

PRESS RELEASE

Paula Modersohn-Becker on Paper

13 May to 20 August 2023

Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen

Press conference: Wednesday, 10 May 2023, 11am

It's not just the scope of the 120 works in the exhibition "Paula Modersohn-Becker on Paper" that make this project at the Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum so special. This is one of the most important Paula Modersohn-Becker shows for decades because of the glimpses it offers into how this internationally prominent north German artist thought about art and the new insights it provides into the way she worked. This project has been made possible by the Paula-Modersohn-Becker-Stiftung's decades of work on a catalogue raisonné of her drawings. Sketches, drawings, watercolours and pastels from every phase of the painter's work – brought together from private as well as public collections and including works that either haven't been shown publicly for decades or never at all – can be seen at Bremen's Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum from 13 May to 20 August 2023.

The exhibition begins where Paula Modersohn-Becker's development as an artist began: at drawing schools in London and Berlin and in Worpswede. From sheets of studies, in which she practised modelling forms, and *croquis*,¹ used to train the artist's ability to grasp a subject, to striking life-size studies of nudes – these works form a prelude to the exhibition, vividly showing Paula Modersohn-Becker's vigorous efforts to learn and her tireless drive to improve and expand her drawing skills.

Her emancipation from academicism began with the new century and her first stay in Paris. Paula Modersohn-Becker's sketches from the Louvre already suggest the direction in which her visual language would develop. The artist concentrated on block-like figures and forms. Paula Modersohn-Becker occupied herself with non-European cultures and primarily focused on reposing, motionless figures in old master paintings. In these studies she developed an individual store of pictorial memories for herself, which she repeatedly went back to and utilised over the course of her life. Paris also provided a setting which Paula Modersohn-Becker used as a site for experimentation. In her drawings of urban life she plays with perspective, tests out the effects produced by figures positioned within pictorial space and – something that is as good as absent from her painted work – records fleeting moments. At the same time, her strokes became more rapid and her drawings more concentrated. Paula Modersohn-Becker's completely preserved Parisian sketchbook from 1900 and 1903 is being made digitally accessible and will also be a part of the exhibition's narrative.

¹ In this drawing exercise, the nude model's pose is changed at short intervals.

Another chapter in the exhibition is devoted to the “unpainted” pictures of Paula Modersohn-Becker. The ideas for pictures presented in these drawings were never realised as paintings, but they nonetheless enable us to gain a glimpse into how the artist thought.

The final gallery of the show brings together paintings and preparatory studies. Using individual examples, Paula Modersohn-Becker’s path to a final composition can be reconstructed and grasped. At times, combining the artist’s drawings and paintings reveals how the former already suggest the surface textures and tonalities of the latter. The painting “Old Woman from the Poorhouse in the Garden with Glass Globe and Poppies” (1907) was preceded by several variations. The mother and child motif maintained its grip on her for years before she finally arrived at her monumental, archaic interpretation “Reclining Mother with Child II” (1906) by way of numerous studies.

The occasion and the basis of this exhibition at the Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum are provided by Wolfgang Werner and Anne Röver-Kann from the Paula-Modersohn-Becker-Stiftung’s catalogue raisonné of Paula Modersohn-Becker’s works on paper which is being published this year after more than 30 years of meticulous enquiry and research. The insights presented at the exhibition are thus based on the latest research.

Until now, only marginal attention has been devoted to the drawings’ significance within the artists’ body of work as a whole – this is a mistake. As the first exhibition of Paula Modersohn-Becker’s drawings in almost 50 years will clearly demonstrate, works on paper played a decisive role in the development of her unique and modern visual language.