

## A cosmopolitan, forced into exile

He shaped the profile of the *Kunstbibliothek* (Art Library) in the 1920s; under Nazism, he had to flee into exile. Remembrances of Curt Glaser, mover and shaper of the Berlin museums, to whom a commemorative plaque will now be dedicated.

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Head portrait of art historian Curt Glaser. Photo: ullstein bild

"The ideal of historiography is a timeless justice." So wrote Curt Glaser in his work on [Lucas Cranach](#), which was published in 1921. He could not have imagined at that time, just how much this sentence would also apply personally to himself. The name of the prominent art historian, museum man, art critic and collector would lose its place in the history of art and be almost completely forgotten following the Nazi seizure of power. The Berlin *Staatliche Museen* (State Museums) are today again remembering Curt Glaser with deep respect, as one of their most important directors and scientists. On Monday a commemorative plaque to him will be unveiled.

Born on May 29, 1879 in Leipzig, Curt Glaser studied medicine and in 1902, took up the study of art history in Berlin. At this time, he also began to write reviews and reports on the Berlin art scene for daily newspapers and magazines – an activity that he would continue over 30 years, with texts appearing almost weekly, in which he advocated a cosmopolitan, modern attitude. On his 50th birthday, [his mentor Karl Scheffler](#) wrote: "One hardly needs to say to readers of the *Berliner Börsen-Courier* what Curt Glaser means to our artistic life." By then, the honoree was already one of the most distinguished art historians and journalists of the Weimar Republic.

He began his museum career in 1909 as a "research assistant" at the *Kupferstichkabinett* (Museum of Prints and Drawings). There, he supervised the "New Department," that is, the collection of modern and contemporary art, which he enlarged with acquisitions. His knowledge and interests stood him in good stead in this work: He earned his doctorate on Hans Holbein the Elder, and at the same time he cultivated his acquaintances and friendships with contemporary artists such as Max Beckmann, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Max Pechstein. A trip of several months duration to Japan and probably also to China, resulted in an intensive engagement with the art and culture of East Asia. Glaser's most important scientific publications originated during his period at the *Kupferstichkabinett*. His best-known work, *The Graphic Art of Modern Times*, published in 1922 by Verlag Bruno Cassirer, went to 10,000 copies in the second edition and became a standard work.

### **Glaser essentially shaped the profile of the *Kunstbibliothek***

In 1924, Glaser became Director of the *Staatliche Kunstbibliothek* (State Art Library). In the years that followed, he developed it from a collection of references on the decorative arts into an art history research library. He broadened its exhibition program and acquisition profile in the direction of contemporary advertising, typography and photography. He also founded the German picture archive there, which was to serve as a central repository for images of great German works of art and initially grew rapidly, but did not survive after Glaser's departure and the Second World War.

Glaser also introduced a series of lectures, which addressed current issues: Issues of architectural and urban development for the big city, art education or "problems of modern painting."

The prominent topics and speakers made the *Kunstabibliothek* into a central address for the Berlin art scene. Not everyone welcomed these developments, as could be read in the *Deutsche KulturWacht* (*German Cultural Watch*), the organ for the Nazi Reich's *Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur* (Combat League for German Culture), after Glaser was removed from his position in 1933: "Now it is necessary to exorcise the spirit of disorder, which has moved into the library." In retrospect, we can say that today's profile of the *Kunstabibliothek* as a special scientific library in many ways dates back to the themes set by Glaser.

Together with his wife Elsa, Glaser also built up an important private collection. The art-loving couple, who enjoyed traveling, ran an open house where artists, scientists, and museum colleagues were gladly welcomed guests. "Those who are fortunate enough to take part in the 'Monday receptions' at the home of Professor Curt Glaser, Director of the *Staatliche Kunstabibliothek*, will take the feeling back home with them, that they had enjoyed sociability in the best sense," wrote the *Berliner Tageblatt* in 1929.

### **Under Nazism, he fled into exile**

A special friendship linked the pair with [Edvard Munch](#), who painted portraits of Elsa alone as well as of the couple, and of whose works the Glasers had the most extensive collection in Berlin. How deeply Curt Glaser suffered under Elsa's illness and death in 1932, can be traced in his letters to Munch.

After the National Socialists came to power, in the spring of 1933, Glaser was placed on leave from the office of the Director of the *Kunstabibliothek* – because of his Jewish ancestry and certainly because of his approach. He was thus one of the first victims of the Nazi purges, which would also strike Max J. Friedlander, the Director of the *Gemäldegalerie* (Painting Gallery), and Wilhelm Waetzoldt, the Director General of the *Staatliche Museen*, as well as other staff members.

Glaser had to vacate his apartment. Privately, he unexpectedly found new happiness with Maria Milch, whom he married in May 1933. Even before he was forced to retire in September, Curt Glaser had large parts of his collection and home furnishings as well as his art library auctioned off in two auctions at Max Perle; in June, the couple went into exile.

In recent years, some works from his collection have appeared in the *Staatliche Museen*. With Glaser's heirs, we come to a fair and equitable solution for this matter, in the sense of the Washington Agreement, in 2012 and again in 2016: One portion of the works were restituted, a compensatory damage payment was made for others, and all the rest remain with the *Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz* (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation), not least in memory of Curt Glaser.

### **A commemorative plaque will now honor him**

This remembrance is a matter of central concern for the Foundation. It must not be, that a man who contributed so much to the museums, is only honored in specialized publications. It would be tantamount to a late-in-the-day triumph for the Nazis, virtually the success of their attempt to annihilate people and attitudes. With this commemorative plaque, we want to honor not only Curt Glaser's professional achievements, but also remember that here a career was precipitously interrupted. Even though he attempted to establish himself again as an art historian abroad – he could never follow up upon his success in Berlin.

His emigration led first through France to Switzerland. In 1938, Glaser wrote from Ascona to Munch on his 75th birthday: "Do you still remember, when we were with you, just before the great war broke out? At that time, we had no idea how it would overturn the world and deprive people of the freedom that we had become accustomed to consider our self-evident and inalienable right – and now?" Via Italy and Cuba, the Glasers eventually emigrated to the U.S.A. in 1941. Curt Glaser published an essay on Fra Angelico and completed a manuscript on the history of the Renaissance in Florence, but his career was effectively over. He died in 1943 at the age of 64 after a long illness in Lake Placid, New York.

The author is President of the *Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz*. Commemorative plaque unveiling: May 9, 10:30 a.m. in the foyer of the Cultural Forum of the *Kunstabibliothek*.