

THE ART NEWSPAPER

What's on; Max Ernst

Werner Spies's reputation as the world's leading Max Ernst scholar took a knock two years ago: the art historian and former director of the Centre Pompidou, Paris, became embroiled in a forgery scandal that saw him duped into authenticating seven fake Ernst paintings made by the notorious forger Wolfgang Beltracchi, and receiving commissions on some sales.

He subsequently resigned from his position at the Max Ernst Museum in Brühl. Now he is the guest curator of a major Ernst retrospective organised by Vienna's Albertina and the Fondation Beyeler, Basel, that is set to re-establish his role at the forefront of Ernst scholarship.

"When I first met Max Ernst [1891-1976], it quickly became clear to me that very little of his immense body of work was known," Spies says. "The same works kept coming up in exhibitions and publications, so, along with Dominique and Jean de Menil, I decided to start working on a catalogue raisonné with my great partners Sigrid and Günter Metken.



Max Ernst's *The Fireside Angel or The Triumph of Surrealism*, 1937

At first, Max didn't want to have anything to do with it. Retrospection hardly interested him. But then he not only agreed but also helped uncover countless works that had disappeared into private collections.

In this way, we were able to gather over 6000 works in the past few decades." Spies is still one of the only people to know the whereabouts of many works by Ernst.

"He has to be involved," says the Beyeler's Raphaël Bouvier, a co-curator of the show. "A lot of key Ernst works are still in private collections [around 70% of the works in the exhibition] and he knows where most of them are." Spies says: "Contrary to the general trend of the time, many collectors discovered very early on that Max Ernst was one of the key figures of his century.

And unlike many other collectors, the collectors of Max Ernst remained faithful to him." To avoid possible pitfalls of authenticity, however, the show, which opened in Vienna and is travelling to Basel this month, only includes works from the seven published volumes of the catalogue raisonné.

The eighth is currently in production. Constant renewal The exhibition is vast. Around 180 paintings, collages, sculptures, books and documents chronicle Ernst's diverse body of work.

The focus of the show is on the 1920s and 1930s when his work was "most original and dynamic", Bouvier says.



But pieces range from his early collages as a member of the Cologne Dadaists to his cosmic visions in post-war France.

Spies says: “The overall picture [displayed in the exhibition] shows the ingenuity of Ernst, and his enormous wish, reminiscent of Picasso, constantly to question and renew himself.” Ernst experimented with and invented new techniques, such as frottage, grattage and decalcomania, often using found objects.

(According to a Vanity Fair article, Beltracchi had a “Max Ernst box” filled with wood, seashells, sponges, ropes and other materials that he used to copy the artist’s process.

One Beltracchi forgery titled The Forest was sold to the French publisher Daniel Filipacchi for \$7m.) The section devoted to Ernst’s forest series is a highlight.

The paintings were popular right away, Bouvier says, “but Ernst didn’t rest on his success. He worked on the forest motif for one or two years but then, typically for him, moved on to something different.” Spies’s devotion to Ernst’s work—and deep friendship with the artist—speaks volumes about Beltracchi’s skill.

“I was deceived by a brilliant forger, but not just me: also the family of the artist, museum directors and collectors.

The problem of counterfeiting has become a huge, almost insoluble problem. What should frighten us all are claims that Beltracchi painted countless other works by many other artists, and introduced them into the market.

Where are they? Will we ever discover them?” Julia Michalska Categories: Post-War (1945-70) Modern (1900-1945)