



## Becoming CoBrA: Beginnings of a European Art Movement

Nov. 19, 2022–May 5, 2023

Press conference: Nov. 16, 2022, 11 am

Kunsthalle Mannheim presents over 120 works from the period before 1949

With the exhibition *Becoming CoBrA: Beginnings of a European Art Movement*, Kunsthalle Mannheim takes a look at the origins of one of the most influential avant-garde groups of the twentieth century, reaching back to the 1930s. While the years from 1948 and 1951, in which CoBrA existed as a fixed association, have already been discussed widely, the process of emergence that preceded the artist collective, rarely explored until now, will be the focus of this show.

In the framework of this exhibition, more than 120 paintings, sculptures, prints and drawings, photographs, textile and ceramic works by the later members of the trans-European collective will provide insights into the creative cosmos of CoBrA before its founding. They show how a new avant-garde already took shape in the context of the Second World War that stood for peace, international understanding, and a new definition of artistic modes of production.

**KUNSTHALLE  
MANNHEIM**

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### Origins in Scandinavia

The name of the movement comes from the first letters of the hometowns of the founding members: Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam. In Denmark, artists such as Asger Jorn, Ejler Biller, Else Alfelt, or Henry Heerup began engaging with key issues of the later CoBrA movement as early as the mid-1930s: the art of non-European cultures, Scandinavian mythology, but also the directness of so-called art brut and the art of children. "Like other historic artist associations, CoBrA was on the one hand looking for a new language, new models and sources of inspiration, while at the same time setting itself apart from positions that were artistically considered conventional and outdated," according to Inge Herold, one of the curators of the exhibition.

In the immediate postwar years, these Danish artists established contact with artists from all across Europe such as Pierre Alechinsky, Karel Appel, Madeleine Kemény-Szemere and Zoltán Kemény, who dealt independently with very similar issues. Artist couples and artists from Czechoslovakia, France, Scotland, Sweden, Hungary, and from Germany as well soon joined the group.

### The Formative Experience of Wartime

While there were differences from country to country, the artists were essentially in agreement when it came to their goals and program. Essential here were the formative experience of the war and thus the lack of a freely developing art world. "To that extent, it is not surprising that the artists were interested in freedom, revolution, and a distance to artistic and social conventions," in the words of



curator Christina Bergemann. Formally speaking, the artists shared an expressive, spontaneous style of painting and a joy in pure color. “Fantastic hybrid creatures combining human, animal, and plant elements served as a symbolic expression for the longing for natural origins, for the pure and primeval. The characteristic motifs of the CoBrA-artists included intentionally naïve renderings of animals, but also depictions of mother and child,” Inge Herold adds.

*Becoming CoBrA: Beginnings of a European Art Movement* will be on view in the exhibition halls on the ground floor of Hector-Bau. The exhibition will take visitors on a tour leading to each of the group’s geographic centers: Denmark, Belgium/France, and the Netherlands.

Parallel to the special exhibition *Becoming CoBrA*, the movement of German art Informel that was successful just slightly later and constitutes an emphasis of the collection at Kunsthalle Mannheim will be presented in the new annex and set in relation to the beginnings of the international artists’ association.

Deutscher Kunstverlag will be publishing a catalogue (German/English, 248 pages) with contributions by Christina Bergemann, Inge Herold, Karen Kurczynski, and Mathias Listl. Shop price: 29.50 €.

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STADTMANNHEIM



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## AT A GLANCE

Title: Becoming CoBrA. Beginnings of a European Art Movement

Duration: Nov. 19, 2022–March 5, 2023

Curators: Inge Herold and Christina Bergemann (Mathias Listl, guest curator)

## PRESS PHOTOS



Sonja Ferlov Mancoba,  
Composition, 1938,  
Kunstmuseum Brandts,  
Odense, Denmark

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Galerie Mikael Andersen,  
Copenhagen; VG Bild-Kunst,  
Bonn 2022; Photo: Bent Hesby



Else Alfelt, Fossen, Tjuvkil /  
Waterfall, Tjuvkil, 1947, Carl-  
Henning Pedersen & Else Alfelts  
Museum, Herning, Denmark

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Photo: Ralf T. Søndergaard



Karel Appel,  
Untitled, 1947, gouache on  
paper, 69.4 x 50 cm,  
Karel Appel Estate, Netherlands

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Constant,  
Fantastische dieren / Fantastic  
Animals, 1947, Kunsten Museum  
of Modern Art Aalborg, Denmark

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Photo: Niels Fabæk



Madeleine Kemény-Szemere,  
Femme et oiseau / Woman and  
Bird, 1946, private collection

© Nachlass Zoltán  
und Madeleine Kemény-  
Szemere. Courtesy  
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Max Walter Svanberg,  
Minotaurus / Minotaur, 1946,  
Moderna Museet Stockholm,  
Sweden

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Henry Heerup,  
Døden høster / Death Reaps,  
1943, Louisiana Museum of  
Modern Art, Humlebæk,  
Denmark

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