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Kurt Schwitters

Opened by Customs

1937–8



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NOT ON DISPLAY

ARTIST	Kurt Schwitters 1887–1948
ORIGINAL TITLE	Zollamtlich geöffnet
MEDIUM	Paper, printed paper, oil paint and graphite on paper
DIMENSIONS	Support: 331 x 253 mm frame: 523 x 421 x 29 mm
COLLECTION	Tate
ACQUISITION	Purchased 1958
REFERENCE	T00214

Summary



Opened by Customs 1937–8 is a collage made of paper, printed paper, oil paint and graphite by the German artist Kurt Schwitters. The pasted-together fragments have been cut and torn from a variety of sources, including parcel paper, Nazi administrative labels, a large section of printed Norwegian text from a book or a pamphlet, a blue label for Spanish oranges (stuck face down so that the logo is seen in reverse) and a printed list of travel-related words in German, including 'airline boarding pass', 'baggage insurance' and 'sleeper car'. At the bottom right of the collage is a piece of white paper featuring an insignia that bears the words '*Deutsche Arbeit*' (German Work) set within a laurel wreath.

Opened by Customs was created in Lysaker, Norway, after Schwitters emigrated from Nazi Germany in 1937. Here he attempted to continue his *Merzbau*, or *Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, which he had begun in c.1923 in his apartment in Hanover. While living in Norway his work was exhibited in his homeland in the Nazi Degenerate Art exhibition. He left Norway for Britain in 1940 when Germany invaded the country. Schwitters's son Ernst chose the title of this work based on the customs labels at the top centre of the collage, which read '*Zollamtlich geöffnet*' ('Opened by customs') and are stamped 'Hannover 3.8.37'. As Ernst Schwitters explained in a letter dated 10 May 1973:

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emotions, concepts and ideas (15,768)

universal concepts (6,318)

irony (309)

formal qualities (11,827)

assemblage / collage (38)

objet trouvé / readymade (2,610)

history (5,752)

politics and society (2,316)

politics: Nazi Germany, 1933-45 (378)

people (35,276)

adults (22,960)

man (10,595)

society (34,917)

social comment (6,448)

displacement (20)

persecution (99)

symbols & personifications (7,228)

inscriptions (6,738)

printed text (1,141)

stamp (58)

objects (23,044)

reading, writing, printed matter (5,035)

newspaper - non-specific (376)

abstraction (9,662)

non-representational (6,555)

colour (2,436)

irregular forms (1,976)

from recognisable sources (4,424)

man-made (1,012)

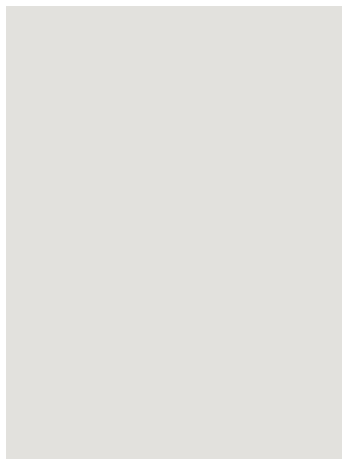
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Kurt Schwitters
(Relief in Relief)

c.1942–5

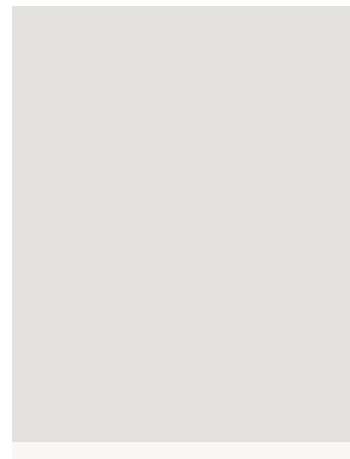
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Kurt Schwitters
Picture of Spatial Growths - Picture with Two Small Dogs

1920–39

● On display at [Tate Britain](#)
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Kurt Schwitters
Magic

c.1936–40



