

# The federal art collection

Autor(en): **Lienhard, Pierre-André**

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# THE FEDERAL ART COLLECTION

**Pierre-André Lienhard** In contrast to most countries – among them also federally structured states – Switzerland does not have a National Gallery. The Federal Constitution of 1848 left all authority in the cultural sphere to the cantons and the communes, especially also the authority to collect art, to found museums and to run them. When the artists had soon made their initial experiences with the limits of federalism in the promotion of the arts, they organized and succeeded in convincing the Confederacy to advance the arts, and, in addition to other measures for the "promotion and advancement of Swiss art", after the passing of the Federal Act of December 22, 1887, to collect contemporary art as well.

Since 1888 annual acquisitions and competitions, but also occasional donations have led to the creation of the most comprehensive collection of Swiss art. The approximately 14,500 objects largely document the evolution of Swiss art in the past 150 years. With its focal points as well as with its lacunae, the collection represents a unique history of Swiss art reception. In addition to art promotion, the Confederacy has been active in the promotion of Swiss design since 1918. Thus, in a similar vein, one of the most substantial collections of Swiss design has emerged (approx. 5,500 objects). The two collections, now merged, but originally both stemming from the same promotion concept, form the Federal Art Collection and bear precious testimony to the cultural identity of modern Switzerland. The Federal Art Collection is administered and conserved by the Federal Office for Culture (BAK) in Berne, which makes it accessible to the public by

loans. Thus, most of the artwork is exhibited in representative buildings at home and abroad. As permanent loans of the Confederacy, the most valuable art exhibits and most of the design objects complement the collections of Swiss art museums, of design museums as well as the Swiss Foundation for Photography. Of the overall inventory, the ratio of objects on loan to those kept in the depot is two to one. The artwork temporarily in the depot is available for new loans. The exchange amounts to approx. 1,500 objects annually.

For years the growth of the Federal Art Collection has been below one percent of the total inventory and is almost exclusively due to acquisitions in the framework of art promotion. Competitions hardly contribute to this growth any more. Donations at times enrich the collection, mostly in the form of single items. On two occasions the Federal Art Collection obtained major donations from an artist's estate: In 1968 the by now forgotten artist Susanne Madeleine Schwob from Berne bequeathed the Swiss Confederacy in her will, and in 1971 the estate of Wilhelm Schmid was divided among the Confederacy and the City of Lugano. However, these cases date back as far as forty years. Nowadays, accepting entire bodies of work of such a dimension would require a very selective approach: On the one hand, the premises are extremely limited; on the other hand quality standards must be retained, which presupposes a national, if not international significance and resonance of the artwork.





Bilderdepot Kunstmuseum Thurgau