

Camille Graeser

Becoming a Concrete Artist

MEDIA ORIENTATION
29.10.2019, 11 am

OPENING
30.10.2019, 6 pm

31.10.2019 – 12.1.2020

curated by Vera Hausdorff, conservator of the Camille Graeser Foundation

Museum Haus Konstruktiv presents a comprehensive exhibition on Swiss artist Camille Graeser (1892–1980) who, along with Max Bill, Richard Paul Lohse and Verena Loewensberg, was part of the innermost circle of Zurich Concretists. The exhibition focuses on the 1930s to 1950s and is supplemented by a selection of representative works from his most important periods. The exhibition makes it possible to take a new look at Graeser's early work and to gain a deeper understanding of his career as an artist.

This solo show, which spans two floors, looks at the question of how Camille Graeser, a furniture designer who ran his own studio in Stuttgart and took part in major exhibitions by the association Werkbund before having to return to Switzerland in 1933 as a result of the Nazis coming to power, subsequently came to be one of the main representatives of concrete art in Zurich. For this purpose, several of his interior designs and furnishings from the 1920s and 1930s are juxtaposed with his paintings, reliefs and sculptures from the late 1930s, and the manner in which Graeser developed his constructivist-concrete language of forms within the milieu of the Swiss artists' association Allianz in the 1940s and 1950s is demonstrated.

Not only are the decisive steps in his progress as a painter shown, but also pieces by artists who influenced his work. Many of the exhibited pieces by Camille Graeser come from his estate; these are complemented by loaned works from Switzerland and abroad.

Camille Graeser, born in 1892 in Carouge near Geneva, grew up in Stuttgart, where all his school education and vocational training (carpentry apprenticeship and furniture design class) took place. In 1917, he managed to run his own studio as a successful furniture designer. His interior fittings and pieces of furniture, indebted to modernism, were presented in many exhibitions by the association Deutscher Werkbund, as well as in a model apartment in 1927, situated in Stuttgart's Weissenhof Estate designed by Mies van der Rohe. In 1933, Graeser left his place of work in Stuttgart because of the Nazis and went to Zurich, where he sought to advance his career as a furniture designer. He made contact with major furniture manufacturers and design-oriented intellectuals, e.g. architectural historian Sigfried Gideon, architect Alfred Roth and the furniture store wohnbedarf in Zurich. However, due to the economic depression, his efforts to gain a

foothold in Zurich as a furniture designer were not very successful, so he began to devote himself to painting in 1933/1934. At the end of 1937, he became a member of the artists' association Allianz. He very quickly established himself in the milieu of the movement later known as the Zurich Concretists and was present at key Allianz exhibitions in Zurich, Basel, St. Gallen and Bern. Together with Max Bill, Richard Paul Lohse and Verena Loewensberg, he first gained international recognition in 1949 and 1950 via exhibitions in Germany, Italy and the USA.

The exhibition at Museum Haus Konstruktiv is divided into seven thematic sections, in which links to European art history are demonstrated on the basis of selected works by Graeser, his role models and his companions. The exhibition begins in the two cabinets on the fourth floor. Graeser's connection with avant-garde pioneer Adolf Hölzel, for example, who gave Graeser private lessons in 1919 and whose theories on color and composition influenced not only his early work but also his later paintings, is thematized here. Another theme is Graeser's relationship with the figurative. In the 1920s and 1930s, his purist drawings, furniture designs, wall designs and facade designs had figurative qualities, suggesting that Willi Baumeister's murals and Oskar Schlemmer's figurines were influences. Figures that thematized the new gender relations between man and woman to no small extent in his wall and facade designs often functioned as vectors that indicated spatial orientation and thus mediated between architecture and artistic design.

The transition to a constructivist-concrete language of forms in the early 1940s can be retraced in the first room on the fifth floor, which is devoted to the first residential Zurich studio shared by Camille Graeser and Emmy Graeser-Rauch, at Stadelhoferstrasse 33, where the pair moved in at the end of 1936. The earliest Zurich paintings, still reminiscent of surrealism, along with drawings, reliefs and sculptures that Camille Graeser realized in this residential studio, are exhibited here, as well as a sideboard from the self-designed furnishings. Emmy photographed Camille's works, kept a catalogue of them from the start of the 1940s onward and, with his encouragement, began to engage in artistic activity herself: In 1938, she produced small gouaches highly reminiscent of El Lissitzky and Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, with a language of forms that was almost more radical than her husband's first concrete paintings. However, she did not launch a career of her own as an artist.

At the invitation of Leo Leuppi, Graeser became a member of Allianz at the turn of 1937/1938 and was involved in all exhibitions from then until 1954. This membership helped him to achieve his breakthrough as an artist, much like other Allianz members. When joining this artists' association, he contributed works of a surrealist and purist-organic nature. It was not until 1943 that Graeser began to act as a representative of a constructivist-concrete language of forms in Allianz exhibitions. Allianz artists who were either Graeser's role models (Sophie Taeuber-Arp) or friends (Lili Erzinger, Diogo Graf, Leo Leuppi and Hansegger), or whose artistic language of forms developed in similar ways at times (Maria Clara Friedrich, Robert Gessner and Heinrich Eichmann) each have one work exhibited here as well.

It was also not until the 1940s that the constructivist-concrete language of forms began to clearly take shape in the work of various other Allianz members, who would later become known as Zurich Concretists. During this phase, mathematical principles such as progression and degression played a key role for Bill, Lohse and Loewensberg, as well as for Vordemberge-Gildewart, who was not an Allianz member but did influence Graeser.

Like the other Zurich Concretists, Camille Graeser was also influenced by Russian constructivism (Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin and El Lissitzky) and the De Stijl movement surrounding Theo van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian. In the mid-1940s, he incorporated elementarism, in the form of mathematical formal elements such as the square, rectangle, circle and rhombus, which would play a major role in his works until 1954, and he combined them with bars or T-shapes that were either colored or black. In 1944, in order to achieve a systematic language of forms, he started using numerical systems in an

attempt to define Piet Mondrian's art more precisely and thus to exclude any intuitive factor. Eight Graeser works in which he combined square or rectangular fields in primary colors with orthogonal black bar elements can be seen at Haus Konstruktiv. Supplementing these, works by Bill, Lohse, Loewensberg, Fritz Glarner and Adolf Fleischmann also clearly demonstrate a De Stijl influence.

In the large columned hall on the fourth floor, juxtaposition enables visitors to once again compare Graeser's most important periods of work in the approximately 20 series that he developed over the course of his career as an artist. The large-format stripe relationships from the 1960s and the late dislocations from the 1970s are juxtaposed with individual early works in the museum's largest room.

This exhibition will also be shown at: Vasarely Museum, Budapest (3/4–5/31/2020); Musée des beaux arts, La Chaux-de-Fonds (10/31/2020–1/5/2021); Espace de l'Art Concret, Mouans-Sartoux.

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