

The Kunstmuseum Basel: buildings and collections

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The holdings of the cabinet passed through several buildings before they found a permanent home. In the nineteenth century they were shown in a museum building on the Augustinergasse designed by Melchior Berri, which also housed the natural history collections and the university library.¹ The art collection moved in 1936 to the building on the St. Alban-Graben designed by Rudolf Christ and Paul Bonatz, whose monumental arcaded courtyard has since become one of the recognisable images of the city.²

Two further buildings followed. The Museum für Gegenwartskunst, opened in 1980 on the St. Alban-Rheinweg, was the first museum in Europe devoted exclusively to contemporary art, according to its own description, and owed its existence largely to the Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation and to a gift by Maja Sacher.³ In April 2016 the Kunstmuseum opened its extension across the street from the main building, designed by the Basel architects Christ & Gantenbein and connected to the old building by an underground passage. The extension was financed in large part by a private donation from Maja Oeri, a granddaughter of Maja Sacher, together with a contribution from the canton.⁴ The three houses now operate under a single institution.

The collection rests on two pillars. The first is the art of the Upper Rhine and of the Netherlands from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with the largest group of works by Holbein in the world, works by Konrad Witz and the drawings and prints of the Kupferstichkabinett, many of which go back to the Amerbach Cabinet.⁵ The second is modern and contemporary art from the nineteenth century to the present, which the museum acquired largely through gifts, deposits and bequests of private collectors. The 1939 purchases of works that the National Socialist regime had removed from German museums strengthened this second pillar, although Part H has shown that their history remains ambivalent.⁶

Several private collections have shaped the modern holdings. The Rudolf Staechelin Family Foundation lent the museum a group of Impressionist and post-Impressionist paintings for decades. The Im Obersteg collection and the gifts of Raoul La Roche, a Basel banker and friend of Le Corbusier, brought major works of Cubism and Purism to the museum.⁷ In 2015 the Staechelin family sold Gauguin's *Nafea Faa Ipoipo* from the loaned group, at a price reported to be among the highest ever paid for a painting. The withdrawal of further works by the foundation showed how much the museum depended on private holdings that it did not own.⁸

1 Notes

1. On the Museum an der Augustinergasse by Melchior Berri, opened in 1849, which housed the art collection until 1936 and today houses the Naturhistorisches Museum and the Museum der Kulturen, see the publications of the canton of Basel-Stadt. To be verified. ↩
2. On the main building of the Kunstmuseum Basel on the St. Alban-Graben (architects Rudolf Christ and Paul Bonatz, opened 1936), see the publications of the Kunstmuseum Basel. To be verified. ↩
3. On the Museum für Gegenwartskunst (today Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart), opened in 1980 with the support of the Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation and Maja Sacher-Stehlin, see the publications of the Kunstmuseum Basel. Status to be verified. ↩
4. On the Neubau of the Kunstmuseum Basel by Christ & Gantenbein, opened on 17 April 2016, and its financing by a donation of Maja Oeri and a cantonal contribution, with total costs of about CHF 100 million, see the publications of the canton of Basel-Stadt and the Kunstmuseum Basel. Figures to be verified. ↩
5. On the holdings of old masters, the Holbein collection and the Kupferstichkabinett of the Kunstmuseum Basel, see the collection catalogues of the museum. To be verified. ↩
6. On the purchases of 1939 under director Georg Schmidt, see Part H, Chapter V. To be verified. ↩
7. On the gifts of Raoul La Roche (1883–1965) to the Kunstmuseum Basel in 1952 and 1963, including works by Picasso, Braque, Gris, Léger and Le Corbusier, and on the long-term loans of the Rudolf Staechelin Family Foundation, see the publications of the Kunstmuseum Basel. Dates to be verified. ↩

8. On the sale of Paul Gauguin's Nafea Faa Ipoipo (1892) by the Rudolf Staechelin Family Foundation in 2015, reportedly for about USD 210 million to a buyer in Qatar, and the withdrawal of the Staechelin loans from the Kunstmuseum Basel, see contemporary press reports. Figures to be verified. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/basel-the-kunstmuseum-basel-buildings-and-collections