

# MINICARS

The Invention of the 20th Century  
Carl Einstein and the Avant-garde

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## Carl Einstein and the Avant-garde

Carl Einstein is probably the least classical of 20th-century art historians. Although he studied several semesters of art history at the university in Berlin, he became a novelist, poet, dramatist, essayist and translator as well as an art and literary critic. He also edited anthologies and revues, worked occasionally in the art market and even wrote a film script. As author of the experimental novel *Bebuquin oder die Dilettanten des Wunders* (Bebuquin or the Dilettantes of Wonders) published in 1912, his place in the history of European literature is assured. It is, however, in the field of art history that Einstein rates among the most interesting innovators. In the last two decades his challenging and promising books and articles have been re-discovered and in Germany, France, the United States –and recently Spain– scholars and publishers have started to pay attention to his work. Like Walter Benjamin, Aby Warburg and Georges Bataille, Carl Einstein is now in a position to play a leading role as one of the main intellectual figures of historical and theoretical art discourse. The show organized at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía will make him the protagonist of an international exhibition for the first time and place him in the focus of today's art history debate.

Among Einstein's broad range of critical and theoretical art essays, are the following publications,

his most famous writings on art: his study *Negerplastik* (Negro Sculpture), first published in 1915 followed by *Afrikanische Plastik* (African Sculpture) in 1921, his Surrealist-anthropological revue *Documents* (1929-1930) and a monograph on his close friend Georges Braque, which appeared in 1934 and must be regarded as a masterly summary of Cubist aesthetics. But most important was his *Die Kunst des XX. Jahrhunderts* (Art of the 20th Century), first published in 1926 (with revised editions in 1928 and 1931) in the world-famous series *Propyläen-Kunstgeschichte*. Its success made Einstein one of the main avant-garde historians, fulfilling the words of Guillaume Apollinaire who had called him "un des esprits les plus clairvoyants". Politically radicalized by his experiences in the trenches and hospitals of the First World War, Einstein became a Communist activist in the soldier soviets in Brussels and Berlin and, in 1936, gave up his literary career to fight at the side of the famous anarchist Buenaventura Durruti in the Spanish Civil War. In July 1940, trapped by the German army, he felt compelled, like so many left-wing intellectuals, to commit suicide.

It is the aim of the exhibition to give a convincing visual overview of the intellectual work of Carl Einstein. Concentrating on the works of the most important artists of the 20th century whom Einstein knew, worked with and/or wrote about and using documentary material related only to his intellectual life, the show re-creates a retrospective of the art history of the century as it was seen by this central figure in the art world. The exhibition consists of sections on African Art, Dada and Verism, Cubism, Surrealism and on the role of art in the Spanish Civil War.

With his *Die Kunst des XX. Jahrhunderts* –which Einstein started researching in spring 1922– the author developed a synthetic literary form that allowed a whole representation of art history to evolve from his critical pieces. Rather than a retelling of historical facts or a series of individual



**Pablo Picasso.** *Man with Clarinet*, 1911-12  
Oil on canvas. 106 x 89 cm  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

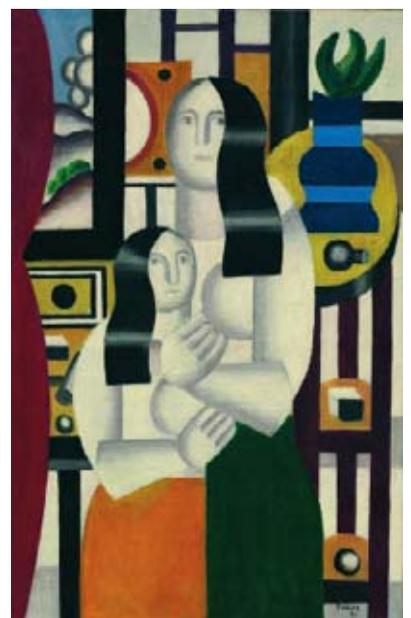
analyses of works, the compendium might be described as a historical model (assembled from the point of view of art theory) mapping art's journey from its formal autonomy around 1900 by way of Cubism's revolutionary concept of space to the new myths of Surrealism. The fact that his way of looking at modernity breaches the narrow confines of its aesthetics and also includes that radical change in the image of the world and humanity demanded by art in the first decades of the 20th century is particularly crucial to a comprehensive understanding of Carl Einstein as an art historian. The transforming power the writer attributes to visual expression is revealed not least in the fact that his understanding of art made the idea of a "reciprocal adaptation of picture and world" completely possible. If, on its first appearance in 1926, *Die Kunst des XX. Jahrhunderts* represented a programmatic summary of the Cubist way of looking at the world, the third edition of the book (published in 1931) had evolved into an evocation of a visionary and hallucinatory art, into a manifesto for a new –surrealistic– design of the world. Basically the following applies to every important artistic act: "By looking, we change people and the world".

The first section of the exhibition brings together for the first time almost 40 original African works (from internationally renowned private and public collections) which were reproduced in Einstein's famous *Negerplastik* of 1915. The avant-garde sections display important works by artists like George Grosz, Rudolf Schlichter, Max Beckmann and Otto Dix, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Juan Gris and Fernand Léger, André Masson, Joan Miró, Gaston-Louis Roux, Salvador Dalí, Hans Arp and Paul Klee.



**Unknown Fang artist.**  
*Reliquary Head*. Wood, 63 cm  
Musée Dapper, Paris (2664)

**Fernand Léger.** *Two Women*, 1922  
Oil on canvas. 90.8 x 58.3 cm  
National Gallery of Art, Washington





**Paul Klee.** *Narr in Trance*, 1929  
Oil on canvas. 50.5 x 35.5 cm  
Museum Ludwig, Cologne

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Centro de Arte Reina Sofía**

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**Opening Times**

Mondays to Saturdays: 10.00 - 21.00

Sundays: 10.00 - 14.30

Closed Tuesdays

The exhibition rooms will  
be vacated 15 minutes before  
the museum closes

**Illustrations**

© Sucesión Pablo Picasso,  
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© Fernand Léger, VEGAP, Madrid, 2008

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