque's still lifes and Dalí's burning giraffe.



Kunstmuseum Basel is one of Europe's oldest public art collections. Its origins are connected with the Amerbach Cabinet, which the city acquired in the seventeenth century. The collection is strong in both early painting and modern art, so changes in European painting can be followed within a single museum.

The twenty works chosen here draw on both strengths. Two of the earliest are difficult pictures: Konrad Witz's Synagoga, a Christian allegory of Judaism, and Hans Holbein the Younger's dead Christ laid in the tomb. With them are Witz's Saint Christopher, bowed under a child, and a drawing Holbein made while planning a portrait of Thomas More's household. Delacroix's dying brigand, Böcklin's centaurs and Hodler's views of Lake Geneva and the Dents du Midi come next. The modern pictures include Braque's early harbour and the still lifes in which he and Picasso broke objects apart, alongside works by Rousseau, Modigliani, Modersohn-Becker, Klee, Chagall, Kirchner and Dalí.

Artline chose these works from the museum's documented holdings, working independently of the museum. Dates and attributions keep the qualifications given in the records.

Explore this selection in Artline

See the selected works alongside books and events from their period, or compare when the artists lived. The books and events provide context, not evidence of direct influence. Works without confirmed dates remain in this guide.

Artworks in context Who lived when?

artlines.org/guides/kunstmuseum-basel

The selection · 20

1. The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb
   Hans Holbein the Younger · 1521–1522
2. Study for the Family Portrait of Thomas More
   Hans Holbein the Younger · c. 1527
3. Synagoga
   Konrad Witz · 1435
4. Saint Christopher
   Konrad Witz · 1435
5. Senecio
   Paul Klee · 1922
6. The Burning Giraffe
   Salvador Dalí · 1937
7. Still Life BACH
   Georges Braque · 1912
8. Violin and Pitcher
   Georges Braque · 1910
9. Pedestal
   Pablo Picasso · 1914
10. Self-Portrait
    Marc Chagall · 1914
11. The Cattle Dealer
    Marc Chagall · 1912
12. The Muse Inspiring the Poet
    Henri Rousseau · 1909
13. The Dents du Midi from Chesières
    Ferdinand Hodler · 1912
14. Lake Geneva from Chexbres
    Ferdinand Hodler · 1905
15. Antwerp Harbour
    Georges Braque · 1905
16. Little Girl in a Black Apron
    Amedeo Modigliani · 1918
17. A Mortally Wounded Brigand Quenches His Thirst
    Eugène Delacroix · 1825
18. Stafelalp: Return of the Animals
    Ernst Ludwig Kirchner · 1919
19. Battle of the Centaurs
    Arnold Böcklin · 1873
20. Boy with a Cat
    Paula Modersohn-Becker · c. 1903

01 / 20

The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb

Hans Holbein the Younger

1521–1522 · Kunstmuseum Basel



Hans Holbein the Younger. The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

Holbein lays Christ's body in a narrow stone recess with hardly any room to spare. No mourners attend it, so there is no one in the picture to grieve on the viewer's behalf. The body is long and rigid, and the face is exposed. The physical consequences of death are set down so plainly, and with so little comfort, that the subject is hard to sentimentalise. That directness is why the picture has so often shocked those who see it.

Object source · Open artwork

02 / 20

Study for the Family Portrait of Thomas More

Hans Holbein the Younger

c. 1527 · Kunstmuseum Basel



Hans Holbein the Younger. Study for the Family Portrait of Thomas More. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/hans-holbein-the-younger/study-for-the-family-portrait-of-thomas-more · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

This is a working drawing, made while Holbein was planning a portrait of Thomas More's household, and it still shows that stage: some details are only lightly drawn, and there are written notes. The problem it tackles is a group. Seated and standing figures had to read as one company, so the gaps between them needed as much thought as any single likeness.

Object source · Open artwork

03 / 20

Synagoga

Konrad Witz

1435 · Kunstmuseum Basel



Konrad Witz. The Synagogue. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

Witz paints Judaism the way Christian allegory personified it: a figure in a gold robe, blindfolded, holding a broken staff and tablets. The robe lends the figure material splendour, but the meaning the allegory required lies in the blindfold, the broken staff and the tablets. This is not a neutral account of Jewish belief. It belongs to a religious hierarchy, and it presents that hierarchy as settled.

The quality of the painting does not soften this. The body is convincingly painted and the gold is handsome, and that skill works on behalf of the hierarchy the image asks its viewer to accept.

Object source · Open artwork

04 / 20

Saint Christopher

Konrad Witz

1435 · Kunstmuseum Basel



Konrad Witz. St. Christopher. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

Christopher is a large man wading across the river, yet he bends under a child whose visible size cannot account for the effort. The strain shows in his staff, his footing and his drapery. Witz does not leave this to the title. He paints the weight into the man's body, and whatever this passenger weighs, it is more than his appearance would suggest.

Object source · Open artwork

05 / 20

Senecio

Paul Klee

1922 · Oil on canvas · Kunstmuseum Basel



Senecio. WikiArt; Paul Klee. Proportional resizing and JPEG compression; source frame preserved. · Public domain

A divided circle, red eyes and a few unequal geometric features are all Klee needs for a face, and you recognise it at once. Look for longer and the coloured areas start to suggest other arrangements, though he stops short of dissolving the person.

Object source · Open artwork

06 / 20

The Burning Giraffe

Salvador Dalí

1937 · Oil on panel · Kunstmuseum Basel



Salvador Dalí. The Burning Giraffe. WikiArt source label: Salvador Dali Fair Use. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/salvador-dali/flaming-giraffe · Salvador Dali Fair Use (WikiArt source label)

Anyone looking for the giraffe will find it far off in the distance, small and in flames. The foreground belongs to a tall blue figure with drawers opening from its body and supports stretching out behind it. Dalí paints this impossible anatomy very clearly. You can make out every drawer, support and flame, yet the parts add up to a body that could not work.

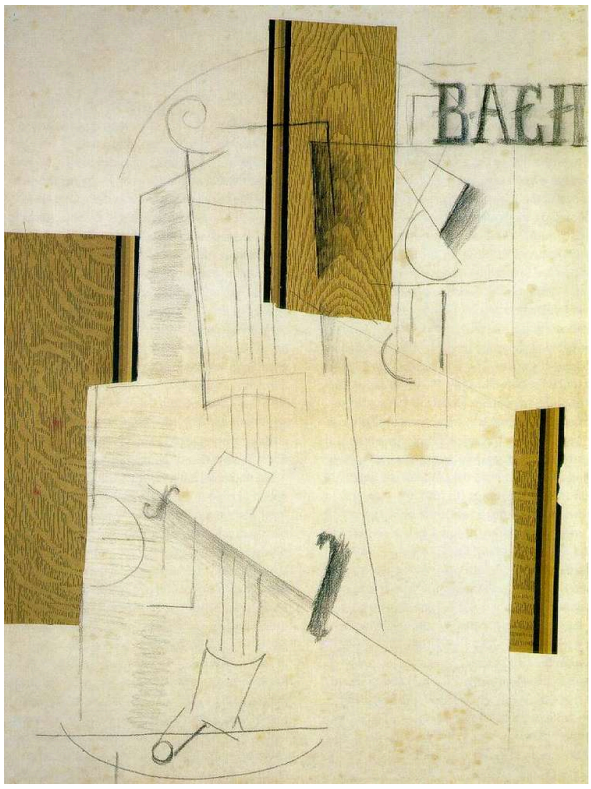
Object source · Open artwork

07 / 20

Still Life BACH

Georges Braque

1912 · Charcoal, collage and gouache on paper · Kunstmuseum Basel



Georges Braque. Still life BACH. WikiArt source label: Public domain US. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/georges-braque/still-life-bach-1912 · Public domain US (WikiArt source label)

Braque works here with several kinds of evidence at once: letters, charcoal drawing, pasted paper and gouache. Each of them says still life, but they disagree about depth, and no single space reconciles them. The pasted paper is the most stubborn. It takes its place in the picture and goes on looking like paper.

Object source · Open artwork

08 / 20

Violin and Pitcher

Georges Braque

1910 · Oil on canvas · Kunstmuseum Basel



Georges Braque. Violin and pitcher. WikiArt source label: Public domain US. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/georges-braque/violin-and-pitcher-1910 · Public domain US (WikiArt source label)

Neither the violin nor the pitcher is seen from one viewpoint. Pieces of each come forward among brown and grey planes, then sink back into the larger arrangement. Recognising them takes work, because the objects compete with the painted divisions that surround them and cut into them.

Object source · Open artwork

09 / 20

Pedestal

Pablo Picasso

1914 · Oil on canvas · Kunstmuseum Basel



Pablo Picasso. Pedestal. WikiArt source label: Public domain US. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/pablo-picasso/pedestal-1914 · Public domain US (WikiArt source label)

A pale rectangle cuts across a narrow cluster of lines, letters and patterned areas. Together they suggest a still life, though none is fully modelled as an object. Much of the interest lies in the pull between the clues you can recognise and the flat areas that hold them. Beside Braque's Still Life BACH, where paper really is pasted down, it is tempting to take every patterned fragment here for collage. The medium is recorded as oil on canvas, though, so that is not a safe assumption.

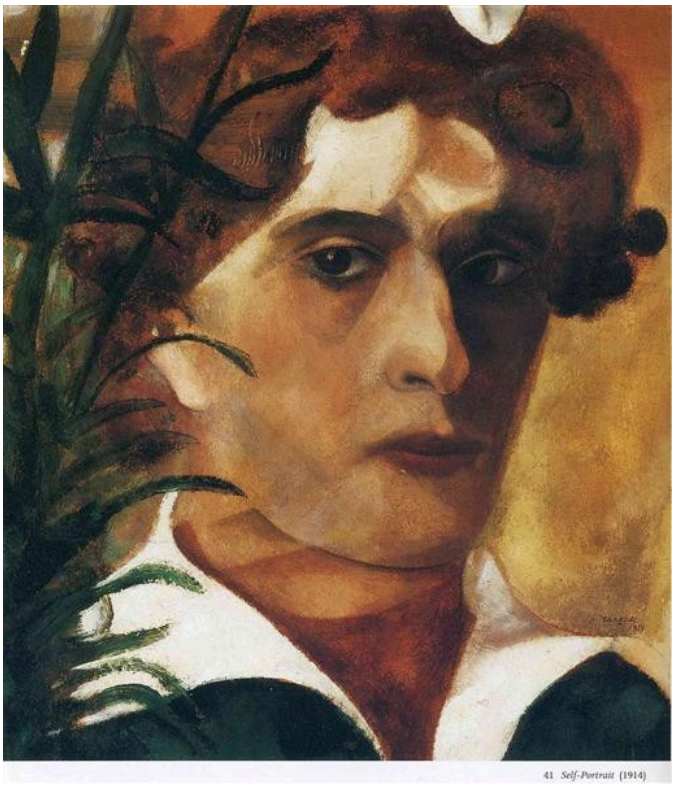
Object source · Open artwork

10 / 20

Self-Portrait

Marc Chagall

1914 · Oil on cardboard mounted on canvas · Kunstmuseum Basel



Marc Chagall. Self-Portrait. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

Next to The Cattle Dealer, this is Chagall in a quieter mood. The face is seen close up and is fairly easy to read, though warm and cool colours divide its shadows, and shapes like foliage press in beside the head.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: Im 1081

11 / 20

The Cattle Dealer

Marc Chagall

1912 · Oil on canvas · Kunstmuseum Basel



Marc Chagall. The Cattle Dealer. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

Chagall paints the inside of an animal on the same terms as what could normally be seen only from outside. Around the cart and its horse, figures sit at unlikely angles in the coloured terrain. No single rule decides what can be seen or from where. What is known and what is observed share one surface, and the dealer's journey is not a view from any one position.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: 2213

12 / 20

The Muse Inspiring the Poet

Henri Rousseau

1909 · Oil on canvas · Kunstmuseum Basel



The Muse Inspiring the Poet. WikiArt; Henri Rousseau. Proportional resizing and JPEG compression; source frame preserved. · Public domain

The muse and the poet hold themselves as still as sitters for a formal portrait, while oversized flowers upset their relation to the garden. Rousseau makes no attempt to correct the scale into something plausible. Instead, repeated outlines bind the figures to the plants, and the literary pair end up in a place that exists only in the picture.

Object source · Open artwork

13 / 20

The Dents du Midi from Chesières

Ferdinand Hodler

1912 · Oil on canvas · Kunstmuseum Basel



Ferdinand Hodler. The Dents du Midi from Chesieres. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/ferdinand-hodler/the-dents-du-midi-from-chesieres-1912 · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

Hodler strips out most of the small detail and keeps the mountain's profile. Broad bands of blue slope, pale cloud and warmer sky fix it in place, and there are few individual features to pick out. The outline of the ridge alone is enough to identify the Dents du Midi as seen from Chesières.

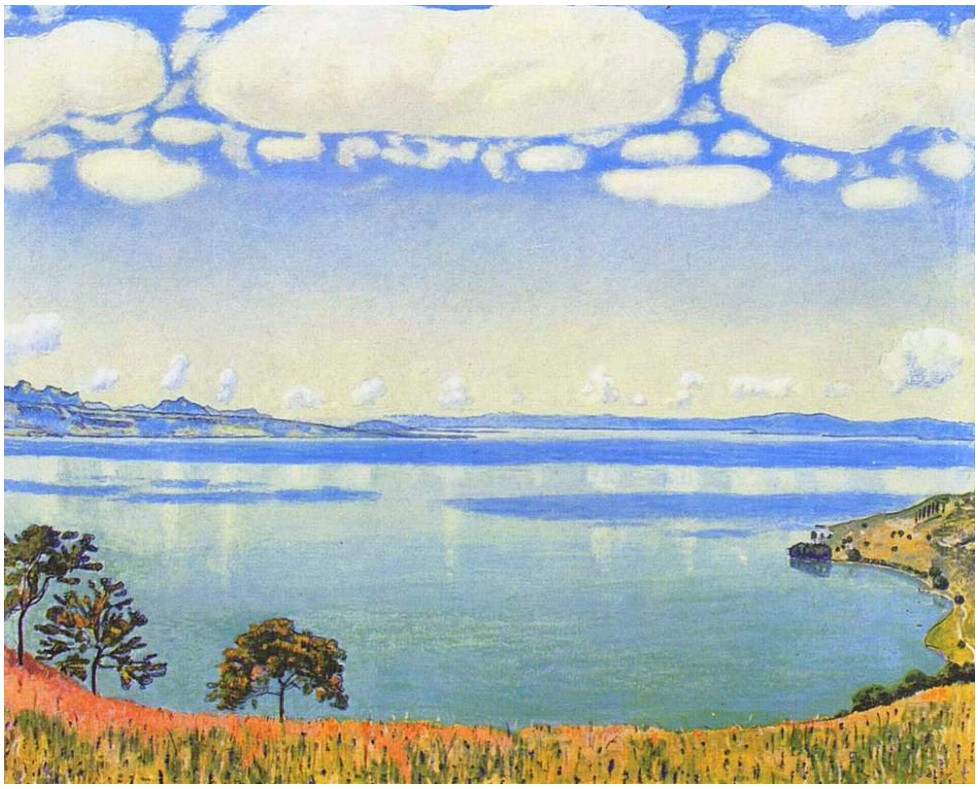
Object source · Open artwork

14 / 20

Lake Geneva from Chexbres

Ferdinand Hodler

1905 · Oil on canvas · Kunstmuseum Basel



Ferdinand Hodler. View of Lake Leman from Chexbres. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/ferdinand-hodler/view-of-lake-leman-from-chexbres-1905 · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

The Dents du Midi picture is pared down to a profile. This one is built on echoes. Cloud forms repeat above horizontal bands of reflection, so that sky and water answer each other. Trees and a narrow strip of foreground show where the viewer stands without competing with the lake. It remains a particular place, but the repetitions give it something of the order of a patterned surface.

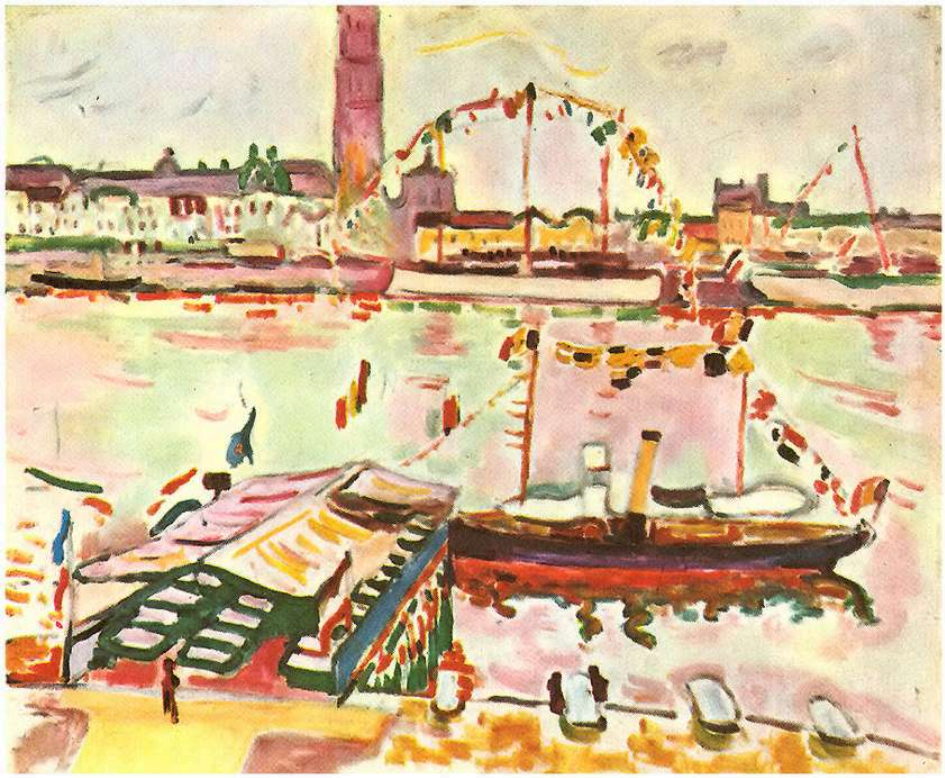
Object source · Open artwork

15 / 20

Antwerp Harbour

Georges Braque

1905 · Oil on canvas · Kunstmuseum Basel



Georges Braque. Antwerp Harbor. WikiArt source label: Public domain US. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/georges-braque/antwerp-harbor-1905 · Public domain US (WikiArt source label)

This is the earliest of the Braques here, and at first sight the odd one out. The harbour is built from separate bright strokes, with pale ground showing between them. Boats, buildings and a chimney can be picked out, though the scene is not filled in continuously. Different as it looks, it already loosens a stable view. In Violin and Pitcher the view is broken into planes. Here it is the colour that is broken up.

Object source · Open artwork

16 / 20

Little Girl in a Black Apron

Amedeo Modigliani

1918 · Oil on canvas · Kunstmuseum Basel



Amedeo Modigliani. Little Girl in Black Apron. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/amedeo-modigliani/little-girl-in-black-apron-1918 · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

The girl's pose is frontal, steadied by her lowered arms, but her head tilts slightly above a narrow neck, and that small break from symmetry does much of the work. The economical, simplified handling of faces and figures is Modigliani's own. Here it is adapted to one particular sitter.

Object source · Open artwork

17 / 20

A Mortally Wounded Brigand Quenches His Thirst

Eugène Delacroix

1825 · Oil on canvas · Kunstmuseum Basel



Eugène Delacroix. A Mortally Wounded Brigand Quenches his Thirst. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/eugene-delacroix/a-mortally-wounded-brigand-quenches-his-thirst-1825 · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

The title does much of the telling. Mortally wounded, and a brigand: the image alone could not fully establish either. What Delacroix paints is a man struggling to drink. His pale face and sleeve stand out against the rough ground, though he still belongs to it. Whatever story brought him here, the urgency of the picture lies in that bodily need.

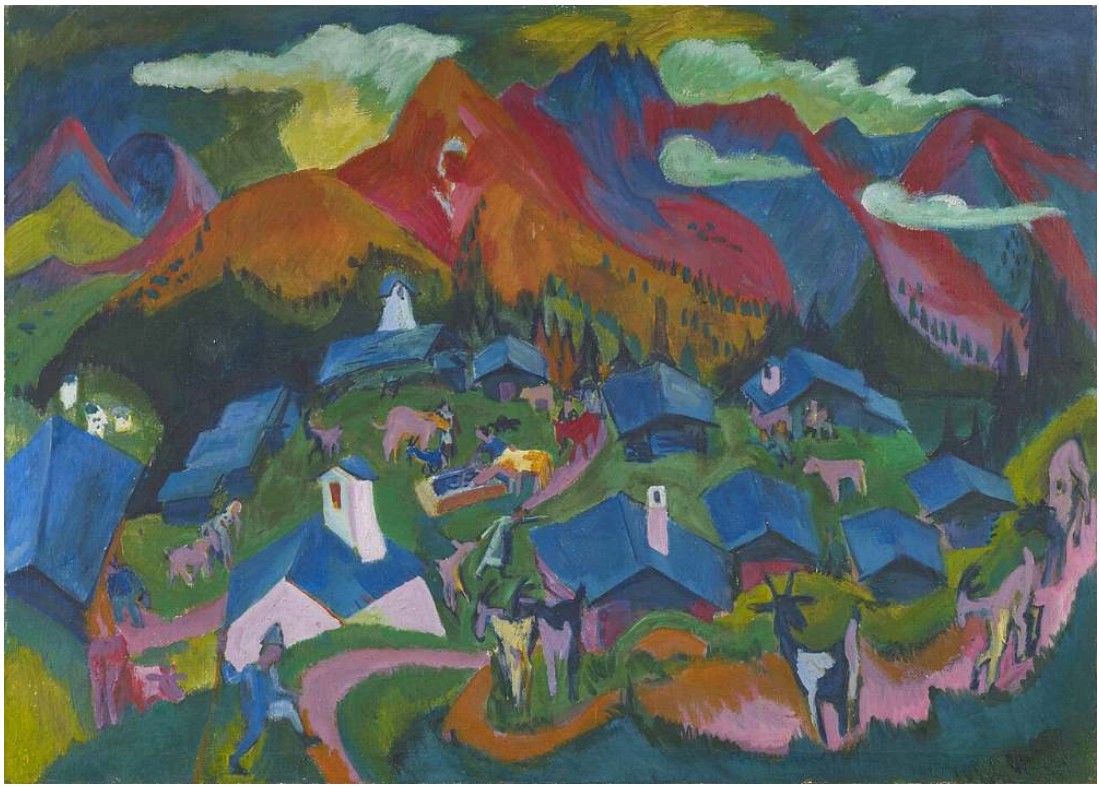
Object source · Open artwork

18 / 20

Stafelalp: Return of the Animals

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

1919 · Oil on canvas · Kunstmuseum Basel



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Stafelalp, Rückkehr der Tiere (1919). Kunstmuseum Basel; Schenkung Eberhard W. Kornfeld. Public Domain Mark 1.0 (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kirchner_-_Stafelalp%2C_R%C3%BCckkehr_der_Tiere%2C_1919%2C_Inv._G_2017.10.jpg. Accessed 2026-09-18T07:59:53Z. Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop or generated content. · Public Domain Mark 1.0

The subject is ordinary and easy to follow: animals and figures on their way back. The landscape they cross is less ordinary. Kirchner lays it out in strong patches of colour, and houses and mountains mark sharp changes of direction across the slopes. You cannot follow the route without following the way he has rearranged the land.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: G 2017.10

19 / 20

Battle of the Centaurs

Arnold Böcklin

1873 · Kunstmuseum Basel



Arnold Böcklin. Battle of the Centaurs. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

Each of Böcklin's centaurs brings both a horse's bulk and a man's arms to the fight, which gives the bodies more places to collide. Raised stones, bent human limbs and heavy horse bodies come together at close quarters. The creatures come from myth, but the violence obeys ordinary physical rules: bodies need room, and force meets resistance.

Object source · Open artwork

20 / 20

Boy with a Cat

Paula Modersohn-Becker

c. 1903 · Kunstmuseum Basel



Paula Modersohn-Becker. Boy with Cat. Image credit: Paula Modersohn-Becker; Source credit: Kunstmuseum Basel. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Resized and JPEG-compressed; selected source frame preserved. · Public domain

The boy holds a pale cat against his dark clothing. There is little detail anywhere else, so that act of holding becomes the centre of the portrait, and broad shapes give both bodies solidity. Neither face is made to perform affection. The care shows in the way his arms support the cat and in the contact between them.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: 1749

Comparisons across the selection

The three works by Braque make a short sequence of their own: a harbour in bright, separated touches, a still life broken into planes and a drawing made partly with pasted paper. Picasso's Pedestal belongs beside the last of them. Holbein's dead Christ, Klee's Senecio and Modersohn-Becker's boy with his cat give three very different accounts of a human body, from close description to broad simplification. Dalí and Böcklin both make impossible anatomy concrete. One uses drawers and supports, and the other joins horse and man. The order of this guide is an editorial choice and does not trace a route through the museum.

Further reading

Concerning the Spiritual in Art

Wassily Kandinsky; translated by Michael Sadleir · Read free · English

Kandinsky argues here that colour and form carry spiritual content. The text is Michael Sadleir's English translation. It was written in the same period as several of the modern works in this selection. Its claims are worth testing against Klee, Chagall and Braque, who each went about painting in very different ways.

Museum website · Official collection guide

Sources and visitor information checked: 2026-10-12
