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Werner Spies rehabilitated with Max Ernst show in Vienna

German art historian wrongly attributed master forgeries to Ernst in 2010

By Julia Michalska
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Werner Spies, the prominent German art historian, has organised his first major show since his spectacular fall from grace in 2010. Spies's involvement in the Beltracchi forgery scandal - he falsely authenticated seven Max Ernst paintings by the master forger Wolfgang Beltracchi - led to his resignation from the Max Ernst Museum in Brühl and a civil lawsuit. To mark his 75th birthday, the Albertina in Vienna invited Spies to be the guest curator of "Max Ernst: a Retrospective" (until 5 May). It is due to travel to Basel's Fondation Beyeler in May. "The huge shadow of the Beltracchi affair shouldn't detract from [Spies's] achievements," says Klaus Albrecht Schröder, the Albertina's director.



"On occasion of his birthday, I wanted to honour Spies as one of the most influential art historians of the 20th century." The exhibition features around 170 paintings, drawings, collages, sculptures and books by the Surrealist artist, the majority of which are on loan from private collections. Spies is an "unmatched door-opener", Schröder says. "[The exhibition] would have been impossible without Spies's close relationship to the lenders." In fact, one of the biggest lenders of the show bought one of the fake Ernst paintings that Spies believed to have been real. Schröder says: "It shows that the wrong attribution of works didn't harm [Spies] in the eyes of these collectors." One precaution the museum did take, however, was to only show works included in the first volume of Spies's Max Ernst catalogue raisonné, which was published in 1975 when the artist was still alive. "We are staging a retrospective of Ernst, not of Beltracchi," Schröder says.

Spies was the director of the Pompidou Centre in Paris from 1997 to 2000. A close friend of Ernst and Picasso, he compiled the first catalogue raisonné of Picasso's sculptures in 1971 and organised the first ever Max Ernst retrospective at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1975.



Max Ernst, La puberté proche... (les pléiades), 1921