

PRESS RELEASE

March 2026

Monet – Cézanne – Matisse The Scharf Collection

12 March to 9 August 2026

Monet, Cézanne, Matisse – few defining names of modern art are absent from the Scharf Collection. For the first time, Germany’s most important private collection of French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism will be presented to the public. Bringing together around 180 works, an exhibition at the Kunstpalast highlights the remarkable breadth of the holdings, which span from the early nineteenth century to the present day. Alongside masterpieces by Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, Paul Cézanne and Pierre Bonnard, the presentation also includes works by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Henri Matisse, another central focus of the Scharf collection. Today, the collectors René and Christiane Scharf have turned their attention to contemporary art, continuing the family’s commitment to artistic innovation into its fourth generation.

Until now, the Scharf Collection has remained anonymous and has only rarely been shown publicly, through a small number of loans. “We are delighted to present the Scharf Collection on such a large scale for the first time,” says Felix Krämer, Director General of the Kunstpalast. “The exhibition, conceived together with the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin – where it proved a major public success, attracting 170,000 visitors – will be expanded in Düsseldorf by more than 60 additional works. These include pieces by Edgar Degas and Henri Matisse, as well as nineteenth-century Japanese colour woodcuts. Our heartfelt thanks go to the Scharf family for their trust and their willingness to take this

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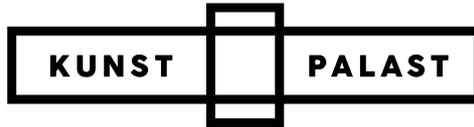
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step with us.”

René Scharf explains: “For us, as for the generations before us, it has always been important to make individual works from the collection available for museum exhibitions so they can be shared with as many people as possible. Even so, it is a new experience for my wife and me to present the entire collection to the public under our name. I am particularly pleased that the exhibition is also coming to my hometown of Düsseldorf, and that some of my personal favourites – such as Edgar Degas’s experimental monotypes – will be shown here exclusively.” The exhibition brings together paintings, works on paper and sculptures spanning three centuries. For curator Kathrin DuBois, Head of the Paintings before 1900 Collection at the Kunstpalast, working with the Scharf Collection has also been a special experience: “It is remarkable that a private collection has been built over four generations with such passion for art. From this rich and varied body of works, we have been able to develop a presentation that includes outstanding pieces by world-renowned artists while also leaving room for new discoveries.”

An art collection spanning four generations

The Scharf Collection traces its origins to a branch of the renowned Berlin collection assembled by Otto Gerstenberg (1848–1935). As Director General of Victoria Insurance – later incorporated into the Düsseldorf-based ERGO Group – Gerstenberg played a key role in the company’s success both nationally and across Europe. Around 1900, he began collecting art on a significant scale.

His initial focus was on German and Dutch prints from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Soon he expanded the collection to include nineteenth-century European painting, acquiring works by artists such as Francisco de

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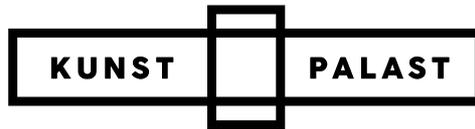
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Goya, John Constable and Gustave Courbet, before turning to the art of his own time. Gerstenberg assembled outstanding works by, among others, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet and Auguste Renoir, laying the foundation for the present-day Scharf Collection's emphasis on French Impressionism. One of the collection's unique highlights worldwide is the near-complete graphic oeuvre of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. In the Kunstpalast exhibition, these works are presented in an expansive salon-style hanging. Alongside the artist's celebrated fin-de-siècle advertising posters is *Elles* (1896), a portfolio suite of colour lithographs in which Toulouse-Lautrec depicts quiet, everyday moments in the lives of prostitutes.

Gerstenberg's daughter Margarethe Scharf (1889–1961) managed to save a large part of the collection during the Second World War and later passed it on to her two sons, Walther (1923–1996) and Dieter Scharf (1926–2001). The present-day Scharf Collection descends from the branch of the family associated with Walther Scharf, who, together with his wife Eve and their son René, further developed the collection's focus on French art and expanded it with key works. Among them is Claude Monet's *Waterloo Bridge* (1903), part of a series of around forty paintings depicting the famous London bridge in constantly shifting colour and light. The collection was also enriched by Pierre Bonnard's intimate painting *The Large Bath* (1937/39), which shows his wife Marthe reclining in a bathtub. With Henri Matisse's artist's book *Jazz* (1947), the collection includes an icon of modernism, bringing together twenty of his characteristic paper cut-outs, among them the widely reproduced sheet *Icarus*. At the same time, the collection opened up to French post-war positions, including works by Maurice Estève, Charles Lapicque and Jean René Bazaine.

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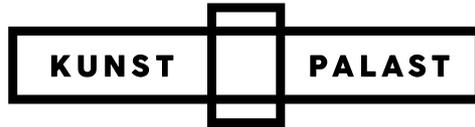
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René Scharf, who worked for Christie's and the Museum of Modern Art from 1984 to 2003 before becoming an art dealer in New York, expanded the core of the collection to include works of classical modernism and Abstract Expressionism, among them paintings by Sam Francis. Today, René and his wife Christiane Scharf – a lawyer specialising in copyright and media law – have also turned their attention to contemporary art, continuing the family's collecting tradition into the present. Recent acquisitions include works by international figures such as Robert Longo and Sean Scully, alongside artists from Berlin's emerging art scene, whom the couple recognised and supported at an early stage. Their works reflect the diversity of contemporary painting in its approaches to colour and form, from the surreal figuration of Jonas Burgert and the provocative pop aesthetics of Martin Eder to the monumental abstractions of Katharina Grosse.

The only loan in the exhibition not drawn from the Scharf Collection is provided by the ERGO Group: a portrait of the collector Otto Gerstenberg painted by the German Impressionist Max Liebermann. "The historical connection between ERGO and Otto Gerstenberg gives this exhibition a special significance for us. All the more reason why we are delighted to support it as a partner of the Kunstpalast," emphasises Markus Rieß, Chairman of the Board of Management of ERGO Group AG.

Collecting between tradition and innovation

An interest in the possibilities of painting has guided the collection across four generations. Which traditions are taken up, and which new directions emerge? With René and Christiane Scharf, the dialogue between abstraction and figuration has moved to the forefront. In doing so, the Scharf Collection also reveals how artists continually learn from one another, refer to one another and

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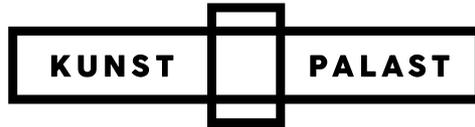
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develop artistic ideas further. Some of these connections – sometimes overt, sometimes subtle – can be discovered in the exhibition. One example is the colour lithograph *Bonnard's Bath* (1979) by the American Pop artist Mel Ramos, which directly references Pierre Bonnard's post-impressionist painting *The Large Bath* and thus alludes to the historical core of the collection.

The atmospheric motifs of Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, Eugène Delacroix's sense of colour and tension, and Courbet's engagement with reality inspired many artists who followed. During his stay in France in the 1950s, the American painter Sam Francis likewise drew on the work of Monet and Bonnard, whose impressionistic approaches to colour and composition resonate in the more recent abstract works in the collection. The chronological route through the Scharf Collection's eleven exhibition rooms becomes a journey through a range of artistic approaches – and a reminder that artistic renewal rarely emerges from a complete break with the past, but rather builds upon it.

The exhibition at Kunstpalast was organised in cooperation with the Alte Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

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