

KURT SCHWITTERS ***Color and Collage***

First solo museum show devoted to the artist since 1985 MoMA retrospective

On view at the Menil Collection October 22, 2010 - January 30, 2011

Exhibition includes full-sized recreation of the artist's *Merzbau* – on display for first time in the U.S.



Houston, August 23, 2010 – The new Menil exhibition, ***KURT SCHWITTERS: Color and Collage***, examines one of the 20th century's most enduring figures of the international avant-garde. Schwitters (1887-1948) worked at the edges of Germany's revolutionary art and intellectual movements in the tumultuous wake of the First World War. In the summer of 1919 he created the term "Merz" to describe his unique process of dismantling the established boundaries and hierarchies that existed between the fine arts. Employing equal parts philosophy and artistic process, Schwitters sought to unite all forms of art as a means to developing a new aesthetic for the chaos of modern living.

Organized by the Menil Collection in cooperation with the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung at the Sprengel Museum Hannover, ***KURT SCHWITTERS: Color and Collage*** marks the first U.S. overview of the artist's career since the Museum of Modern Art retrospective 25 years ago. The exhibition – guest curated by Isabel Schultz, co-editor of Schwitters's catalogue raisonné and curator of the Kurt Schwitters Archive and Executive Director of the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung at the Sprengel Museum Hannover, in collaboration with Menil Director Josef Helfenstein – will open at the Menil on October 22 and remain on view through January 30, 2011.

As an artist and writer Schwitters spent more than thirty years constructing an impressive range of works, from collages and sculptures to poems and performance pieces. Perhaps his most fully realized project, the *Merzbau*, expanded these principles into the realm of architecture. Built over a decade and a half, and destroyed by Allied bombing during the Second World War, this massive walk-in sculptural environment – a precursor to installation art – filled an entire room in the artist’s Hannover home by the time he fled the Nazi regime in 1937. Exploring key works from Schwitters’s multi-faceted oeuvre – including a full-sized recreation of the *Merzbau*, on display for the first time in the United States – ***KURT SCHWITTERS: Color and Collage*** uncovers the expressive palettes, textures, and techniques behind the artist’s revolutionary work.

Born in Hannover in 1887 to the proprietors of a clothing shop, Kurt Schwitters had a fairly conventional upbringing during prosperous economic times in Germany. Trained as a painter in the conservative academies of Berlin and Dresden, he explored a number of naturalist styles before the onset of the war. After serving as a mechanical draftsman for the military in 1917, he shifted away from traditional forms to explore abstract methodologies that would lead to the creation of his art. Affiliated with Dada during the late 1910s through friends such as Hannah Höch and Hans Arp, Schwitters achieved early notoriety as a writer with the 1919 absurdist poem “An Anna Blume,” which became a popular sensation in Germany and other European countries.

In his visual work Schwitters diverged from many of his Dadaist contemporaries who fully rejected long-established artistic genres, subjects, and media. He instead recast these seemingly outmoded traditions in an entirely new manner. Schwitters transformed the “useless” forms of everyday life into a language and aesthetic that engaged the turmoil of the post-war era. Nailing and gluing together forgotten pieces of urban waste – train tickets, scraps of fabric, candy wrappers – Schwitters advanced collage and assemblage as integral modernist practices perhaps more than any artist of his time.

Interestingly, while collage called into question the very nature of painting, Schwitters’s background as a painter remained central throughout his work, particularly in his sensitivity to color and light. The Menil exhibition offers for the first time a detailed look at the significance of those two elements in Schwitters’s work, unraveling the artist’s complex fusion of collage and painting. Schwitters selected and arranged found objects with a painter’s eye, often enhancing his collages with additional layers of paint to amplify a particular effect. “Schwitters never stopped thinking of painting as central to his work,” states curator Isabel Schultz in her catalogue essay. “The two techniques were not mutually exclusive but rather formed an integrated whole.”

KURT SCHWITTERS: Color and Collage includes more than 100 assemblages, sculptures, and collages from 1918 to 1947, highlighting Schwitters's compositional methods and design principles as well as his critical and often witty response to the major art movements such as Constructivism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. Through this lens, new insight is offered into the artist's fascinating and largely overlooked late work, created during his exile in Norway and England.

The exhibition also explores Schwitters's initial reception in the United States when he was included in a series of exhibitions in the 1920s sponsored by the Société Anonyme, the renowned art organization co-founded by artists Katherine Dreier, Marcel Duchamp, and Man Ray. Nevertheless, until his work surfaced in a number of New York galleries and museums following the artist's death in 1948 at the age of 61 – including a posthumous collage exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art – Schwitters was relatively unknown in U.S. Over the next decade, a new generation of young American artists – many of whom are prominently featured in the Menil's own holdings – began to look to Schwitters for compositional inspiration as well as for a model of working with found materials. Both Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly owned collages; Ellsworth Kelly and Jasper Johns have each loaned pieces from their personal collections to this exhibition. As Josef Helfenstein writes in the exhibition catalogue, "It seems almost compulsory to present Schwitters in the Menil Collection, for his work forms the historical precedent for any number of artists represented in the collection with important groups of works."

The exhibition will travel to **Princeton University Art Museum** (on view March 26 – June 26, 2011); followed by **Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive** (on view August 3 – November 27, 2011).

Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage is accompanied by a fully illustrated color catalogue featuring essays by Schultz along with scholars Leah Dickerman and Gwendolen Webster, and a chronology by Menil Assistant Curator Clare Elliott.

Available at the Menil Bookstore or on our website www.menil.org

176 p., 10 x 11 1/2

14 b/w + 129 color illus.

ISBN: 9780300166118

Cloth: **\$50.00**

Public Program

Friday, October 22, 7:00 p.m. Gallery Talk

A conversation with Isabel Schulz and Josef Helfenstein "Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage"

This exhibition is generously supported by gifts from Houston Endowment Inc.; The Brown Foundation, Inc.; Mrs. Nancy Brown Negley; Harry C. Pinson; Louisa Stude Sarofim; Leslie and Shannon Sasser; the Taub Foundation in memory of Ben Taub, Henry J.N. Taub, and Carol J. Taub; Lionstone Group; Allison Sarofim; Marion Barthelme and Jeff Fort; Ann and Mathew Wolf; Michael Zilkha; the City of Houston; and by proceeds from the inaugural evening of Men of Menil.

Exhibition underwriter Continental Airlines is the Preferred Airline of The Menil Collection.

For more information contact PRESS@MENIL.ORG or visit WWW.MENIL.ORG