



PRESS RELEASE

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A fair and just solution agreed for a Kirchner painting from the Wallerstein Collection in the Brücke-Museum

The Berlin Senate Department for Culture and Social Cohesion (SenKultGZ), headed by **Senator for Culture Joe Chialo** and **State Secretary Sarah Wedl-Wilson**, and **Anne Webber, Co-Chair, Commission for Looted Art in Europe, representing the heirs of Dr Victor Wallerstein**, jointly announce that a fair and just solution has been reached following the restitution claim for the painting *Erich Heckel and Otto Mueller Playing Chess* (1913). The important painting will remain in the Brücke-Museum in Berlin and will be presented from September as part of the exhibition *Biographies of Modern Art. Collectors and Their Works*. Its retention is made possible by funding from the Senate Department for Culture and Social Cohesion, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, the Cultural Foundation of the Federal States, and the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation.

Joe Chialo, Senator for Culture and Social Cohesion: ‘Coming to terms with Nazi art theft and dealing with the fates of the predominantly Jewish victims are tasks of immense importance for society as a whole. Since 2010, the SenKultGZ has been funding projects to systematically research the provenance of individual objects and collections in Berlin’s cultural institutions. In this way, the State of Berlin is fulfilling its historical responsibility to identify, document, and return Nazi-looted property to its rightful owners on the basis of the 1998 Washington Principles. We are and will remain committed to fulfilling this task for the people and their families who were robbed of their property and rights, persecuted, and murdered by the National Socialists.’

Claudia Roth, Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media: ‘It is very pleasing for Berlin and for the whole of Germany that this important painting by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner will be able to remain in the Brücke Museum and be accessible to the public in perpetuity. I would like to express my sincere thanks to the heirs for this. The Federal Government was very pleased to support the purchase of the painting. I am also delighted that visitors to the museum will now be able to learn more about the life, work, and fate of Victor Wallerstein, one of the pioneers of modernism.’

Anne Webber, Co-Chair, Commission for Looted Art in Europe: ‘For the heirs, the fair and just solution of this restitution claim represents an acknowledgement of the pain, terror, and tragedy to which the innocent Wallerstein family was subjected. It is also a recognition of the cultural contribution that Victor Wallerstein and his siblings made to the arts and society in Germany which was the very essence of who they were. The heirs are glad to enable this painting, subject to forced sale in such terrible circumstances, to remain in the Brücke-Museum, and pleased that the forthcoming exhibition *Biographies of Modern Art. Collectors and Their Works* will pay tribute to Dr Victor Wallerstein as one of the leading patrons of German Expressionism.’

The Jewish art historian Dr Victor Wallerstein (Prague 1878 – 1944 Florence) was an important art connoisseur, dealer, collector, and patron of modern artists. In 1919 Dr Wallerstein founded Galerie Goldschmidt – Wallerstein in Berlin together with Dr Fritz Goldschmidt. In the Galerie’s department for modern art, they exhibited the *Brücke* artists, among others. In addition to his work as an art dealer and gallerist, Dr Wallerstein built a private collection that included works by Oskar Kokoschka and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and maintained personal contacts and friendships with many artists in his collection.

Due to the Nazi dictatorship, the gallery was forced to close in the summer of 1934 and was liquidated in June 1936. Wallerstein himself was forced by Nazi persecution to leave Berlin, the centre of his life. In 1936, he sought refuge in Italy and took a small part of his private collection with him, including the painting *Erich Heckel and Otto Mueller Playing Chess*. In Florence, where he was exposed to further persecution under Italian racial laws, he had no possibility of making a living. As a result, of both German and Italian repression, Dr Wallerstein was forced to sell works of art, including the Kirchner painting, which he sold around 1940. Dr Victor Wallerstein died in a hospital in Florence in July 1944, following arrest by the SS. In 1973, the painting *Erich Heckel and Otto Mueller Playing Chess* passed from the art trade to the Brücke-Museum.

In recognition of the persecution Dr Wallerstein by the Nazi regime and the forced sale of the Kirchner painting in 1940, the parties involved agreed in accordance with the Washington Principles of December 1998 that the painting will remain in the Brücke-Museum in return for a compensation payment to the community of heirs. The parties have agreed not to disclose the amount of compensation.



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel und Otto Mueller beim Schach (Erich Heckel and Otto Mueller Playing Chess, 1913, oil on canvas, Brücke-Museum, photo: Nick Ash

In honour of the memory of the previous owner Dr. Victor Wallerstein (1878-1944), art historian, gallerist and collector

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's painting is one of the highlights of his creative period in Berlin. Created shortly before the dissolution of the artist group *Die Brücke* in 1913, it shows an intimate studio scene that presumably took place in his home studio in Durlacherstrasse: It depicts his artist friends and *Brücke* colleagues Erich Heckel and Otto Mueller playing chess, with Kirchner's partner Erna Schilling lying naked on a sofa in the background. Stylistically, the work is a typical example of Kirchner's Berlin years; a distortion of perspective and the juxtaposition of ascending and descending lines create a special, charged atmosphere. But it is not only stylistically that the work plays an important role in the artist's oeuvre. It is the last painterly document of the *Brücke* community before its dissolution. In this sense, the painting is of particular importance in the collection of the Brücke-Museum.

Prof. Dr Markus Hilgert, General Secretary of the Cultural Foundation of the Federal States: 'I am delighted that Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's painting *Erich Heckel and Otto Mueller Playing Chess*, which is of national cultural importance, can remain in Berlin. The Brücke-Museum is the ideal place to show the work in its art historical, regional and, above all, provenance-historical context. I am particularly pleased that the role of the collector Victor Wallerstein, exemplary for many Jewish biographies, is now being honoured by the museum.'

Dr Martin Hoernes, Secretary General of the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation: ‘A private art foundation has matched the contributions of the federal and state governments to a fair and just solution that has enabled a work of art sold as a result of persecution to remain in the Brücke-Museum. The great importance of Kirchner’s painting *Erich Heckel and Otto Mueller Playing Chess* for the outstanding collection of the Brücke-Museum and for Berlin as a city of art – as well as for the shared responsibility for coming to terms with the unspeakable barbarity of Nazi Germany – motivated us to become involved.’

Lisa Marei Schmidt, Director, Brücke-Museum: ‘For me, a transparent and responsible approach to researching the provenance of works in our collection is one of the most urgent tasks of museum work. The injustice of Nazi persecution and the suffering it caused is a great obligation for us. I am therefore all the more pleased that a fair and just solution has been found with regard to Kirchner’s painting *Erich Heckel and Otto Mueller Playing Chess*. The fact that this wonderful work, which is a highlight of Kirchner’s Berlin oeuvre, may remain in the Brücke-Museum is particularly valuable. At the same time, it is important to me to preserve the memory of its former owner, Dr Victor Wallenstein.’

Since 2018, the Brücke-Museum has been intensively researching the provenance of work in its collection. The upcoming exhibition *Biographies of Modern Art. Collectors and Their Works* from 1 September to 24 November 2024 will provide insights into provenance research at the museum. The focus of the presentation is not on the history of the works of art themselves, but rather on the biographies of nine former owners: visionary Jewish personalities who were instrumental in supporting and promoting modern art in Germany. Dr Victor Wallenstein will be remembered and honoured as one of the central figures – and the painting *Erich Heckel and Otto Mueller Playing Chess* will be prominently featured. The provenance was researched at the Brücke-Museum with the support of the German Lost Art Foundation and the Senate Department for Culture and Social Cohesion.

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