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irene and peter ludwig focusing on contempo- raneity

The German couple Irene and Peter Ludwig's collection today comprises thousands of objects, ranging over the widest of chronological and geographic spectra. It includes European (ancient Greek, medieval and new), African, Chinese, and Indian art, and even art from pre-Columbus America. Here there is fine art and decorative art: porcelain, faience, ceramics and furniture are all represented. But the collection undoubtedly owes its global renown to its unique holdings in twentieth-century art, which date back to the 1960s, when the main direction for the Ludwigs' acquisition activity was decided upon. Their interest was concentrated on modern and contemporary art.

Peter Ludwig, whose thesis of 1950 was devoted to *The Image of Man in the Works of Pablo Picasso as the Expression of a Generation's World View*, argued that the art of any period was above all an expression of the age: "When I began my studies in 1945, Picasso was not yet the admired Olympian of the first half of the century, but widely discussed. My thesis tried to show the intellectual legitimacy in his art; to see him as not as an individual creating an art which is not understood by society but to show him as an artist who, bound by his time and his generation, gave expression to this thinking and feeling of this time and this generation. Every art, that of the so-called primitive people as well as that of high cultures, expresses the time and generation, which created it, is an expression of a people, from which it has grown."¹

Works by contemporaries of Irene and Peter Ludwig gradually became the main focus of their acquisitions. They began to acquire works by still unknown artists, which they then placed in their museums, with considerable daring, alongside works by the old masters, thus radicalising the traditional museum space. In the 1960s, the Ludwigs became particularly interested by American Pop Art, which positively screamed modernity, was not yet recognised by critics, and had caused much controversy. "Art in those years burst over us like a storm",² admitted Peter Ludwig. He personally associated with Pop Artists and bought up their work, and as a result was one of the first to reveal Pop Art to Europe. In 1968, he organised an extraordinarily successful exhibition of Pop Art in Cologne,³ and in 1976 the Ludwig Museum was founded in the same city with a donation of over 300 works by Pop Artists, as well as work by even younger artists. This event heralded the arrival of Pop Art not only in Cologne, but in all of Europe, and noticeably radicalised the European art scene, introducing the public to the work of artists including Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann, Robert Indiana, James Rosenquist, Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein, Jasper Johns and others. Apart from the Ludwigs' rich collection of Pop Art, their collection of works by Pablo Picasso from 1904 to 1972 and Russian avant-garde artists from 1910 to 1930, and contemporary works from Eastern Europe and the former GDR and the USSR also enjoy international prestige.⁴

The international system of the Ludwig Museums is an enormous project which took shape in the mid-1950s and continues to be a success. Today, works donated or loaned on a long-term basis by Peter and Irene Ludwig are displayed in more than twenty of the world's public museums. Twelve museums, including that in St Petersburg, bear the title of Ludwig Museum, that is a museum which either has received a generous support from the Ludwigs in the form of donations and long-term loans, or was itself founded by the couple. Seven museums are devoted to modern art, and are located in Cologne, Aachen, Koblenz, Vienna, Budapest, Beijing and St Petersburg (Ludwig Museum in the Russian Museum). The Ludwig Museum in Cologne, the

¹ Interview between Peter Ludwig and Wolfgang Becker in *Neue Galerie der Stadt Aachen, Der Bestand, 1972: Kunst um 1970*. Catalogue. Germany, 1972, p. 21.

² V. Fiedler. *Derzhat' v napryazhenii. Peter Ludvig, metsenat in Guten Tag*, 1989. No. 7, p. 28.

³ See: K. Ruhrberg. *Twentieth Century Art. Painting and Sculpture in the Ludwig Museum*. Cologne, 1986, p. 46.

⁴ See: <http://www.ludwigstiftung.de>



Exhibition of the Ludwig Museum in the Russian Museum. 2009



Ludwig Forum in Aachen, and the small Ludwig Museum in Koblenz are independent institutions founded by the Ludwigs. The remaining museums are so-called “museums within museums” which make up for deficiencies in the collections of the parent museum. The Ludwigs have donated works of art to museums whose collections are lacking in the respective area. Thus they have filled some of the gaps which inevitably exist, for whatever reason, in the collection of any museum.⁵ Understandably, most of these are museums of modern art: contemporary art is the hardest to evaluate, and is therefore under-represented in museums.

Irene and Peter Ludwig’s museums are interesting not only for the value and uniqueness of their collections, but also for their concept of representation,⁶ which today is highly topical. The

very concept of the museum of modern art has a relatively short history, dating back less than a century. Of course, the first public European, American and Russian museums of the late 18th and early 19th century displayed works by contemporary artists which had somehow found their way into the collection, as well as the art of the past. Thus, for example, the first works acquired by the Hermitage Picture Gallery included 18th-century works, and the 19th century saw prototypes of the modern art museum in France and Germany, such as the exhibition of French painting at the Luxembourg Palace in Paris in 1818, and the Neue Pinakothek in Munich, founded in 1853. However, these collections did not yet show any evidence of a clear concept of the modern art museum, the delineation of which as a separate type of museum only became possible in the first third of the twentieth century, when museums of modern art began to open in Europe.⁷

But the museum which became the model for European and American museums of modern art, and largely defined the course of their development in the twentieth century, was the Museum of Modern Art in New York, known as MoMA: “In the course of its fifty-seven year history the Museum of Modern Art has exerted an enormous influence, not only in America, but everywhere, on the tastes and prejudices of the public, and on art teaching and museum practice.” MoMA is the museum that has played the most important role in formulating the principle of exhibiting used today by most of the world’s modern art collections.

This principle was first elaborated in 1936 by museum director Alfred Barr, who proposed, instead of the traditional chronological model, the idea of an evolution of “-isms”, through which art progressed from representation to abstraction. According to this idea, modern art, a term usually used to refer to art of the first half of the twentieth century, developed along a trajectory of ever

⁵ Marc Scheps. *Peter and Irene Ludwig: Collectors, Donors, Museum Founders in Ludwig Museum in the Russian Museum*. Catalogue. St Petersburg, 1998, p. 16–18.

⁶ K. Khadson. *Influential Museums*. Novosibirsk, 2001, p. 61.

⁷ Ibid.



Exhibition of the Ludwig Museum in the Russian Museum. 2009

greater aestheticisation and emancipation; in other words, form developed faster than content, and during this development art was not subject to any significant external influences. This principle of representation remains dominant to this day as far as the staging of permanent and temporary exhibitions is concerned, and fully corresponds to the creative aspirations of Modernism. At the same time, individual artistic practice “merges” with certain trends and tendencies, which are linked together and bound by specific chronological parameters.⁸

However, this method of representation and the traditional functions of the museum began to be criticised in the last third of the twentieth century. Searches for and attempts to visualise new methods of representation for the post-Modern era of cultural development continued throughout the second half of the twentieth century via the staging of temporary exhibitions of modern art. **The Ludwig Museum in Cologne**, which opened in 1986, is currently running a project entitled *Museum of Our Wishes*, the aim of which is on the one hand to find new methods of staging exhibitions, and on the other, to broaden and change the traditional functions of a museum. The curators have rejected the thematic and chronological models, in which a group of works are shown and individual exhibits are often overlooked. Such a model gradually leads to a concentration on an individual work or the works of those artists who exerted a decisive influence on the development of twentieth-century art. Furthermore, fundamental changes in the whole concept of the museum are planned, such as extending the traditionally perceived boundaries of its activity to such forms of art as music, dance, and poetry. One of the most recent works of museum theory states that “We see our task on the basis of a critical reflection of the constantly changing cultural institution, which over the past decades has been assigned a multitude of new functions and which has to adjust its meaning to the changed requirements of its visitors without giving up its own ideals.”⁹ The main task of a museum consists in striving to reconcile as successfully as possible the demands of the age with the museum’s chosen fields, the development of its collections and its method of representation.

The trend of pushing back the boundaries of the functions of a museum can be seen even more clearly in the **Ludwig Forum for International Art, Aachen**, opened in 1991. This is not so much a museum as a cultural centre, where a variety of events are held. The appearance in the last third of the twentieth century of cultural centres, in which collections and exhibitions were not the sole or even the most important component, and their wide distribution, is connected with the necessity, which had recently become emerged, of uniting the different branches of knowledge, and the arts and sciences, in order to overcome the incoherence of art and create a united picture of the modern stage in the development of culture. The modern art museum’s aspirations to go beyond the boundaries of the traditional static display, expand the scope of its activity, and create the conditions for a wider understanding of modern artistic culture by including the viewer in the process of museum communication were first achieved in the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, also known as the Centre Beaubourg, which was founded in the 1920s. The Ludwig Forum in Aachen consciously tries to shatter the traditional concept of a museum, and reject any kind of chronological, thematic, or other system or order, thus causing a collision of different cultural discourses in the museum. This leads to the creation of an interactive, modern museum space, which ceases to be a neutral frame for works of art, instead taking on the quality of an active participant in cultural exchange.¹⁰

⁸ See: H. S. Bee and M. Elligot (eds.), *Art in Our Time. The Chronicle of The Museum of Modern Art*. New York, 2004, pp. 44–45.

⁹ U. Wilmes. *Museum of our Wishes*, in Kaspar König (ed.), *Museum of our Wishes. Ludwig Museum Cologne*. Catalogue. Belgium, 2001, p. 24.

¹⁰ <http://www.ludwigstiftung.de>



Exhibition of the Ludwig Museum in the Russian Museum. 2009

In the 1970s, the Ludwigs began to extend their sponsorship activities to museums in neighbouring countries. **The Museum of Modern Art Ludwig Foundation (MUMOK) in Vienna** is today considered one of the most important museums of modern art in Europe, and boasts a significant proportion of the Ludwigs' collection, including masterpieces of post-1945 American and European art. Since 2001, when it was given the name MUMOK, the museum has been housed in a purpose-built location in the city's Museum Quarter. The new building has played host to a comprehensive exhibition of modern and contemporary art since September 2001.¹¹

1995 saw the opening of the **Ludwig Museum in the Russian Museum**, to this day the only museum of international modern art in Russia with a permanent exhibition. This so-called "museum within a museum" is an institution, which has a relatively autonomous status within the "main" museum. Exhibitions of contemporary foreign artists are held there quite often.

The foundation of the museum by the Ludwigs was the first step in closing the gap which arose in the Soviet era in Russian museums' coverage of modern art. Socialist realism was the main trend in art of the second half of the twentieth century to be represented in museums. The incomplete representation of unofficial underground art in Soviet museums' collections, as well as the actual absence of contemporary Western art, distorted viewers' perceptions of the global art scene in the second half of the twentieth century. This situation was the reason for Irene and Peter Ludwig's bequest, which was intended to change the prevalent principles of forming of the museum collections.

The bequest included 118 works of modern international art, whose addition to the collection of one of Russia's most important national art museums was one of the major events of the late twentieth century in the cultural and social life of the country.

One of the most outstanding sections of the collection is a group of Pop Art works, by artists including Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann, Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein and James Rosenquist. For the first time, viewers have the opportunity to get acquainted with original works by the most important exponents of Pop Art through the museum's permanent collection. American Hyperrealism is represented by Robert Bechtle, Ralph Goings, and Jeff Koons, while German art from 1950 to 2000 is well represented by Joseph Beuys, as well as by the neo-expressionists Georg Baselitz, Markus Lüpertz, Anselm Kiefer. The collection is particularly strong in Soviet and Eastern European unofficial artists, whose works not only scarcely feature in their native museums, but are also beyond those museums' financial reach. *The Garden*, a 1979 work by the leader of Moscow Conceptualism Ilya Kabakov, is such an example, and gives us an idea of the work of an artist who is today a byword for modern Russian art in the West, yet is poorly represented in Russian museums.¹²

Thus, in donating part of their collection to the Russian Museum, the Ludwigs enabled a gap to be filled, which first opened up in the Soviet era and unfortunately exists to this day in museums in many cities in Russia. The last contemporary art collections to be displayed at the museum were those of Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov in the pre-revolutionary era, which the Soviet authorities subsequently banned from public view. Works in their collections by the French Impressionists, post-Impressionists, Fauvists, and Cubists date back no later than 1917, when Western art became inaccessible and impossible to collect. The works

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See: F. Achleitner. *From Danube Limestone to Basaltic Lava. The Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (MUMOK) a Time Machine?* in M. Ammer and C. Mittermayr (eds.), *Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien. The Collection*. Catalogue. Wein, p. 27–33.

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See: Alexander Borovsky. *The Ludwig Donation in Ludwig Museum in the Russian Museum*. Catalogue. St Petersburg, 1998, p. 12–15; Alexander Borovsky. *The Ludwig Museum in the Russian Museum in The Department of Contemporary Art. 1991–2001. History. Collection. Exhibitions*. St Petersburg, 2004, p. 19–21.

donated by the Ludwigs are therefore especially valuable; Pablo Picasso's work *Big Heads*, for example, is the only example of his later work in St Petersburg. Though the Hermitage boasts an exceptional collection of Picassos, with 37 works, they all date to before 1917.

In the late 1920s a Department of Contemporary Art was set up at the Russian Museum by Nikolai Nikolaevich Punin, though it soon closed,¹³ while the nationalised parts of Sergei Shchukin



Signing of the agreement concerning donation of the artworks from the private collection of Peter and Irene Ludwig to the Russian Museum. 1995

and Ivan Morozov's collections were brought together with an excellent collection of art from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries to form the new State Museum of Contemporary Western Art. Unfortunately, this museum was closed by the government in 1948 as part of a war against "formalism" and "cosmopolitanism".¹⁴ The work of the Ludwig Museum at the Russian Museum therefore represents the resumption of a tradition of exhibiting contemporary foreign art in Russia, and the closing of a significant lacuna in artistic knowledge.

Exhibitions are regularly staged at the Ludwig Museum in the Russian Museum with the involvement of Russian as well as foreign artists. This allows the viewer to gain an insight into the contemporary international art scene and the links between Russian and world art. The Russian viewer has the opportunity to become acquainted with the most recent foreign art and form a clearer impression of Russian art. Contemporary art exhibitions, events and performances are regularly held in the Marble Palace, at the Russian Museum's branches — Stroganov Palace and St Michael's (Engineers) Castle — and occasionally outdoors in the courtyard of the Marble Palace or in the Mikhailovskiy Gardens with the aid of new and experimental approaches, thus transforming the museum's work into a genuinely modern and dynamic enterprise.

¹³ See: Irina Karasik. *Obrazovanie i deyatel'nost' otdeleniya noveyshikh techenii* in Irina Karasik and Yevgenia Petrova (eds.), *Gosudarstvenny Russky muzei. Iz istorii muzeya*. St Petersburg, 1995, p. 58–80.

¹⁴ See: B. Ternovets. *Pis'ma. Dnevnik. Stat'i*. Moscow, 1977.

This project was set up and is run with the co-operation of the Russian Museum and the Ludwig Foundation. Peter and Irene

Ludwig's museums of modern art are a complex system in which every element has its particular characteristics, yet expresses the general ideas and goals of the whole, which seeks to develop international cultural relationships, and strives to reconcile the trends of the time with an openness to change. The Ludwig Foundation's statutes particularly stress its orientation towards the future. Keeping up to date is one of the main principles of the Ludwigs' activity. The main goal of the Foundation is not, therefore, to preserve the collection as a kind of static monument, but to follow any initiatives, which appear modern, productive, and oriented to the future.¹⁵ The Ludwigs' system of museums is thus a novel, developing institution. This project is open to external influences, it is focused on the interaction of international artistic and cultural processes and corresponds to the most recent ideas about the nature of a modern art museum.