

# GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



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Bookended by two terrible world wars, the 1920s were characterized by a tireless quest for new pathways in a host of realms in society, from knowledge to art and culture. Conquests like leisure for the vast majority, the visibilization of certain minorities, the design of modern cities, the rupture of countless taboos, scientific discoveries—such as the birth of quantum mechanics, which cast doubt on many of the classic concepts on which physics was grounded—and the questioning of gender roles, along with the early emancipation of women are just some of the lines that reveal a shift in direction during this decade, which concentrated an astonishing explosion of creativity, freedom, and contagious *joie de vivre* in just ten years.

Speed took on a dizzying dimension in this decade, as did the means for transmitting information (especially the telephone, radio, and the nascent television), and there was spectacular development in other media. As clearly highlighted by this exhibition, artistic experimentation dominated all fields, and in a two-way move, art directly influenced the society that inspired it, which was in the midst of profound transformations.

In addition to a selection of exceptional artworks, *The Roaring Twenties* includes objects and documents which allow visitors to appreciate different aspects of the metamorphosis underway at the time. Fashion, architecture, and furniture become indicators of a new way of living with style and functionality. Likewise, film and photography, music and dance are just some of the areas that the exhibition shows from different angles in an attempt to immerse visitors in the atmosphere of the era.

In our commitment to Bizkaia and the society of our time, BBK feels extraordinarily pleased that we have sponsored this exhibition and thus been part of a project that inquires into a past in which we can glimpse countless parallels with today, from which we can draw important lessons when dealing with the challenges we are currently facing. Thanks to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao as a peerless setting for art, I am confident that the public will appreciate this unique, creative, intellectual, and sensorial interpretation of a mythical decade viewed one century later, in light of these new Twenties which are being ushered in with a very similar intensity.

Xabier Sagredo  
President of BBK

## *The Roaring Twenties*

- Dates: May 7 to September 19
  - Curators: Cathérine Hug, Kunsthaus Zürich, and Petra Joos, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao
  - Exhibition design: Calixto Bieito
  - The exhibition is a cooperation between the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and Kunsthaus Zürich
  - Sponsor: BBK
- The 1920s were a decade of both progression and backlash to the trauma experienced in World War I and the pandemic that ensued in 1918, remarkably parallel to the current coronavirus, which awakened people's intense thirst for life, as reflected in this exhibition.
  - The main new feature of this show is the pioneering collaboration between the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and renowned playwright and opera director Calixto Bieito, who created an exhibition design to foster an enriching dialogue between the fine arts and the performing arts.
  - The 1920s witnessed an explosion of creativity and freedom in all spheres of art and in lifestyles, the harbingers of changes that are still in effect today.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *The Roaring Twenties*, sponsored by BBK, a stimulating tour through the groundbreaking 1920s through more than 300 objects representing the most important artistic disciplines of the time, from painting, sculpture, and drawing to photography, film, collage, architecture, fashion and furniture design.

The exhibition will introduce visitors European cities like Berlin, Paris, Vienna, and Zurich, where major changes and progress were occurring in all spheres, many of which can still be felt today. Even though we cannot compare 1:1 our decade with the 1920s, there surprisingly a lot of parallels, dominated by the trauma of a pandemic and a major recession due to World War I. Yet at the same time it was a decade of progress, with an explosion of creativity and freedom, so this glimpse into the past offers encouraging ideas and inspiration for the future.

As a rare perspective compared to other shows devoted to this period, the exhibition *The Roaring Twenties* reflects the exchange between different progressive movements such as the Bauhaus, Dadaism, and the New Objectivity through seven narrative chapters, and it includes icons of architecture design which reveal the formal diversity that characterized those transformative years. This exhibition goes beyond clichés about the 1920s, exploring which aesthetic moments of that time were so influential and important that they are still omnipresent in the present, even though we barely take notice of it. It also

features the works of contemporary artists who explicitly use the formal language and themes of the 1920s, thus linking it up with today.

Another new feature of this show is the pioneering collaboration between the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and renowned playwright and opera director Calixto Bieito, who was in charge of the exhibition design, forging an enriching relationship between the fine arts and the performing arts. Currently artistic director of Bilbao's Teatro Arriaga and resident director of the Theater Basel, in addition to having a vibrant international career in which he has directed more than 80 operas and plays, Bieito has in-depth knowledge of the period, which enables him to bring to the exhibition a theatrical conception of an intellectual and thrilling time.

In short, this exhibition is bound to delight audiences because it tries not to nostalgically reconstruct or recollect but instead to ingrain and make sensually palpable our cultural origins in our memory and highlight how different phases in history are simultaneously both similar and different.

In the words of Bilbao curator Petro Joos, "The 1920s witnessed an explosion of creativity, erotic freedom, sexual urges, and feminism, yet also trauma, struggle, and unbridled, merciless economy. And all of this is reflected in the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in a very special way thanks to the exhibition design by Calixto Bieito."

The prestigious set designer poses a challenge or call to "take advantage of the experience of 'The Roaring Twenties' to trust our own creative freedom and not fall into the mistakes that engulfed the world in one of its greatest catastrophes. May the 2020s not turn into an Infinite Jest."

## TOUR THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

The 1920s was a decade riddled both with difficulties and progress: cities were growing at a breakneck speed, the patriarchal concept of family was being questioned and transformed, and disadvantaged social groups were making their voices heard in culture and politics. On the other hand, improved conditions for workers went hand in hand with a growing leisure industry, and a spirit of innovation fed art, where experimentation spanned all the disciplines.

### Gallery 205. Moving on from the Trauma of War

The lack of a visible enemy, the exhaustion from an interminable war, and mass-produced weapons' anonymous capacity for destruction traumatized society. At that time, while the conflict was still underway, an influenza virus which was unfairly nicknamed the "Spanish flu" (because the press in that country, which was not censored, was the first to widely report on it) spread throughout the world, taking millions of lives with it in a pandemic that lasted from 1918 to 1920.

This period was characterized by a sense of reality determined by an increasingly fragmented and accelerated world; as painter Fernand Léger described it in 1924: "There has never been an epoch as frantic for spectacle as ours. [...] This frenzy, this craving for distraction at any price, must arise from a need for reaction against our life full of harshness and deprivation."

An important discovery that is reflected in the show is quantum physics, a field profoundly influenced by the insights of Werner Heisenberg, Max Born, and Niels Bohr, who won the Nobel Prize. Based on this knowledge, what mattered was no longer how an atom was built but the processes that it entailed. In consequence, the theretofore static concepts of identity, causality, and objectivity gave way to those in constant motion of ambivalence, chance, and uncertainty.

### **Gallery 206. New Roles, New Models**

The new ideas around men's and women's social roles were closely tied to World War I and its aftermath. Given that men were fighting at the front, women gained and reclaimed new freedoms both at work and in family, and with them a degree of autonomy. The gradual introduction of women's suffrage in wide parts of Europe after 1918 was its strongest manifestation.

This transformation can clearly be seen in the fashion of the time. Among men, beards gave way to shaved faces and slicked-back hair, bowlers replaced top hats, and the more informal suit and elegant tie replaced the rigid frock coat. For women, short hair became the rage, along with knee-length, beltless dresses, and the occasional cigarette held in elegant poses. All over Europe, novels and research were defying the conventional sexual mores and breaking the taboos surrounding certain "perversions." The bestseller by Victor Margueritte *La Garçonne* (The Bachelor Girl) was published in Paris in 1922, with illustrations by Kees van Dongen in 1925, while at the same time *Wege der Liebe* (Paths of Love) by Aleksandra Kollontai was published in Berlin. This latter author believed that passion and love defined some specific rather than continuous phases in the life of the "modern, working woman," and of course a woman could be a mother without having to be married. New professions were emerging, such as secretaries, while the content of certain jobs was being questioned; some of those are analyzed here in greater detail.

### **Gallery 207. New Ways of Seeing**

When we say "new ways of seeing," we tend to think about the 1970s, when television became an everyday household item in Western homes. However, in the 1920s, speed, which was primarily manifested as greater mobility (the automobile), new work methods in factories (the assembly line), and new ways of transmitting information (the radio) were already transforming the way people saw things.

Film and photography, disciplines that had largely been ignored by the art world until then, earned greater recognition by artists such as Hans Richter and Fernand Léger, and became increasingly experimental. The debate between the defenders of "figurative art/New Objectivity" on the one hand and "abstraction/Constructivism" on the other came to an end, or was at least temporarily suspended, until the early 1930s. In 1920, director Walter Ruttmann stated: "This specific characteristic is evoked mainly through the rhythm of our times. [...] The subject of our observation therefore becomes the development of time in the constantly growing physiognomy of a curve, and no longer the fixed continuity of individual points."

The boldest experiments in the field of photography came from Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy, as attested for example by their unique photograms (photographs without camera), as well as by the show entitled *Film und Foto* (FiFo), one of whose curators was Moholy-Nagy; after it opened in Stuttgart, it travelled via Zurich to Berlin, Danzig, Vienna, Zagreb, Munich, Tokyo, and Osaka. The importance of this

show lay in the fact that it was the first to present film and photography together, a parallelism that today, when mobile phones are omnipresent, seems obvious.

### Gallery 202. The Fashion Revolution

This section analyzes how the aforementioned changes in the self-understanding of women and men were expressed through fashion. Even today, Coco Chanel's "little black dress," which emerged in 1927, remains the most timeless expression of women's emancipation made visible in fashion. Clothing became more functional, while silhouette came to the fore.

The new woman, "garçonne" or "flapper," became an eager consumer of the products made by the modern cosmetics industry, while also experimenting with cosmetic surgery, which shifted from reconstructing faces disfigured by war injuries to the quest for ideal beauty. In 1927, fashion designer Lucien Lelong wrote: "Diet, exercise, reducing apparatuses and treatments, the spread of outdoor sports—or so says the common opinion—have achieved it. The modern woman has become the architect of her own figure. She has managed to remake herself in line with her own ideal [...] Today 40-year-old women are still young."

An important supplier of the fashion industry included the silk sector; in the 1920s, Switzerland was synonymous with the silk industry, the largest in Europe with branches also in the US. In this section, several historically significant examples attest to the wide range of silk products and the synergies between artists and industry. Forgotten now, this sector played a key role in the economic upsurge and consolidation of a modern prosperity.

### Gallery 203. Work and Leisure

The icons of design and architecture in the 1920s are firmly etched in our imagery of that time. Leading a decent life was essentially possible thanks to the changes in the working world. Unquestionably, the most significant transformation in people's everyday lives was the introduction of the assembly line in factories. In addition to allowing consumer goods to be mass-produced, they also lowered the number of hours employees worked, giving rise to a flourishing leisure industry.

The Bauhaus school of design, founded in Weimar in 1919 and in Dessau in 1925, was devoted to building a better and more democratic society based on education and culture. In 1928, Josef Albers said that the profession of artist could fit perfectly well into society: "Today, nobody can exist without considering economics: we are concerned with economic form. [...] Experimentation skips over study and a playful beginning develops courage. Thus we do not begin with a theoretical introduction: at the beginning there is only the material." In 1928, the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (International Congresses of Modern Architecture or CIAM, 1928–56) opened in the castle of Hélène de Mandrot in La Sarraz, a town in French speaking Switzerland; at its first encounters, several participants like Karl Moser (its first president), Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and Gerrit T. Rietveld proclaimed nothing less than a socially responsible architecture which would represent the spirit of the day. This aspect also reached the sphere of design, as seen in the iconic designer chairs presented here.

### Gallery 208. New Notions of the Body

In this gallery, viewers will find the new perceptions and forms of dance through luminaries like Suzanne Perrottet and Rudolf von Laban, who were the forerunners of expressionist dance in Germany, along with Valeska Gert, Mary Wigman, Anita Berber, and Gret Palucca. Regarding the latter, in 1927 photographer and painter Moholy-Nagy claimed enthusiastically: “We are trying to formulate a new aesthetic, and we’re still missing the elementary foundations [...] Palucca’s body, she herself, is a means of representation of the purest expression of a new culture of dance.” Jazz also arrived in Europe from the USA during this period, bringing with it particularly powerful and vibrant sounds that changed the perception of tempo.

One of the main challenges of our days in the 2020s is how to achieve balance between the body, the mind, and society. Dance is a valid metaphor of this yearning—in both the 1920s and today. It is often said that the generation of 1968 gave way to a revolution of the physical which marginalized traditional models in favor of a broader and more assertive body awareness. As we can see, the same can be said about the 1920s. Contemporary artists such as Rashid Johnson and Shirana Shahbazi exhibited in this section show the actuality of these discourse nowadays.

### Gallery 209. Lust

The quintessence of the “roaring twenties” is found in nocturnal, ecstatic dances oozing with sensuality in Paris’s Montmartre and Montparnasse and in Berlin’s Moka Efti. The exhibition concludes with this explosive expression of an emancipated, sensual lifestyle whose most celebrated figure is dancer Josephine Baker. She was the first person of color to become an entertainment star, achieving success in Europe instead of in her native USA due to the segregation and Prohibition in her country.

Josephine Baker is attributed with the introduction and success of the Charleston in Europe. She was so influential that pale-skinned Parisian women applied nut creams to darken their skin to more closely resemble the impressive dancer, known as the “ebony goddess.” Thanks to her charismatic personality, talent, and utter freedom of body and spiritual expression onstage, Josephine Baker soon disarmed her detractors and reaped incredible success.

In this gallery, viewers can enjoy a range of experiences that complement the exhibition through an intellectual staging, with literary cabarets, as well as an emotional one, via the colors, perfumes, films, and music of the era. Thus, visitors can dance to the rhythm of jazz, the Charleston, or the *chansons* of the period, or listen to the classical composers of twelve-tone music.

## DIDAKTIKA

### The Importance of the Performing Arts

As part of the Didaktika project, sponsored by BBK, the Museum designs didactic spaces, online content, and special activities that complement each exhibition, providing tools and resources to help viewers appreciate the works displayed.

The educational space designed for the exhibition offers information on an array of topics and disciplines initiated at that time, which still last today, such as neuroscience, psychiatry and psychology, and the development of the anatomical studies by Vladimir Betz, Theodore Meynert, and Santiago Ramón y Cajal. It also encompasses topics like the perception of the human body and feminism in the early 20th century, which were quite common in the intellectual circles in Berlin, Paris, Vienna, and Zurich, as well as the disciplines of dance, music, theater, circus, and literature both then and now. Filmmaker Fritz Lang, groundbreaking dancer Josephine Baker, and the creative revolution that reached modern theater through Max Reinhardt are just some of the key aspects captured in the exhibition's didactic space.



### Exhibition Programs

#### **Round Table** (May 5)

As an introduction to the exhibition, curators Cathérine Hug from the Kunsthaus Zürich and Petra Joos from the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao will address key aspects of it with Calixto Bieito, exhibition designer and artistic director of Teatro Arriaga. In-person and streamed.

#### **French Institute screening *The Lovers of Montparnasse*** (May 14)

As part of the TopARTE program, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao will screen the film *The Lovers of Montparnasse*, a work on the life of Amadeo Modigliani which is related to the exhibition *The Roaring Twenties*, as it is set in a period that predates that decade. It is a 1958 film directed by Jacques Becker and featuring the mythical Gérard Philippe. After the screening, there will be a talk in French moderated by the educational coordinator of the French Institute in Bilbao.

#### **Shared Reflections**

Unique tours led by professionals in the Museum's Departments of Curatorial and Education offer different vantage points on the contents of the new exhibition.

- **Curatorial Vision** (May 19): Petra Joos, Museum curator, will lead a tour around the main works in the show.
- **Key Concepts** (May 26): Marta Arzak, Associate Director of Education and Interpretation, will talk with participants in the galleries on the general and didactic keys to the works.

\*Sponsored by Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre

#### **Actions with local creadores** (June 3, 10, 17, 25 and July 1)

In collaboration with the Museum, a number of local creators will hold brief talks in the galleries, reinterpreting the 1920s from a current perspective and different approaches. With the participation of Lucía Astigarraga, Raúl Cancelo, María Goiricelaya, and Sergio Verde.



**Talk on *Overcoming Conflict: Neuroscience between Wars: Past and Present*.** (June 16)

David Eagleman, an American neuroscientist and writer and an expert in the most complex organ in the human body, the nervous system, will shed light on the impact of research into the brain from the inter-war period until today. An engaging virtual talk which will be streamed from the US.

**Juan Echanove Recital** (September 11)

This is a unique opportunity to enjoy an exclusive reading of texts by the Viennese playwright Karl Kraus by Juan Echanove, one of the greatest stage actors in Spain. This production was specifically designed for the exhibition *The Roaring Twenties*.

**CATALOGUE**

The 1920s embodied both the shift in new directions and backsliding like no other decade has. Throughout the 20th century, the yearning for innovation was never as intense as it was back then, and the high degree of transformation during this period was clearly mirrored in the zeal for experimentation in the arts. The profusely illustrated exhibition catalogue surveys images from the “roaring twenties” and addresses different aspects via texts written by Cathérine Hug, Jakob Tanner, Gioia Mori, Alexis Schwarzenbach, and Petra Joos.

**Cover illustration:****Christian Schad**

*Maika*, 1929

Oil on wood

65 x 53 cm

Private collection

© Christian Schad Stiftung, Aschaffenburg, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2021

**For more information**

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All the information on the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is available at [www.guggenheim-bilbao.es](http://www.guggenheim-bilbao.es) (Press Room).

Press images  
*The Roaring Twenties*  
Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

### Online press image service

In the press area of the Museum's website ([prensa.guggenheim-bilbao.es](http://prensa.guggenheim-bilbao.es)), you may register to download high-resolution images and videos of both the exhibitions and the building. If you do not yet have an account, you can register and download the material you need. If you are already a user, enter your username and password and you can access images directly.

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### Max Ernst

*Untitled*, ca.1920

Collage with gouache, opaque white and graphite pencil on printed paper mounted on board

Kunsthaus Zürich, Graphic Works Collection

Gift, Erna and Curt Burgauer, 1980

© Max Ernst, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2021



### Ernest Neuschul

*Takka-Takka Dances (Takka-Takka tanzt)*, 1926

Oil on canvas

141 × 103 cm

Private collection

© Nachlass Ernest Neuschul



*I Wonder Where My Baby Is To-Night!*, 1926

Music by Walter Donaldson, lyrics by Gus Kahn, cover by Fabien Loris

Francis-Day, Paris (ed.)

Dora and Walter Labhart Collection



**Grethe Jürgens**

*Hair Salon Mannequins (Friseurpuppen)*, 1927

Oil on canvas

Private collection

© Sprengel Museum Hannover, Vermächtnis Grethe Jürgens



**László Moholy-Nagy**

*AXL II*, 1927

Oil, graphite, and ink on canvas

94,1 × 74,1 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Nueva York

Donation, Gift, Mrs. Andrew P. Fuller, 1964

64.1754

© Estate of László Moholy-Nagy

Photo: Kristopher McKay



**Theodore Lux Feininger, Xanti Schawinsky**

*Untitled*, ca. 1927

Black and white photograph, painted

Plate: 23.2 × 17.9 cm

Private collection, Zurich

© The Xanti Schawinsky Estate /

Nachlass Theodore Lux Feininger 2021



**Josef Albers**

*City*, 1928

Glass and black, red, and white opaque

29.1 × 56.1 cm

Kunsthaus Zürich, 1960

© The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2021



**Madeleine Vionnet**

Cocktail dress, ca. 1928

Silk

Martin Kamer

Photo: Kunsthhaus Zürich, Franca Candrian



**Christian Schad**

*Maika*, 1929

Oil on wood

65 x 53 cm

Private collection

© Christian Schad Stiftung, Aschaffenburg, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2021



**Constantin Brancusi**

*View from the Studio (Atelieransicht)*, 1930–31

Silver bromide print

Kunsthaus Zürich, Photography Collection

Gift in memory of Carola Giedion-Welcker, 1986

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**Constantin Brancusi**

*Bird in Space (Oiseau dans l'espace)*, 1932–40

Polished brass

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venecia, 1976

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Photo: David Heald



**Thomas Ruff** (\*1958)

*h.l.k. 02*, 2000

Color copy mounted on Diasec Face

124 x 180.2 cm

Thomas Ruff, Düsseldorf

© Thomas Ruff, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2021



**Gerrit T. Rietveld**

*Red and Blue Chair (Rot-Blauer Stuhl)*, 1918 (design)

1960s (production)

Painted wood

86.5 x 66 x 83 cm

Vitra Design Museum

© Gerrit Thomas Rietveld, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2021.

© Vitra Design Museum. Photo: Jürgen Hans

