

Mies van der Rohe. The MoMA Collages

Exhibition at Ludwig Forum

Aachen, Germany, 28 October 2016 – 12 February 2017

Mies van der Rohe is generally known as the architect of icons of modern architecture like the Barcelona Pavilion, Farnsworth House or the Seagram Building. What – until now – was less known, is the fact that many of his unbuilt designs survived on paper. Not just in drawings and plans, but in a more vivid medium: the collage. In cooperation with the Museum of Modern Art in New York the Ludwig Forum in Aachen, the town Mies was born in 1886, has shown 50 Mies van der Rohe collages and montages in an extraordinary exhibition. It was the first time ever that an exhibition was dedicated to that chapter of Mies van der Rohe's oeuvre and the first time that those works were on display all together. There was too much to be seen, too many interesting aspects to talk about, which can't be handled in such a short review. It is therefore very pleasing that the associated catalog, written by noted researchers and the curators, makes an important contribution to current Mies van der Rohe research concerning his collages and montages. Maybe one would have expected to find the collages and montages combined with the built work of Mies van der Rohe, but the director, Andreas Beitin, and his team had something different

in mind. As Mies van der Rohe dealt with art throughout his whole life why not connect the collages with art and artists that surrounded and influenced him as well as artists who were influenced by him and his work?

Thus, the exhibition began with a room dedicated to Mies van der Rohe's early photomontages (one might also call them "inserted drawings") combined with works of the avant-garde movement in the 1920s as well as paintings from his own collection, for example by Paul Klee or Kurt Schwitters. As the exhibition proceeded chronologically, the first work the visitor saw was Mies van der Rohe's earliest photomontage from 1910. Together with his brother Ewald Mies, he participated in the competition for a Bismarck monument on the Rhine riverside. It probably wasn't Mies van der Rohe's idea to visualize their project by a montage – at that time it was a rather usual procedure in an architectural competition to ask for such material – but Mies van der Rohe was indeed the only one who enlarged the given photography by adding drawn sections to the surroundings. He obviously recognized the possibilities inherent in that new medium, a fact that makes this piece of work so

important for the later collages and montages. In the early 1920s, Mies van der Rohe designed 5 buildings that were never realized but nonetheless mark a turning point in his work. Among them the famous glass skyscrapers and the concrete office building. Unfortunately, not all of the preserved photomontages were on display in the exhibition – some of them were at least shown in photographic reproductions – but in combination with other competition montages, e.g. for an office building in Stuttgart in 1928, it was quite enough to get a good impression

03 Kurt Schwitters, untitled (Cottage), paper on carton, collage, 25.5 x 21.2 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie (private loan, estate Mies van der Rohe), © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2016.



01 Mies van der Rohe in his apartment, Chicago, 1964. © Werner Blaser.

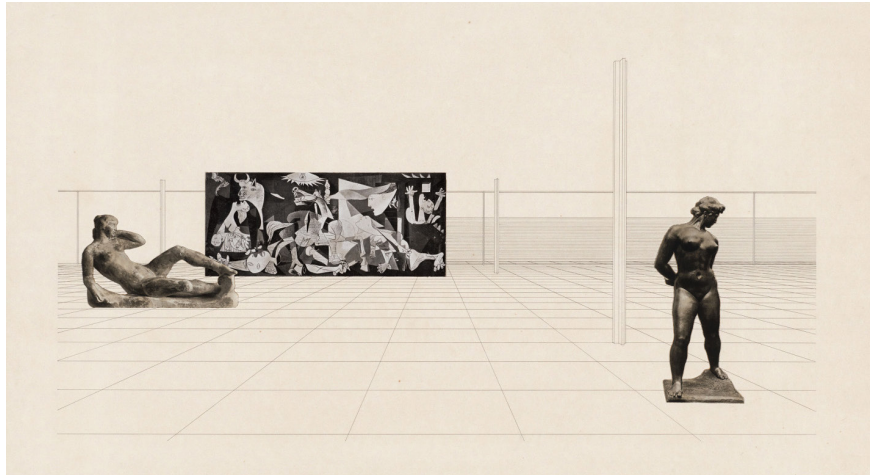


02 Exhibition *Mies van der Rohe. The MoMA collages*, Ludwig Forum Aachen, 2016. © Carl Brunn.

04 Mies van der Rohe, Resor House, project (Jackson Hole, Wyoming): Perspective of living room through south glass wall. 1937-1941 (unbuilt). New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Graphite and collage of wood veneer and cut-and-pasted reproduction and photograph and graphite on illustration board, 30 x 40" (76,1 x 101,5 cm). © The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2016.



05 Mies van der Rohe, Museum for a Small City, 1942-43. Interior Perspective. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Pencil and cut-out reproductions on illustration board, 30 x 40" (76.1 x 101.5 cm). The Mies van der Rohe Archive. © The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2016.



06 Paul Klee, Regentag, 1931, watercolor on carton, nailed to the frame, 20,5 x 38,5 cm, Bern, Zentrum Paul Klee (loan of a private collection); a detail appears in the following collage: Row House with Interior Court project, after 1938, Interior perspective, collage (graphite, cut-and-pasted reproduction of Wilhelm Lehmbruch, Standing Female, 1910, and cut-and-pasted reproduction detail from Paul Klee, Rainy Day, 1931, on illustration board), 76,1 x 101,5 cm, New York, Museum of Modern Art (gift of the architect), © The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2016.

of how innovative his designs were. At that time Mies van der Rohe participated actively in the German avant-garde movement. He joined the *Novembergruppe*, was a founder member of *Der Ring* and co-publisher of the famous avant-garde magazine *G. Magazin für elementare Gestaltung*. Therefore, the exhibition showed collages by Hannah Höch or Raoul Haussmann as well as several works by László Moholy-Nagy or even films, for example by Hans Richter, whom Mies van der Rohe knew very well. With regard to his photomontages and collages it is often said, that the Dada group may have influenced him. But if you compare their collages to the contemporaneous designs by Mies van der Rohe, they don't have very much in com-

mon. However, what is really evident, are the parallels to the constructivist drawings of Theo van Doesburg or the *Prounen* by El Lissitzky, which were both on display. Especially in comparison to a small photographic reproduction of the original drawing for a brick country house, which hung right next to them, this connection was quite obvious.

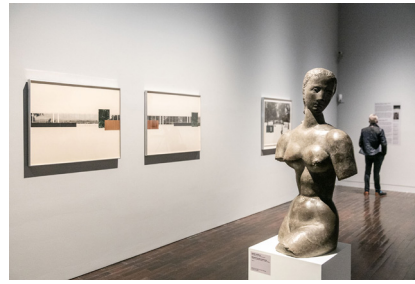
As already stated, Mies van der Rohe didn't invent the architectural collage or montage, it was used before – especially in context of urban landscapes – by artists, photographers, architects and even on common postcards. But the exhibition reveals clearly how much Mies van der Rohe appreciated this medium. When he came to the United States in 1938, he brought this technique with him and

developed a totally different way of presenting his designs. In the case of the unbuilt Resor House project (1937-41), Mies van der Rohe didn't use this medium to assimilate a building to its surroundings but, for the first time, created an impression of the interior including the view through the windows into the landscape. He, therefore, again made use of photography, but with a totally different purpose. In a cut and paste manner he took pictures of paintings, sculptures, landscapes or even marble surfaces, combined them with materials like thin wood panels and added them to a drawn interior. Therefore, those later works can be called collages compared to the earlier designs where he just combined photography and drawing. Mies van der Rohe preferred to include works of his favorite artists, such as Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky or Georges Braque, in the collages. In a work showing an inside view of the Resor House Klee's painting, *Bunte Mahlzeit* [colorful meal], of 1928 depicts a kind of partition wall.

According to that new technique the Resor House marked the transition to a new kind of design standard in Mies van der Rohe oeuvre as well as the transition to the second room of the Aachen exhibition. The second, quite smaller room was dedicated to Mies van der Rohe's courtyard house projects. Many of the collages that were on display in fact weren't made by Mies himself but by his students. After already teaching at the Bauhaus in Dessau and Berlin, Mies continued his teaching activities at the Armour Institute in Chicago, the later IIT. The courtyard houses or atrium houses were a type of architecture that Mies van der Rohe worked with throughout his whole life. Compared to the designs of



07 Exhibition *Mies van der Rohe. The MoMA collages*, Ludwig Forum, Aachen, 2016. Concert Hall Project, 1942. © Carl Brunn.



08 Exhibition *Mies van der Rohe. The MoMA collages*, Ludwig Forum, Aachen, 2016. Bacardi Administration Building Project Santiago de Cuba, 1957. © Carl Brunn.

the 1920s and 30s they didn't interact with their surroundings at all, meaning that the drawings and collages focused completely on the interior in combination with the limited exterior of the courtyard. In the original collages one can discover that Mies van der Rohe used to draw into his students' works, for example a tree or a chair or something else that mostly served to give the design a more precise atmosphere.

Almost all of those collages showing an interior view involve pieces of art. Thus, the exhibition continued in the third room with a design for a Row House with Interior Court (after 1938) showing a painting, which was unknown until the curators discovered that it was a detail of Paul Klee's *Regentag* [rainy day] from 1931. They managed to borrow it from a private collection to place it in the exhibition together with a statue, *Große Stehende* [standing female] (1910), by Wilhelm Lehmbruck, which was also used in the collage. This ensemble impressively showed how Mies van der Rohe used to vary the proportions. In truth, the whole painting by Paul Klee measures only 20.5 x 38.5 cm while, in the collage, it seems to be a piece of furniture or a kind of small wall whereas the life-sized statue appears to be much taller in reality than in the collage.

In Berlin and in the United States, Mies van der Rohe was not very successful in winning any competitions, especially for public works. Struggling with that matter he didn't get tired of designing them. Some of these attempts were also on display in the third room of the exhibition, such as the national project Museum for a Small City (1942-43), which Mies van der Rohe designed together with his colleague George Danforth. For the collages of the interior they used no less than Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), one of the icons of modern painting and at the same time a political statement. Later it was again inserted in the collages for the *Neue Nationalgalerie*, so one might not think of a coincidence, but a potential statement by Mies van der Rohe who never talked about politics in public. This is only one example of how much Mies van der Rohe seemed to think about the

art he inserted in his designs, a fact that this exhibition points out very clearly. Relating to Mies van der Rohe's famous works, like the collages for the Convention Hall (1954, together with Edward Duckett) or the Concert Hall (1942), one might think about their qualities as works of art apart from functioning as a design. Not only in the context of this exhibition but in general, there is a question as to whether Mies van der Rohe's montages and collages can be labeled and presented as autonomous artworks. Despite the fact that this issue is totally irrelevant with regard to their importance within Mies van der Rohe's oeuvre, one may ask: why should they not be? Of course most of them arose from a design process and thus are somehow part of the designed, but mostly unbuilt architecture, but it was Mies van der Rohe who made them more than just standard plans or drawings. He gave them to exhibitions, he signed them, he gave them as presents (e.g. the Concert Hall collage). Especially the act of giving something to somebody releases the work from being just part of an act and underlines its outstanding importance. In short, Mies van der Rohe himself treated at least some of his montages and collages like artworks. Through presenting them in the same way like the works of Klee, Schwitters or Kandinsky this exhibition allowed an entirely new perspective on those impressively huge works.

As already stated, some of the collages and montages had been on display before, but now, as they were to be seen altogether, a totally new way of observing them was possible. If you followed the given path in the exhibition, it couldn't be missed, that Mies van der Rohe, like almost every great architect or artist, sometimes tended to revert to his own designs. This was most evident for the visitor heading to the fourth and final room, where the project for the Bacardi Administration Building in Santiago de Cuba, the Museum Georg Schäfer in Schweinfurt and finally the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin – the only building of those which was actually realized – echoed the architectural ideas already seen in the Museum for a Small City or the courtyard houses. According to Mies van der Rohe

this was not a problem at all as he always was convinced that a building's design should not be dependent on its use.

One might have expected that the unbuilt designs would be accompanied by plans, drawings and photographs of Mies van der Rohe built work. It would have helped visitors who are not that familiar with those buildings and would have given the experts the opportunity to have deeper discussions about the coherences between the different media. But in accordance with the exhibition exposing primarily art and not architecture, the curators decided to complement Mies van der Rohe's collages and montage as well as the works of classical modernism by creations of contemporary artists who dealt with Mies van der Rohe's architecture in many different ways. Among them famous names like Thomas Ruff, Mischa Kuball or Sarah Morris, whose film *Points on a Line* of 2010 discusses the relationship between Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson in very impressive images. Apart from the obvious connection with Mies van der Rohe's built oeuvre, the works somehow are all related to the idea of collage or montage, be it in the changing images that never allow one to recognize at once what one sees, for example in Inigo Mangano-Ovalles' film, *Always After* (2006), or the digital collage technique, for example in Thomas Ruff's pictures showing the *Weißenhofsiedlung* in Stuttgart (2001).

If one really became involved with this unusual compilation – or "collage" – of Mies van der Rohe, Paul Klee, Thomas Ruff and all the others, of drawings, paintings, photography and film, one could definitely gain new perspectives or maybe a new kind of awareness for the Mies van der Rohe myth. If not, there was still the pleasure of seeing a unique exhibition about one of the most important architects of our times.

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