

GOTHIC MODERN

MUNCH

BECKMANN

KOLLWITZ

Exhibition Facts

Duration	19 September 2025 – 11. January 2026
Opening	18 September 2025 6.30 pm
Venue	Propter Homines Galleries The ALBERTINA Museum
Curator	Ralph Gleis
Assistant Curators	Julia Zaunbauer
Works	appr. 200
Catalogue	Available in the ALBERTINA shop and at Albertina Museum Wien Albertina Online-Shop (German or English EUR 32.90 292 pages)
Contact	Albertinaplatz 1 1010 Vienna T +43 (0)1 534 83 0 presse@albertina.at www.albertina.at
Opening Hours	Daily 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. Wednesday and Friday 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.
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GOthic MODERN

MUNCH, BECKMANN, KOLLWITZ

19 September 2025 – 11 January 2026

In its major autumn exhibition, the ALBERTINA Museum has set out to stage a highly charged encounter between modernism and Gothic art. The spotlight here is on masterpieces ranging from symbolism to expressionism that take inspiration from medieval art's emotional power.

"Modernism is usually understood as a radical new beginning and a break with tradition. What is surprising, however, is that modernist artists also looked to historical models, albeit ones that predate the academic tradition, namely works from the Middle Ages and the Gothic period. It is precisely this unusual perspective on modernism that is at the heart of *Gothic Modern*, an exhibition created in a joint research project with the Ateneum Art Museum in Helsinki and the National Museum in Oslo. It brings modern and Gothic works into direct dialogue with each other and also reveals how contemporary and innovative Gothic art was already in terms of form and expression," says Ralph Gleis, Director General of the ALBERTINA and curator of the exhibition.

Modernism was, above all, a radical break with the long-dominant academic tradition—and concurrent with this break, many artists turned their gaze to a far earlier era: the Gothic period. In medieval art, they discovered subjects, motifs, and forms of expression that aligned more closely with their own search for truth than did the norms taught at the academies. In Gothic works, they found reflections of much that stirred them most deeply. Themes such as love and sexuality, death and grief, and faith and doubt as well as engagement with social roles and identities had already been present in the Middle Ages and continued to be of central significance in the art of the modern era.

Gothic Modern demonstrates how artists' recourse to art created prior to the rise of the academic tradition enabled them to forge new creative paths. In doing so, major works by modern artists created between 1875 and 1925 will be placed in direct confrontation with iconic paintings, prints, and sculptures by Old Masters. In this extraordinary juxtaposition of artistic eras, *Gothic Modern* reveals how modernism was less a fundamental break with the past than it was a movement in which purposeful engagement with the art of the late Middle Ages played a vital role. Unlike the nostalgic backward gaze of romanticism or the reconstructions of historicism, perspectives that were often placed in the service of political or national self-assurance, the focus now lay squarely on art's inherent aesthetic qualities. Modern artists drew inspiration from the expressive visual language of a style that

was perceived as raw and unrefined. Increasingly, they sought to visualize inner states and to process existential crises through their work. In predominantly religious imagery, they encountered profoundly human emotions such as love, suffering, and grief rendered in ways that provided starting points for their own artistic explorations. Further points of fascination were traditional artistic techniques such as woodcut and book art as well as stained glass and tapestry-making, which were now rediscovered and integrated into contemporary art production.

It was particularly in German-speaking and Northern European countries that this recentering of the Gothic aesthetic manifested itself as part of the contemporary artistic outlook. Around 1900, Vienna—an important center of modernism—embodied a vibrant melting pot of these innovative artistic currents and a key node of transnational exchange among artists. Figures such as Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Käthe Kollwitz, and Edvard Munch exhibited at the Vienna Secession and engaged in fruitful dialogue with the local art scene, while others like Max Beckmann and Helen Schjerfbeck came to Vienna in search of inspiration.

With its approximately 200 works, this large-scale thematic exhibition sheds light on a phenomenon apparent between 1875 and 1925 in which numerous artists—including Paula Modersohn-Becker, Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, Vincent van Gogh, Gustav Klimt, Käthe Kollwitz, Edvard Munch, Egon Schiele, and Helen Schjerfbeck—deliberately sought inspiration in the expressive power of artistic forebears such as Hans Holbein the Younger, Albrecht Dürer, Lucas Cranach, and Hans Baldung Grien. Encounters with the medieval aesthetic stirred deep emotions and opened up new avenues via which artists could grapple with the fundamental questions of human existence.

Gothic Modern will be on view at the ALBERTINA Museum from 19 September 2025 to 11 January 2026 and will feature numerous international loans alongside works from the museum's own collection.

Curator: Ralph Gleis

Co-Curator: Julia Zaunbauer

Assistant Curators: Lydia Eder, Nina Eisterer

The exhibition has been initiated by the Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki and made in collaboration with them and the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo. It stems from an international research project led by Professor Juliet Simpson (Coventry University) as Guest Curator in partnership with the Ateneum Art Museum in 2018.

The exhibition architecture was designed in collaboration with BWM Architecture & Design.

A comprehensive 292-page catalogue published by Hirmer Verlag to accompany the exhibition will feature numerous illustrations and written contributions by Ralph Gleis, Stephan Kemperdick, Marja Lahelma, Juliet Simpson, Vibeke Waallann Hansen, and Julia Zaunbauer.

Exhibition Texts

Gothic Modern

In the search for new forms of expression in modern art, the Gothic experienced a surge of interest as a source of inspiration at the turn of the twentieth century. Although modern art often defined itself by a departure from academic tradition, impulses from medieval works were central to the artistic reorientation of the avant-gardes from Symbolism to Expressionism.

Unlike the wistful retrospection of Romanticism or the reconstructive view of historicism on the Gothic period—perspectives that often served political and national self-affirmation—the focus was now on the actual aesthetic quality of art. For modern artists, the emotional intensity they recognized in medieval works became the focus of their attention.

They discovered a vivid visual language in the art of the Gothic period, which they perceived as unadulterated. In mostly religious depictions of existential subjects between life and death, they found profound emotions such as love, suffering, and grief in a form that served as a starting point for their own work. They were equally fascinated by artistic techniques such as woodcut and book art, the creation of stained-glass windows and tapestries, which were now being rediscovered and integrated into contemporary art production.

In the German-speaking and Nordic countries in particular, the return to Gothic aesthetics manifested itself as part of the contemporary view of art. As an important center of modern art around 1900, Vienna was also a significant hub in the transnational network of artists and a melting pot for innovative artistic movements.

Journeys to the Gothic

The goal of modernism to create a new art without preconditions led artists to venture far afield, both geographically and historically, in search of new aesthetic experiences. Against this backdrop, the nineteenth century saw a renewed interest in the Gothic. Particular attention was paid to works of art from the late Middle Ages, which were mainly encountered in churches and museums but also became popular through articles and reproductions in art magazines. This gave rise to a new form of art pilgrimage to places with legendary art treasures. Arnold Böcklin and Max Beckmann, like many of their contemporaries, visited the *Isenheim Altarpiece* in Colmar. Fernand Khnopff, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Edvard Munch were fascinated by the medieval character of formerly flourishing Hanseatic cities, such as Lübeck, Cologne, and Bruges.

Inspired by the English Pre-Raphaelites, some artists became particularly interested in the technical solutions of the Gothic masters and the artistic craftsmanship of their works. Others, however, sought a heightened expression of inner processes and emotions, which they saw in artists such as Albrecht Dürer, Matthias Grünewald, and Hans Holbein the Younger. The intense preoccupation with the Gothic made this a decisive source of inspiration for a modern and alternative aesthetic.

In Search of the Unadulterated

The nineteenth century was characterized by a general modernization, as well as by rapid industrialization and mechanization. The profound political and social upheavals that shook society were felt first in big cities. The accompanying uncertainties awakened a longing for alternative lifestyles. There was an escapist return to a supposedly simple and natural life in the countryside, which many artists also followed.

By retreating to rural areas and establishing rural artist colonies, they strove to unite life and art. The remoteness of the densely wooded regions of the north, along with the simplicity of the flat landscapes of northern Germany and Flanders, encouraged engagement with their inhabitants. Simplicity and authenticity dominate the portrait-like depictions, which are far removed from any bourgeois claim to representation. While there was a positive idealization of rural life, it was also recognized that living conditions were harsh and that physical labor was difficult. Käthe Kollwitz illustrates the precarious living conditions of agricultural workers and links the reference to the Peasants' War of 1525 with the social conditions of her own time in the sense of a political call to action.

Forces of Nature

In the late nineteenth century, Symbolism turned nature into a metaphor for the existential fears and longings of modern man. It is therefore not surprising that Arnold Böcklin's introspective and morbid *Isle of the Dead* became an image of identification for an entire generation. While modern science increasingly deciphered nature, the nature of man remained an unfathomable mystery, even with the rise of psychoanalysis. Contrary to the progressive "disenchantment of the world" (Max Weber), the hidden forces of nature were revealed in art. Nature seemed to be magically populated by unknown beings and spirits. Corresponding images of sublime natural forces symbolically expressed what lay hidden beneath the surface in the social and cultural context. With its awe-inspiring, overwhelming dimension, a threatening and sinister side of nature came into view. Already in the Middle Ages, nature was regarded as a bearer of spiritual and uncanny forces, as illustrated in depictions of the so-called wild people and in legends of the saints. Like the hermit Anthony in the works of Lucas Cranach and Martin Schongauer, modern people saw themselves as being tormented by the demons of their fears and desires.

Living with Death

At the turn of the twentieth century, scientific and medical advances made the world increasingly predictable and reduced risks to life. However, this did not initially apply to all sections of the population. It was precisely the industrial proletariat in large cities and simple day laborers in remote rural regions who did not benefit from the promises of modernity. In addition, epidemics such as the Spanish flu and wars repeatedly claimed millions of lives. Consequently, many people viewed the Middle Ages, with its murderous feuds, economic hardship, poor nutrition, and outbreaks of disease, as a reflection of their own time.

During the Middle Ages, when religious beliefs dominated social life, death was firmly anchored in people's consciousness. Its omnipresence was not suppressed but rather perceived as an inevitable part of one's own life. As a constant companion, death also became a frequent motif in art. In the modern era, a time of fundamental upheaval, the confrontation with death took on new, multifaceted meaning amid general uncertainty and existential fears. Medieval forms of representation were adopted and imbued with psychological and symbolist content. The religious, moralizing aspect receded into the background, and death became associated with an existential search for meaning, often appearing in dreamlike or mystical scenes.

Death Dances

In medieval art, death as a necessary limitation of life was a frequent subject. As such, it fulfilled a moral function within the Christian context. In the spirit of *memento mori*—the remembrance of the transience of all earthly things—it served as a reminder of the need for humility and repentance. The motif of the Dance of Death, also known as the *Danse macabre*, emerged in the fourteenth century. In these depictions, Death often appears as a couple, inviting everyone, without exception—popes and kings to peasants and children—to join in a dance. Death was no longer depicted exclusively as a fearsome grim reaper, but also as a sensual seducer, rogue, and friend.

In addition to the monumental murals depicting this motif in churches and on cemetery walls from Lübeck to Basel, Hans Holbein the Younger's series of woodcuts from the sixteenth century is one of the most impressive and powerful interpretations of this theme. In the twentieth century, reflecting on one's own mortality became associated with inner states of anxiety in people thrown back on themselves. Symbolism adopted Hans Baldung Grien's gruesome depictions of Death and the Maiden and updated the theme. In the works of modern artists, the struggle with death took on an individual and emotional dimension. Especially in the context of the First World War, artists drew on the medieval motif of the Dance of Death to reflect on the omnipresence of death.

Pain and Suffering

At the dawn of the twentieth century, an intense interest in modern psychology and existential philosophical questions characterized the changing society. It may seem contradictory that, during this period of social upheaval, artists such as Käthe Kollwitz, Edvard Munch, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff continued to draw on sacred themes, orienting themselves strongly toward the religiously influenced art of the Gothic period. However, the unembellished, drastic display of the tortured, wound-covered body of the martyred Christ in medieval works, for example, conveys an existential expressiveness.

This vivid visual language—evident, for instance, in scenes of the Crucifixion, in depictions of the Man of Sorrows, such as in the works of Lucas Cranach the Elder, and the *Boppard Pietà*—conveys an emotional depth that seemed to reflect the emotional world of modernity, which was characterized by fear, uncertainty, nervousness, and powerlessness. Around 1900, the visual power of artistic archetypes, which had been handed down in sacred art for centuries, was rediscovered and understood as unacademic and unaffected. One particularly impressive example of this form of expression is the depiction of the grieving Mother of God. Overcome with despair at the death of her son, she becomes a symbol of existential turmoil.

Escalation of the Body

Medieval art did not categorically reject all forms of nudity in art. In fact, there are numerous depictions of the naked human body in various contexts. However, these depictions were mostly embedded in Christian moral concepts, portraying either saints or the depravity of humanity. Ostensibly to depict immorality, the sweltering atmosphere of the bathhouse or daring scenes from the witches' sabbath were also depicted, although a clear delight in eroticism can be observed in the corresponding works by Albrecht Dürer and Hans Baldung Grien.

The eloquent gestures and postures, sometimes in unusual poses, in which martyred saints were also depicted, provided surprising points of reference for artists at the turn of the twentieth century. Egon Schiele's drawings of emaciated, contorted figures and George Minne's sculptures of gaunt young men take up the expressive bodies found in Gothic artworks in a remarkable analogy. The human body becomes a drastic articulation of existential emotional states. The numerous depictions of Saint Sebastian, martyred by arrows, served as models in the twentieth century for the representation of desirable male bodies, and as the epitome of the vulnerable artist.

Love and Sensuality

Interpersonal relationships, especially the relationship between men and women, have always been central themes in art—literally since Adam and Eve. In this context, too, Gothic art served as an important point of reference for artists at the turn of the twentieth century. Biblical motifs, such as depictions of the first humans, were particularly significant in this context because they symbolically encapsulated medieval notions of sexuality and sin. Some works depict the moment of heavenly harmony between humans, animals, and nature in balanced beauty shortly before the Fall. In other works, evil, symbolized by the presence of the snake, has already poisoned their relationship.

Against the backdrop of a heightened interest in exploring the depths of the human psyche, the depiction of nudity and physicality in the twentieth century often focused on a disturbed relationship with sexuality and desire. The emotionality of interpersonal relationships was presented in a wide variety of facets: from Emanuel Vigeland's depiction of lovers in close physical proximity to the visible distance between men and women and finally the irrevocable alienation between the sexes in Edvard Munch's work.

Devotion and Dedication

Hardly any pictorial formula conveys the intimate feelings of affection and devotion more clearly than that of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus in numerous variations, for example Hans Baldung Grien's *Maria lactans*, which depicts the intimate moment of breastfeeding. In modern times, images of the Madonna often underwent a secular reinterpretation, with figures of assistance and allegories being dispensed with in favour of a concentration on individual emotions. What they all have in common is the visualization of the closeness between mother and child, which is expressed in loving gestures and glances between Mary and Jesus, conveying a sense of security.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, artists revisited this traditional Christian theme, drawing on classical pictorial compositions. Against the backdrop of her own biography, Paula

Modersohn-Becker broke with idealized traditions of representation. From a female perspective, she focused on a realistic, unembellished depiction of physicality and addressed motherhood as a fundamental experience. Edvard Munch took this reinterpretation of the motif to a radical extreme when he titled his depiction of a nude woman Madonna. At the time the work was created, this combination of religious and sexual associations was considered scandalous.

Toward the Light

Many artists associated the return to Gothic art with the search for a new spirituality. In a secularized world, modern art increasingly took on the role of a profane substitute religion, and artists were regarded as priests and priestesses of this aestheticized cult. The path thus led from *Ver sacrum*, the sacred spring of the Vienna Secession, to the anthroposophical “Lebensreform” movement and its symbolic light prayer, and finally to existential Expressionism. Alongside the manifestation of endured suffering and suppressed desire, aspects of redemption and transcendence also gained a new topicality in this revival.

Akseli Gallen-Kallela, for example, transformed the Christian concept of consecration into a secular symbolism of resurrection to impart his esoteric vision of a promise of salvation. The symbolism of light played a central role in the revival of Gothic art, particularly in the form of luminous stained-glass windows set in filigree tracery. Edvard Munch’s paintings of the rising sun rendered in powerful brushstrokes deliberately echo sacred architecture. With his view of Cologne, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner forged an obvious link between the Gothic cathedral and the Industrial Age, conveying a “Gothic Modern” in the truest sense through expressive means.

Press images

The following images are available free of charge in the Press section of www.albertina.at.
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Vincent van Gogh
Skull of a Skeleton with Burning Cigarette, 1886
Oil on canvas
32,3 × 24,8 cm
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



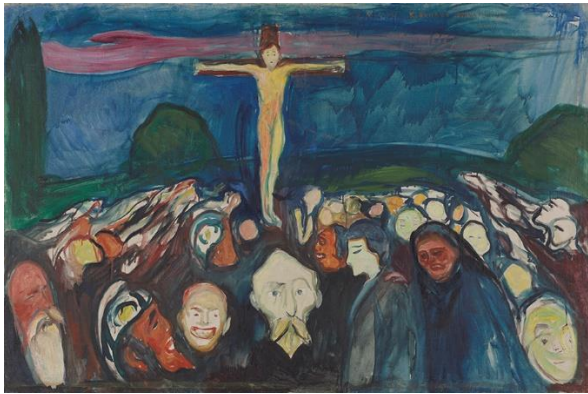
Marianne Stokes
Melisande, c. 1895
Tempera on canvas
87 × 52 cm
Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, Köln
© Foto: Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln, Wolfgang F. Meier, RBAdoooo64



Arnold Böcklin
Self-Portrait with Death Playing the Fiddle, 1872
Oil on canvas
75 × 61 cm
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie
© Photo: bpk / Nationalgalerie, SMB / Andres Kilger



Max Beckmann
Adam and Eve, 1917
Oil on canvas
79,8 × 56,7 cm
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Neue Nationalgalerie
© Photo: bpk / Nationalgalerie, SMB / André van Linn



Edvard Munch
Golgotha, 1900
Oil on canvas
80,5 × 120,5 cm
Munchmuseet, Oslo
© Photo: Munchmuseet / Ove Kvavik



Akseli Gallen-Kallela
Ad Astra (2nd version), 1907
Oil on canvas, painted and gilded wooden shrine
Closed: 120 cm × 196 cm × 12 cm
Villa Gyllenberg, Signe and Ane Gyllenberg Foundation
© Photo: Matias Uusikylä, Signe and Ane Gyllenberg Foundation



Lucas Cranach d. Ä.
Adam and Eve in Paradise / The Fall of Man, 1533
Oil on beechwood
50,5 × 35,7 cm
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie
© Photo: bpk / Gemäldegalerie, SMB / Jörg P. Anders



Hugo Simberg
The Wounded Angel, 1903
Oil on canvas
127 × 154 cm
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum – Ahlström Collection, Helsinki
© Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen



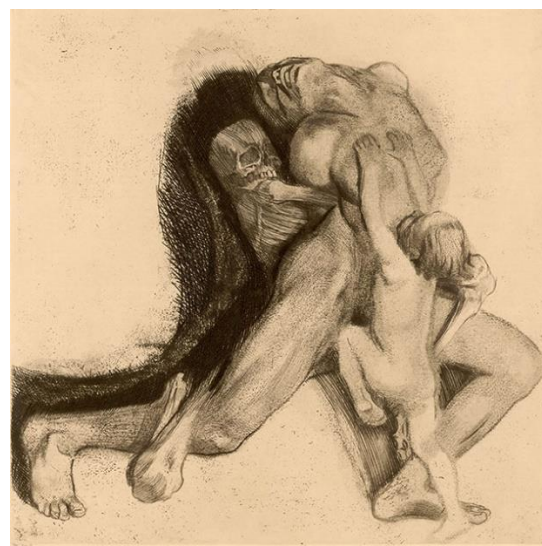
Hans Baldung Grien
The Three Ages of Man and Death, c. 1509/10
Limewood
48,2 × 32,8 cm
Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Gemäldegalerie
© Photo: KHM-Museumsverband



Otto Dix
Self-Portrait, 1913
Oil on paper mounted on cardboard
36 × 30 cm
The Ömer Koç Collection
© Bildrecht, Vienna 2025, Photo: Hadiye Cangökçe



Matthias Grünewald
Moses before the Burning Bush, c. 1516
Charcoal, heightened with white brushwork, on
yellow-gray wash-toned paper
36,2 × 29,2 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



Käthe Kollwitz
Death and Woman, 1910
Etching
45 × 58,2 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



Akseli Gallen-Kallela
Lemminkäinen's Mother, 1897
Tempera on canvas
85,5 × 108,5 cm
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum,
Antell Collections, Helsinki
© Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen



After Hans Holbein the Younger
The Dead Christ in the Tomb, 17th century
Oil on unprimed fir panel
37,8 × 207,6 cm
Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen
© Photo: Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen



Paula Modersohn-Becker
Nursing Mother, 1902
Oil on cardboard
72,2 × 48 cm
Kunstpalast Düsseldorf
© Photo: Kunstpalast – LVR-ZMB – Joshua Esters–
ARTOTHEK



Hans Baldung Grien
Madonna and Child with Parrots, 1533
Mixed media on limewood
91,5 × 63,3 cm
Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg
© Photo: Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Photo: Dirk
Meßberger



Egon Schiele
Male Nude, 1912
Pencil and watercolor on paper
48,2 × 31,7 cm
Wien Museum
© Photo: Wien Museum



Martin Schongauer
Saint Sebastian, late 15th century
Engraving
15,6 × 11,1 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna