

Press Kit

Against  
the Current

16.8. ———  
1.12.2024

# Chaim Soutine

**KUNST  
MUSEUM  
BERN**

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Between 16 August and 1 December 2024 the Kunstmuseum Bern is devoting the major retrospective *Chaim Soutine. Against the Current* to the painter Chaim Soutine (1893–1943). His expressive and vividly coloured paintings address the existential dimension of life and are at the same time a pure artistic experiments. The exhibition has been organised in collaboration with the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark.

Chaim Soutine is one of the great painters of classical modernism. His works show swaying landscapes, slaughtered animals and people from the lower strata of society; his models were pages, chambermaids, cooks and altar-boys. The vividly coloured paintings address the existential, vulnerable dimension of life and bear impressive witness to a precarious existence on the margins of society.

The exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bern comprises some 60 works from all periods of the artist's career, including six works from the Kunstmuseum's own collection (all from the legacy of Georges F. Keller), as well as international loans from institutions such as the Musée d'Orsay et de l'Orangerie and the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Tate, London, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the National Gallery of Art in Washington. It shows works from the genres characteristic of Soutine – portraits, landscapes and still lifes – and focuses on the first decades of his career.

#### **Declarations of love to life**

Soutine's paintings are impetuous explosions of colour, and at the same time demonstrate dramatic vulnerability. They are declarations of love to life and to the people at the lowest level of society – an experience that Soutine shared through his own biography. His empathetic and raw portraits of simple people, his energetic, colourful landscapes and the mysterious still lifes of slaughtered animals reflect a whole era and a generation marked by war, social abuse and the remorseless conflict of religious and political views of the world.

### **Against the current**

Chaim Soutine grew up in a Jewish Orthodox family in a small town near Minsk in present-day Belarus. In 1913, at the age of 20, he travelled to Paris, which was to become his second home. Even so, he remained an outsider throughout his life, with a poor command of the language at first, and an ignorance of socially acceptable manners. The experience of flight and migration that profoundly shaped Soutine's life is apparent in his works. His few close friends included the Italian artist Amedeo Modigliani.

While many of his contemporaries engaged with abstraction, Soutine's painting was figurative, extremely vivid and expressive. His works are marked by a powerful, restless line that gives his paintings an incomparable expressive force.

### **The 'artist's artist'**

The exhibition in the Kunstmuseum Bern has the aura of a journey of discovery: even though Soutine is treated as one of the most important modern artists, and represented in many major museum collections, his work is less well known than for instance that of his friend and colleague Amedeo Modigliani or that of Marc Chagall. His influence on painting after 1945 can be seen among the representatives of Abstract Expressionism, the CoBrA group of artists and the School of London, which chose Soutine as an inspiring model. Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock and above all Francis Bacon are his best-known admirers. But also contemporary artists like Dana Schutz, Leidy Churchman, Amy Sillman, Emma Talbot, Thomas Hirschhorn, Chantal Joffe and Imran Qureshi name Soutine as a key figure in their artistic biographies. In a film produced specially for the exhibition these seven artists provide an insight into their fascination with Soutine. In 2020–21 Soutine assumed contemporary symbolic status in the democratic protests in Belarus, which were later crushed by repression.

With the major retrospective *Chaim Soutine. Against the Current*, the Kunstmuseum Bern would like to make this extraordinary painter accessible to a wide audience.

#### **Opening**

The opening of the exhibition will take place on

**Thursday, 15 August 2024, from 6.30 pm.**

Admission to the exhibition is free on this evening.

#### **Guided Tours in English**

Sunday **10 October 2024**, 11:30–12:30

#### **Curator**

Anne-Christine Strobel

#### **With the support of**

Kanton Bern, Ruth & Arthur Scherbarth Stiftung, Ursula Wirz-Stiftung, UNIQA, Bundesamt für Kultur, Minerva Kunststiftung, Dr. Georg und Josi Guggenheim-Stiftung, Verein der Freunde Kunstmuseum Bern

### Media preview

We cordially invite you to the media preview with curator Anne-Christine Strobel on **Thursday, 14 August 2024 at 10 am at the Kunstmuseum Bern.**

Please register via [press@kunstmuseumbern.ch](mailto:press@kunstmuseumbern.ch).

### Individual visit of the exhibition



We are looking forward to your individual visit to the exhibition. Admission to all exhibitions at the Kunstmuseum Bern is free for media representatives with a valid press card. Please fill in the digital accreditation form which you can either access via [kunstmuseumbern.ch/media](https://kunstmuseumbern.ch/media) or by screening the QR-Code before your visit.

### Digital Guide

There is a freely accessible digital guide to the exhibition. It can be accessed from Wednesday, 14 August 2024 via the QR code below.



### Catalogue

#### Chaim Soutine

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With contributions by Claire Bernardi, Marta Dziewańska, Susanne Meyer-Büser, Sophie Krebs, Pascale Samuel, Catherine Frèrejean

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2023: Hatje Cantz



Soutine in front of a torn brick wall, *Le Blanc*, 1927, unknown photographer



Chaim Soutine, 1928, Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme, Paris, unknown photographer

## Biography

### 1893

Chaim Soutine is born in Smilavichy near Minsk, now part of Belarus, as the 10<sup>th</sup> of 11 children. Smilavichy is a *shtetl* with a predominantly Jewish population. Soutine grows up in poverty in a strongly religious environment and speaks Yiddish as his mother tongue. Soutine's father is a repairing tailor and wishes his son to become a craftsman as well. Soutine, however, resolves to dedicate his life to painting.

### 1903–1912

Soutine travels to Minsk to take drawing classes. In 1910, he draws a portrait of an Orthodox Jewish man, thereby violating Judaism's prohibition on images. Soutine is gravely assaulted by the man's sons. For this, his parents receive monetary damages, which finance their son's education at the art school in Vilnius.

### 1913

Soutine makes the multiple-day train journey from Vilnius to Paris, at that time Europe's capital of art. He lives in the studio community *La Ruche* in Montparnasse.

In the summer, he enrolls at the *École des Beaux-Arts de Paris*. Soutine is impressed by the city, and especially by the Louvre's art collection. His initial period in Paris is characterised by hunger, illness and deprivation.

### 1914–1915

On 4 August 1914, the First World War breaks out. As an immigrant, Soutine is not called up to serve. He volunteers, but, due to a stomach ailment, is rejected.

Soutine moves to the artists' residence of *Cité Falguière* and strikes up a close friendship with Italian artist Amedeo Modigliani (1884–1920), who also grew up in a Jewish family.

### 1916–1918

Soutine mainly paints still lifes, only a few of which have survived. Modigliani persuades his art dealer, Léopold Zborowski, to sign a contract with Soutine. In exchange for the exclusive rights to his works, Soutine receives a modest daily allowance.

In March 1918, German troops bombard Paris. At the urging of Zborowski, Soutine and Modigliani travel south to Vence and Cagnes-sur-Mer at the Côte d'Azur.

### 1919

Zborowski sends Soutine to Céret, a small town in the Pyrenees. He paints numerous landscapes and portraits of the town's inhabitants, including *Le Pâtissier*, with which he was to achieve his breakthrough.

### 1920

In January in the south of France, Soutine is shocked to learn of Modigliani's death.

During a visit from Zborowski, Soutine sets fire to several paintings he no longer likes. Zborowski manages to save some of them.

## **1922**

At the end of 1922, Soutine returns to Paris with around 20 works. He destroys many of them in subsequent years.

American art collector Albert C. Barnes visits Paris in the winter of 1922/1923 in search of works for a collection he wants to establish in Philadelphia. He is thrilled with *Le Pâtissier* and buys this and 51 other works by Soutine at a price of 15-30 dollars apiece. News of the unusual success story spreads quickly throughout Paris.

## **1923**

In January, French art dealer Paul Guillaume publishes the first article about Soutine in the journal *Les Arts à Paris*.

Barnes organises an exhibition of Soutine's work at Guillaume's gallery and subsequently shows his acquisitions at an exhibition of European art in Philadelphia.

Soutine spends much of the next two years in Cagnes in the south of France. Here, he creates further portraits of pastry chefs and numerous landscapes. In a letter to Zborowski that same year, he writes that he is in a poor state of mind and that he is lonely in Cagnes. However, he only returns to Paris two years later.

## **1924**

Barnes's purchases increase Soutine's value in the art market, giving him both financial independence and artistic recognition.

He begins his series of still lifes with stingrays.

## **1925**

Soutine moves into his own apartment near Rue du Saint-Gothard, where his large studio is located. From this time on he moves lodgings several times a year.

Soutine has a daughter, Aimée, with Déborah Melnik, whom he knows from his art studies in Vilnius. However, he never acknowledges the daughter as his.

He travels to Amsterdam to study Rembrandt's works at the Rijksmuseum. He begins his series of choirboys, bell boys and slaughtered oxen.

## **1926**

Polish-born art critic Waldemar George writes about Soutine in the journal *L'Amour de l'art*. His fame grows and his works now fetch high prices at auction.

Due to his continuing stomach problems, Soutine regularly visits a spa in Châtel-Guyon in Auvergne between 1926 and 1928. Here, he meets the interior designer Madeleine Castaing and her art critic husband Marcellin. They develop a close friendship, and Soutine paints her portrait.

## **1927**

Soutine's first solo exhibition takes place at Galerie Henri Bing in Paris. He feels uneasy around people and does not attend the opening.

Thanks to Barnes, his work is shown in group exhibitions in New York and other cities in the United States.

### **1928–1929**

Waldemar George publishes the first monograph on Soutine in the series *Artistes juifs* at Editions Le Triangle in Paris in 1928. The year after, the art historian Élie Faure's monograph comes out.

In 1929, Soutine paints the series *L'Arbre de Vence*.

### **1930–1932**

The global economic crisis weakens the Parisian art market. Zborowski is no longer able to represent Soutine. The Castaings become Soutine's patrons. Up until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, he often stays with them in Lèves in the Centre-Val de Loire region.

Léopold Zborowski dies in 1932. His wife, Anna, sells his entire collection.

### **1935**

The first comprehensive exhibition of Soutine's work in the United States takes place at the Art Club of Chicago.

In Paris, 10 of his works are shown in the exhibition *Peintres instinctifs. Naissance de l'expressionnisme*.

Sullivan Gallery and Valentine Gallery, who also represents Piet Mondrian, organise solo exhibitions by Soutine in New York.

### **1937**

At the artists' hangout *Café du Dôme* in Montparnasse, Soutine meets German-Jewish refugee Gerda Groth, née Michaelis. She takes him in and he calls her Mademoiselle Garde. Together they move into Villa Seurat in the 14<sup>th</sup> arrondissement.

In London, Leicester Gallery shows a retrospective exhibition of Soutine's work. Petit Palais in Paris shows 12 of his works in the exhibition *Les Maîtres de l'art indépendant*.

Severe stomach pains prevent Soutine from working.

### **1939**

When the Second World War breaks out, Soutine is living with Gerda Groth in the village of Civry in the Bourgogne-Franche-Comté region. Both are registered as refugees and are forbidden to leave the town. Upon being granted a special medical certificate, Soutine is able to travel to Paris.

### **1940**

During the summer, German troops occupy Paris. Anti-Jewish restrictions and violent attacks become increasingly common. In May, the German army transports Gerda Groth to the Gurs internment camp in the Pyrenees, where she is kept for three months. Soutine never sees her again.

In Paris, Soutine meets his future partner, the painter Marie-Berthe Aurenche (1905–1960).

**1941**

Soutine stays in Paris illegally but is afraid to leave the capital for fear that he will not be able to get the milk he needs for his diet in the free zone. He is forced to wear the Star of David.

Soutine and Aurenche manage to obtain forged papers to take refuge in Champigny, near Chinon in the Centre-Val de Loire region.

**1943**

Soutine's health deteriorates drastically. After a risky three-day journey, he is transferred to a hospital in Paris. Soutine undergoes emergency surgery for a perforated stomach ulcer, but dies two days later on 9 August.

Fellow artists Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Jean Cocteau (1889–1963) along with the poet Max Jacob (1876–1944) are among those who attend Soutine's funeral at Montparnasse cemetery on 11 August 1943.



## Press images

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01

Chaim Soutine

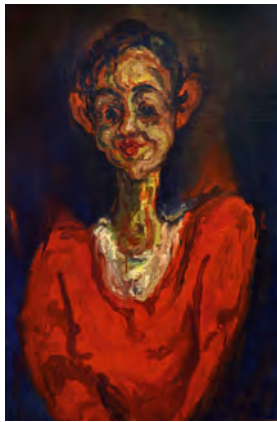
*Le tzigane*, 1926

Oil on canvas

46 × 38 cm

Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

Photo: open.smk.dk, public domain



02

Chaim Soutine

*La vieille fille*, around 1920

Oil on canvas

71,5 × 54 cm

MAH Musée d'art et d'histoire, Ville de Genève. Deposit of the Fondation Jean-Louis Prevost, Genève, 1986

Photo: Alamy Stock / Peter Horree



03

Chaim Soutine

*La vieille actrice*, around 1922

Oil on canvas

92,1 × 65,1 cm

Private collection

Photo: Paul Hester, courtesy of McClain Gallery, Houston



04

Chaim Soutine

*Le cuisinier de Cagnes*, around 1924

Oil on canvas

61 × 51 cm

Kunstmuseum Bern, Bequest of Georges F. Keller 1981

Photo: Kunstmuseum Bern

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**05**

Chaim Soutine  
*La tricoteuse*, around 1924–25  
Oil on canvas  
82,5 × 60 cm  
The Norton Simon Foundation, Pasadena  
Photo: Courtesy of The Norton Simon Foundation



**06**

Chaim Soutine  
*Le grand enfant de chœur*, 1925  
Oil on canvas  
100 × 55,9 cm  
Centre Pompidou, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne – Centre de création industrielle  
Photo: Foto: bpk / CNAC-MNAM / Bertrand Prévost



**07**

Chaim Soutine  
*Le groom*, 1925  
Oil on canvas  
98 × 80,5 cm  
Centre Pompidou, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne – Centre de création industrielle  
Photo: bpk / CNAC-MNAM / Philippe Migeat



**08**

Chaim Soutine  
*Le valet de chambre*, around 1927  
Oil on canvas  
68,9 × 46 cm  
The Lewis Collection  
Photo: Courtesy of The Lewis Collection

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**09**

Chaim Soutine

*Nature morte à la raie*, 1923

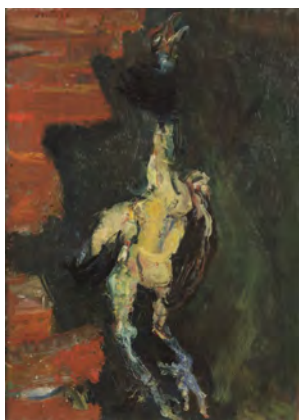
Oil on canvas

80,5 × 64,5 cm

The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of the

Hanna Fund

Photo: © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New  
York



**10**

Chaim Soutine

*Le Poulet pendu devant un mur de briques*,  
1925

65 × 46,5 cm

Oil on canvas

Kunstmuseum Bern, Bequest of Georges F.  
Keller 1981

Photo: Kunstmuseum Bern



**11**

Chaim Soutine

*Le boeuf écorché*, around 1925

Oil on canvas

72,5 × 49,9 cm

Kunstmuseum Bern, Bequest of Georges F.  
Keller 1981

Photo: Kunstmuseum Bern



**12**

Chaim Soutine

*Nature morte aux harengs*, 1916

Oil on canvas

68,9 × 86 cm

Galerie Larock-Granoff, Paris

Photo: Galerie Larock-Granoff, Paris

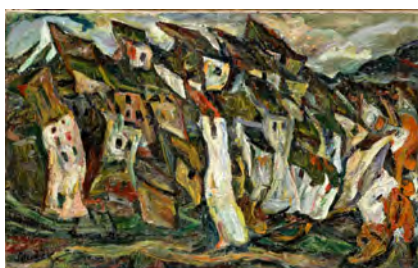


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**13**  
Chaim Soutine  
*Glaïeuls*, 1919  
Oil on canvas  
56 × 46 cm  
Paris, Musée de l'Orangerie, collection Jean  
Walter et Paul Guillaume  
Photo: bpk / RMN-Grand Palais / Hervé  
Lewandowski



**14**  
Chaim Soutine  
*Les maisons*, between 1920-1921  
Oil on canvas  
58 × 92 cm  
Paris, Musée de l'Orangerie, collection Jean  
Walter et Paul Guillaume  
Photo: bpk / RMN-Grand Palais / Hervé  
Lewandowski



**15**  
Chaim Soutine  
*Paysage de Cagnes*, 1923/1924  
Oil on canvas  
60 × 73 cm  
Kunstmuseum Bern, Bequest of Georges F.  
Keller 1981  
Photo: Kunstmuseum Bern

## **Current and upcoming exhibitions at the Kunstmuseum Bern**

Tracey Rose. Shooting Down Babylon  
bis 11.8.2024

Chaim Soutine. Against the Current  
16.8.–1.12.2024

Amy Sillman. Oh Clock!  
20.9.2024–2.2.2025

Kahnweiler & Rupf. A Gallerist and his Collector  
22.11.2024–24.3.2025

### **Opening hours**

Tuesday

10:00–21:00

Wednesday–Sunday

10:00–17:00

Monday closed

### **Contact**

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