

**Between Music and Painting  
The Beethoven Scholar Max Unger  
and his Friendship  
with Karl Schmidt-Rottluff**

Special Exhibition of the Beethoven-Haus Bonn  
in Collaboration with the  
Schloßberg Museum Chemnitz  
17 March - 7 August 2000

Max Unger (1883-1959) was known until now exclusively as one of the most important Beethoven scholars of the first half of the 20th century. A wealth of documents from his estate reveal him to have been a versatile scholar and a talented artist. His friendship with the painter Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, one of the leading representatives of German Expressionism, was to be of special importance for art history. They met during their school years in Chemnitz. Together with Paul Holstein, Erich Heckel and Fritz Cohn they founded a student's club which they named the „Volcano“, a group which met for discussions, for philosophizing, but especially to read aloud their own poems, to make music and to paint. In was an intellectual circle of gifted young people who were striving to escape the narrow confines of the industrial city of Chemnitz. It became the germ of the artist's alliance „Die Brücke“ („The Bridge“) which was founded in Dresden in 1905 and which was to revolutionize painting in Germany with its radically new attitude toward art.

The Special Exhibition begins in Room 7:  
On the wall on the right the watercolor „The Old Barn in Rabenstein“ (1909), the painting „Studio Interior with Foxglove“ (1937) and the watercolor „View from the Kaßberg in Chemnitz“ (1903), all by Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. The latter two pictures are

being exhibited here for the first time. The painting „Studio Interior with Foxglove“ was a present from Schmidt-Rottluff to his friend Max Unger (see the original mailing tube in the case). The picture was created at the time at which – as a result of the Exhibition „Entartete Kunst“ („Degenerate Art“) – he was suffering the most severe persecution by the Nazis and was finally forbidden to paint. His personal situation seems to be reflected in this painting. It has an extremely high and narrow format and the subject as a whole stresses the vertical axis. The picture shows a view of the atelier of the painter. Stretched canvases are leaned against the walls. The room has no windows, an indication of the isolation and threatened situation of the painter, or of his art. The canvases on the left serve as a source of light, probably a statement as to the meaning which Schmidt-Rottluff ascribed to painting. At the same time, threatening shadows are creeping up this canvas. A vase with four stalks of foxglove stands on a table in the middle, this, too, full of symbolism, because the foxglove is a medicinal plant bearing beautiful, but poisonous flowers. It can be safely assumed that Max Unger understood the message hidden in this painting.

In Case 1, numerous postcards and letters can be seen which Schmidt-Rottluff sent to Unger. They kept in close contact with each other their whole lives through letters and visits and each of them always maintained a lively interest in the work of the other. Their paths crossed again when they both returned to Chemnitz briefly after the Second World War. In 1946, in the Schloßberg Museum there, the first solo exhibition of watercolors by Schmidt-Rottluff since 1937 was shown. Case 2 shows mementos from their common school days at the Königliche Gymnasium in Chemnitz (see the pupil's caps from this era and the matriculation book).

Case 3 shows on the right a drawing by Max Unger which was unknown until now. A comparison with the only published photo of the youthful Schmidt-Rottluff shows it to be a portrait of this friend of his youth, with whom Unger drew and also took trips in the area around Chemnitz and to Bohemia to do watercolors. In the middle the aquarelle „Poppy Flowers“, a student work by the 18-year-old Schmidt-Rottluff which already reveals his mastery. On the left a youthful work by Erich Heckel, the watercolor „Birch Path“ (around 1903). Heckel was also a member of that circle of friends in Chemnitz. According to Unger's memoirs, Heckel showed at first a remarkable talent for poetry. Only later did he concentrate completely on painting.

Case 4 gives an impression of the art scene in Chemnitz. The training offered by Friedrich Otto Uhlmann (see the photo in case 6) at the Königliche Gymnasium was thorough, but rather conventional. His colleague at the Realgymnasium, Robert Rudolf Hoffmann, taught a somewhat more progressive view of art. Two of his aquarelles are exhibited here, an Italian palazzo, and factories in Chemnitz. Hoffmann was also the chairman of the exhibition committee for the „Kunsthütte“ in Chemnitz.

Case 5 shows the typescript „Awakening: From the Student Days of Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Erich Heckel“, Unger's extremely interesting memoirs about their common youth and the artistic development of the members of the „Volcano“. This significant art historical source has been published for the first time in the catalogue accompanying this exhibition. On the right a self-portrait by Paul Holstein, who suggested the founding of the pupil's club and who was especially prominent in this circle for his literary work.

Case 6 shows Max Unger and his future wife, Mary Thomsen, at the time of their engagement in December, 1911. At that time he had already earned his first merits as a musicologist. The objects in cases 6, 7 and 8 as well as the pictures on the wall prove that Unger was a talented painter and draughtsman. Mostly watercolors from the 1930s are to be seen. Unger lived at that time in Zurich and took many trips, among others to Italy and Venice, where many of his works were produced. His point of departure was the painting technique which he had learned from Uhlmann and at the Leipzig Academy, where he took courses again in the years 1923-32. His works received national recognition in a number of exhibitions and publications. They are characterized by their energetic line and the special pleasure they radiate in the subtle and nuanced use of color, an aspect in which the influence of his friend Schmidt-Rottluff can be perceived (canals in Venice, case 8). Contrary to his friend, however, Unger always adhered to the visual impression and retained in his pictures above all what had been seen, rather than the emotional transformation of the subject.

Continuation of the exhibition at the end of the tour circuit in room 12 on the ground floor

Case 1: In contrast to his contributions in the visual arts, Max Unger as a Beethoven scholar has retained a presence in the mind of everyone knowledgeable about Beethoven. He produced a great number of publications about Beethoven and his circle. Additionally, he was a very much sought-after music critic and reviewer. Unger began as a pianist, organist, conductor and composer. Starting in 1908, he studied musicology at Leipzig University under Hugo Riemann. Riemann was one of the foremost representatives of the field and was working at that time on a monograph study of Beethoven. Unger wrote

his dissertation on the composer, piano virtuoso and music publisher Muzio Clementi. In the printed version there are acknowledgments for Schmidt-Rottluff and Erich Heckel. The latter had aided Unger actively in his research by sifting through Roman archives. Clementi crossed paths with Beethoven a number of times. This pointed Unger the way to Beethoven. Even before he received his doctoral degree in 1913 (see the diploma on the wall), he had published a book about Beethoven's Immortal Beloved. His further life as a scholar was determined by his efforts toward a critical, historical edition of the letters of Beethoven. He worked on it for decades with enormous diligence, without being able in the end to finish it. Unger was very soon considered the great authority on Beethoven's difficult handwriting. In 1926 his treatise on this subject, which is still used today, was published by the Beethoven-Haus. The deficiencies of the editions of the letters which were in use at the time can be seen in his own personal, annotated copy of Ch. G. Kalischer's edition. Using the autograph of Beethoven's letter to Ferdinand Ries from 9 April 1825 from the collection of the Beethoven-Haus exhibited here, Unger was able to correct dozens of mistakes. Subsequently Unger published many Beethoven letters for the first time, or for the first time in their correct form.

Case 2: Unger's activities as curator of the Bodmer Collection in Zurich in the years 1933-1940 was especially important. This legendary private collection (in the Beethoven-Haus since 1956) would hardly have achieved this size and this quality without Unger's expert guidance. In 1939 he produced the catalogue of the collection - a standard work of musical bibliography. He was also able then to publish unknown works by Beethoven for the first time. He built a bridge back to painting with his

representation of the so-called Moated Palace in Gneixendorf near Krems, an estate which belonged to Beethoven's brother Johann beginning in 1819, and of the Beethoven-Haus in Heiligenstadt. A caricature of Unger entitled „The critic comme il faut“ was drawn at a banquet during the International Music Festival in Vichy in 1935.

Case 3: Besides Beethoven and his contemporaries, Unger was interested in the phenomena of perfect pitch and synesthesia, actually not surprising for a person with talents in two areas. The fascinating answers Unger received to his questionnaire on these subjects from the conductors Wilhelm Furtwängler, Fritz Busch and especially Arnold Schönberg have been published for the first time in the book accompanying this exhibition. They demonstrate what refined faculties of perception a person such as Schönberg had at his disposal. He writes that he was dependent upon them because the musicians of the orchestra disliked both conductors and composers, and therefore tried to uncover any weaknesses in either. The last connection that Unger made between music and painting was in his sepia drawings of the life masks of Beethoven and Goethe which appeared in his book „Plans for a Faust Opera by Beethoven and Goethe“ in 1952. He sent his friend Schmidt-Rottluff a copy of it. The latter responded with great appreciation for Unger's accuracy of research and the „instructive“ masks.

A book accompanying the exhibition (160 pages with many illustrations, some in color) and a poster of the painting „Studio Interior with Foxglove“ by Karl Schmidt-Rottluff are available in the Museum Shop and at the ticket desk.

S.B./M.L./J.C.-B.