



Images of Disability

This Is Not Absence: The Würtz Collection and the Visibility of Disability
Professor Simon McKeown



HUMBOLDT-
UNIVERSITÄT
ZU BERLIN





Hans and Rosa Würtz on the day of their arrival in Prague in 1934.: Heilpädagogisches Archiv Berlin.



Oskar Helene Heim – Berlin, Germany - 2025



Film scene from the documentary
Krüppelnot und Krüppelhilfe
Directed by Nicholas Kaufmann, 1920

Metal
Paintings
Photographs
Lithographs
Newsprint
Prints
Porcelain
Figurines
Copies
Paintings
Drawings
Ivory



Archive: Jedličkův ústav. Praha

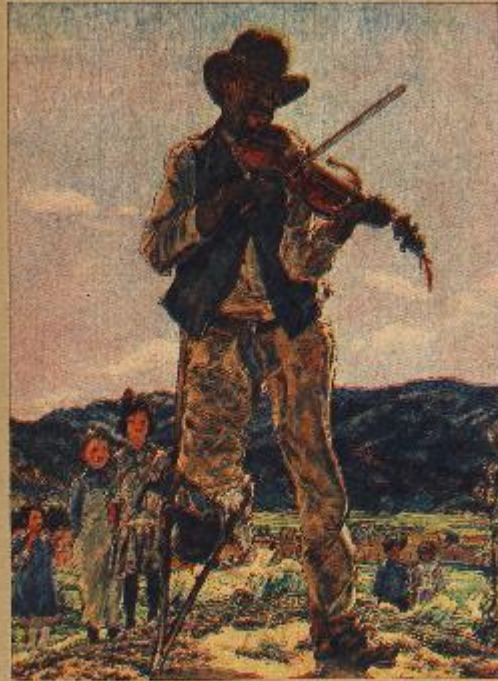


“To the Plenary Hall” - Source: Hans Würtz Collection,



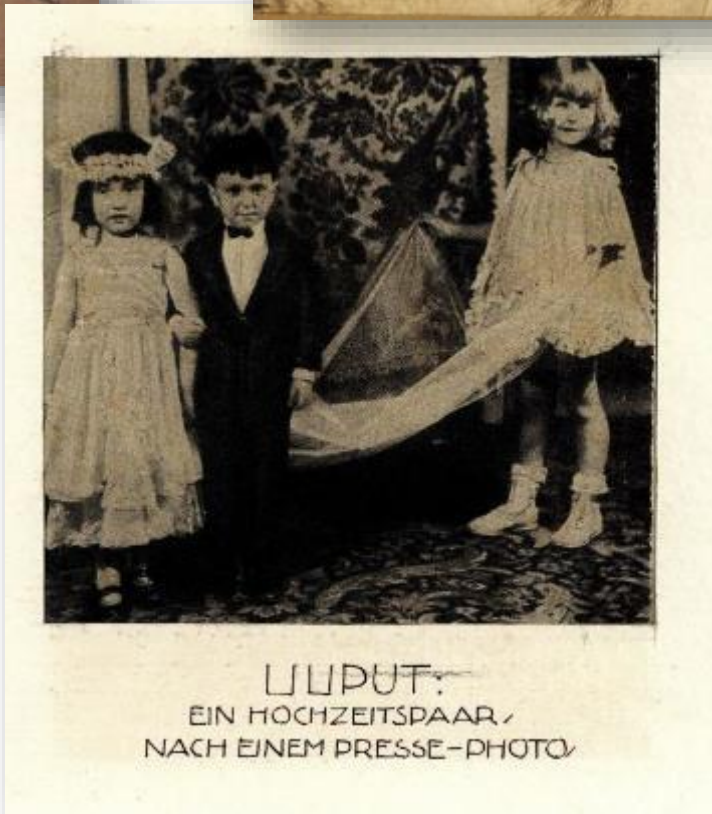


Artista
Der normale Soldat im Jahr 1902



Wilder Mann
Donnerstag der Frau







Pigai:
"Der Fäulekaiser"
(Süddeutsche Monatshefte Nr. 50.)





The most significant worldwide collection of artwork connected to disability ever collated

(1934 – 1938)

- Collection left unattended in deposition of OHH BERLIN
- Unknown number of original objects removed from the collection

TOTAL: **7408 ITEMS**

(1938 – 1945)

- Collection transferred to Czechoslovakia in May of 1938
- Number of objects broke and were discarded
- Würtz removes number of objects in Prague
- Possible damage during the WWII

TOTAL: **5004 ITEMS**

(1945 - present)

- Collection nationalized after the war
- Collection split between different institutions
- Removals or discarding from the collection

TOTAL: **3335 ITEMS**



Project history



Simon Mckeown – Professor of Art, Teesside University, UK – www.simon-mckeown.com // www.imagesofdisability.org

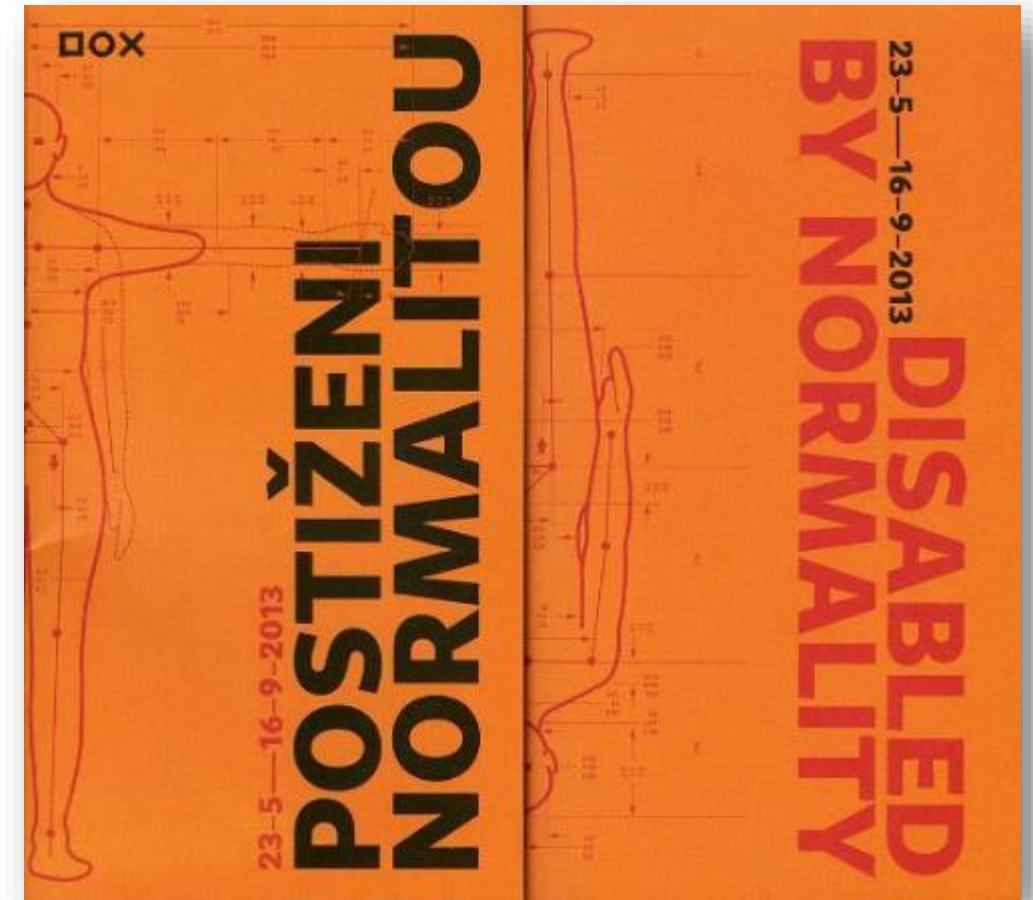


Professor Oliver Musenberg
Humboldt University - Berlin

After finishing with a Master Degree in Special Education he followed his interest in the History of Special Education and continued with a PhD doctoral thesis, reconstructing the biography of Hans Würtz (1875-1958) and his pedagogical and psychological theories towards the education of the “cripple”. In this context Musenberg discovered original fragments of the Würtz-Collection in Prague based archives.



<https://www.dox.cz/en/whats-on/disabled-by-normality> - Prague, CZ, 2013.



We are indebted to DOX Centre for Contemporary Art (and their partners). Prague, CZ, and their curatorial work and the resulting subsequent contribution to knowledge, which led to our AHRC/DFG project.

Analysing the collection



Images of Disability is a collaborative project made possible through funding from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the German Research Foundation (DFG) with the support of Teesside University, Middlesbrough, UK, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany and in partnership with the National Medical Library, Prague, Czech Republic and the Jedlička Institute and Schools, Prague, Czech Republic with thanks to DOX Centre for Contemporary Art without whom this project would not have been possible



We have 2D and 3D digitised all of the collection which and generated base meta data for the Collection



3D digitise porcelain, bone and ivory
statuettes.

[W15 - 3D model by Brek \(@Brek\) \[7af511f\]](#)



CAPTURING AND CATALOGUING OF THE COLLECTION

All (2,970) | Published (2,970)

Search Digital Archive

Add Filter All dates ID Min - Max Any Artists name Any Original number on base Any Is it a top 100? Type of impairments Theme Any Photograph or Picture Any Their Gender is

Any Ages Any Ethnicity Filter

Bulk actions Apply Reset Sorting

2,970 items 1 of 149

Date	ID	Status	Artists name	English title - 2d	Original number on base	NML Photo	RECTO (front) Image	RECTO (front) File Name	RECTO out of frame Image	RECTO out of frame File Name	VERSO out of frame Image	VERSO out of frame File Name	Description	Is it a top 100?	Types of impairments	Themes	Photograph or Picture?	Their Gender is	Ages	Ethnicity
☐ Published 2022/03/10 at 13:12 Edit Quick Edit Bin View	7204	Basic Data Entry Added	Hundbäck, Matts		W168								Soldier of a white knight with big belly (10)	Yes	Deformation of the spine, Obesity			Male	Adult	Unknown
☐ Published 2022/03/10 at 13:10	7301	Basic Data Entry Added	Hundbäck, Matts		W167								Older, slightly hunched woman with cleaning stuff (10)	Yes	Hunchback, Care Work			Female	Adult	Unknown

👤 W100

👁️ 0 💬 0 ☆ 0 ⋮



👤 W096_Re Cap

👁️ 0 💬 0 ☆ 0 ⋮



👤 W150

👁️ 2 💬 0 ☆ 0 ⋮



👤 W026

👁️ 4 💬 0 ☆ 0 ⋮



👤 W134

👁️ 2 💬 0 ☆ 0 ⋮



👤 W080

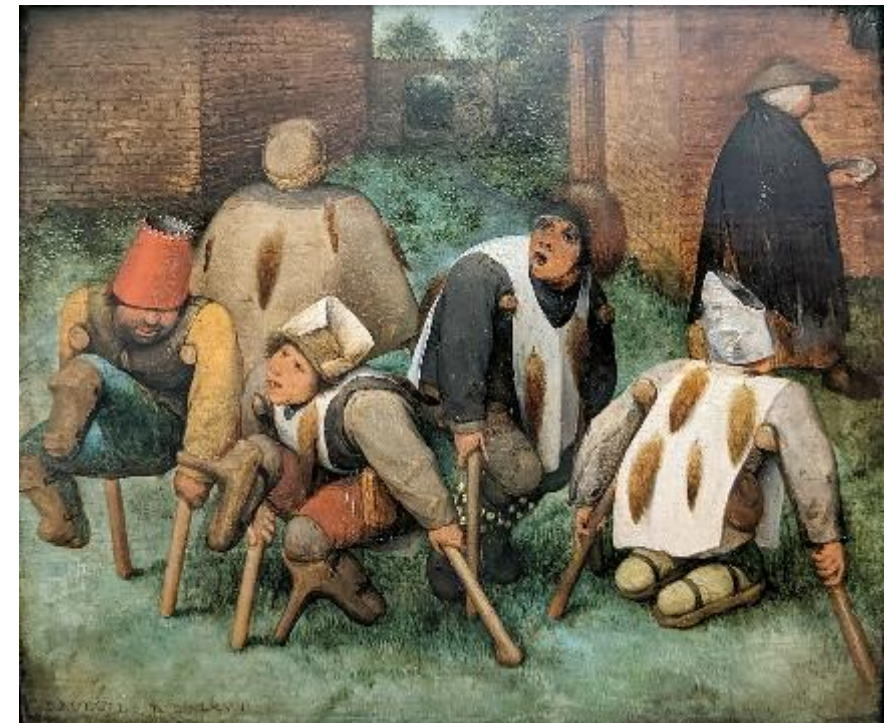
👁️ 1 💬 0 ☆ 0 ⋮



Analysis

Analaysis

The Beggars (also known as *The Cripples* or *The Legless*) was painted in 1568 by the Netherlandish artist Pieter Brueghel the Elder. Brueghel was one of the first artists to depict everyday life, and he painted village scenes that included disabled people using handmade crutches—something quite unusual at the time. However, his work is often layered with symbolism, making it difficult to interpret. *The Beggars* is no exception, and its meaning is still debated today.







The top 11 themes by frequency and percentage:

1. Portrait (160) – 23.2%
2. Poverty (110) – 15.97%
3. Beggar (109) – 15.82%
4. City (79) – 11.47%
5. Grotesque/Caricature (79) – 11.47%
6. Musician (68) – 9.87%
7. Entertainment/Performance/Circus/Freak Show (63) – 9.14%
8. Ageing (58) – 8.42%
9. Couple (58) – 8.42 %
10. Famous People (56) – 8.13%
11. Person with Animal (56) – 8.13%



The Würtz Collection contains an exceptionally rare group of historic ivory carvings, sculptures, prints and objects that reveal disability as something always present within everyday European life. These are not crude curiosities, but highly skilled works produced within the traditions of the *Kunstkammer* and cabinet of curiosities culture of the 17th to 19th centuries — spaces where rare, strange and remarkable objects were collected to represent the breadth of human experience. Many of the ivories demonstrate extraordinary technical brilliance: microscopic carving, expressive characterisation, movement, musical notation, prosthetics, clothing and gesture rendered in astonishing detail. Together, they form both an artistic achievement and a social archive, preserving disabled figures who were often omitted from official histories. The collection challenges assumptions that disability was historically hidden or absent, instead revealing it as visible, integrated and culturally significant across centuries of European visual culture.

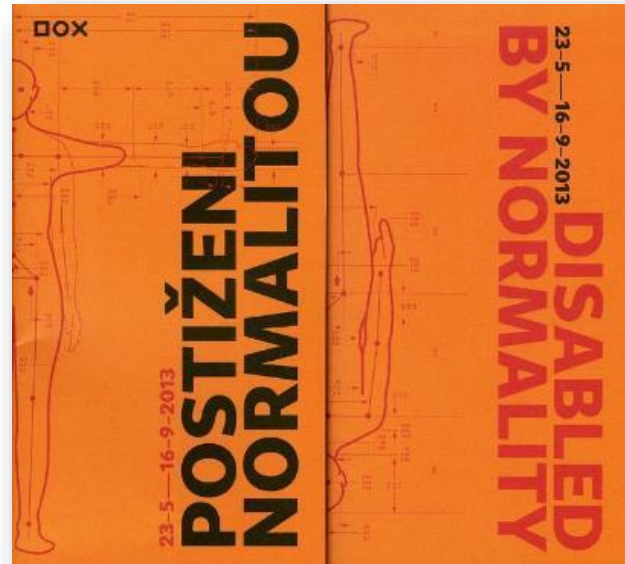


Exhibitions and community involvement

1932
Berlin



2013
Prague



2025
Berlin



Images of Disability

17 – 29 March 2026

MIMA, Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art

Presented by Professor Simon McKeown of Teesside University.

A rare opportunity to view select works from the Hans Würtz collection of Images of Disability.

In Berlin, in 1932, Hans Würtz built one of the largest ever exhibitions connected to disability and impairment. The collection uniquely connects art and disability in a cultural manner, beyond a simple cabinet of curiosities.

imagesofdisability.org

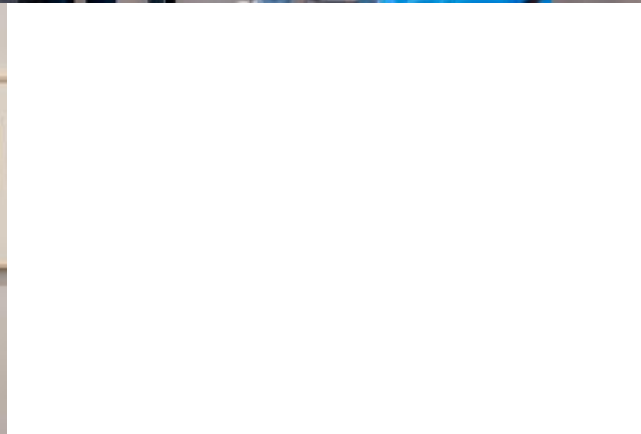
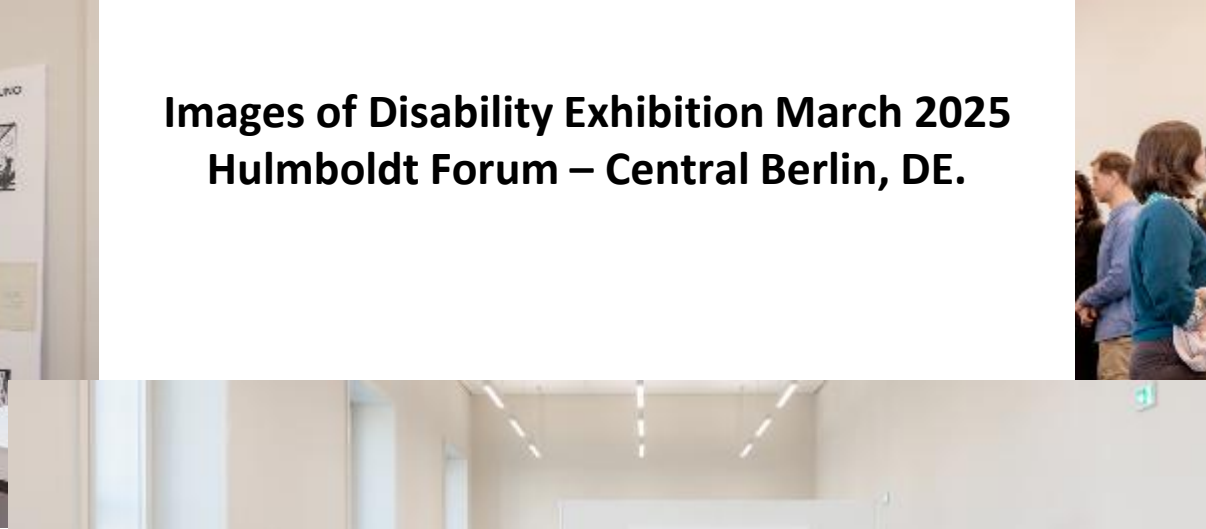


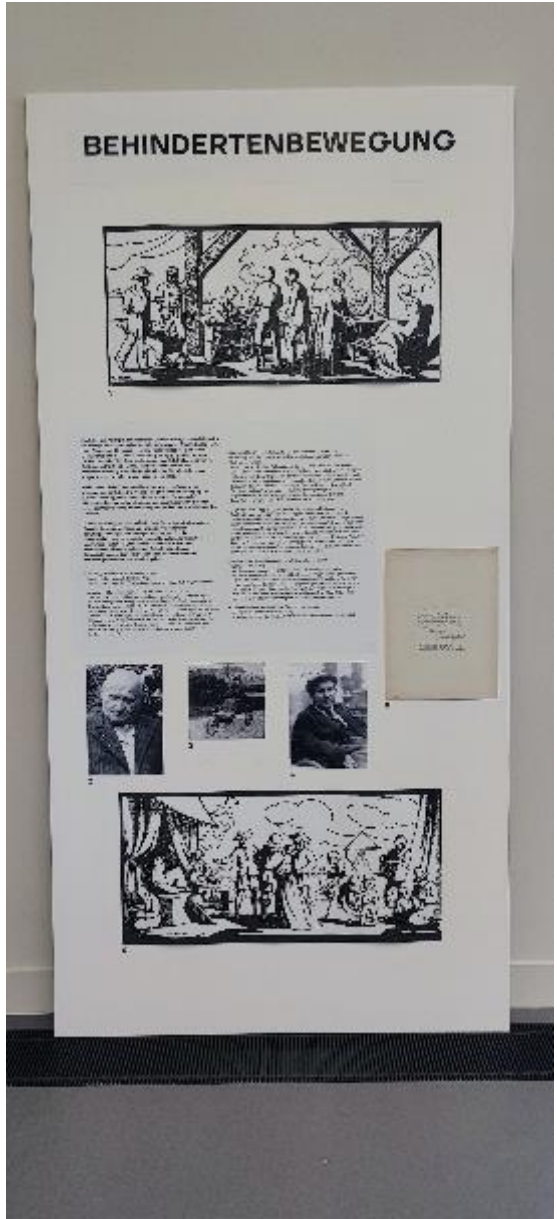
Centre Square, Middlesbrough, TS1 2AZ
mima.art 01642 931232 cc by-nc-sa



2026 MIMA UK
MIDDLESBROUGH

Images of Disability Exhibition March 2025 Hulmboldt Forum – Central Berlin, DE.





BEHINDERTENBEWEGUNG



Die Idee der Behindertenbewegung ist die, dass die Behinderten nicht nur als Opfer betrachtet werden, sondern auch als aktive Teilnehmer an der Gesellschaft. Die Bewegung zielt darauf ab, die Lebensbedingungen der Behinderten zu verbessern und ihre soziale Integration zu fördern. Dies geschieht durch die Schaffung von Arbeitsplätzen, die Ausbildung und die Unterstützung bei der Lebensführung.

Die Behindertenbewegung hat in der Vergangenheit eine wichtige Rolle gespielt, indem sie die Aufmerksamkeit der Öffentlichkeit auf die Probleme der Behinderten gelenkt hat. Durch ihre Arbeit haben sie dazu beigetragen, dass die Behinderten heute besser in der Gesellschaft integriert sind.



Der Krüppel in der Zukunft, Elisabeth Buzek, 1927.
Medizinische Nationalbibliothek, Prag. Ansichtskartenserie der
"Ersten Österreichischen Krüppelarbeitsgemeinschaft".

KUNSTGESCHICHTE



Oskar Joe Fabritz 2025



Images of Disability

17 – 29 March 2026

MIMA, Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art

Presented by Professor Simon McKeown of Teesside University.

A rare opportunity to view select works from the Hans Würtz collection of Images of Disability.

In Berlin, in 1932, Hans Würtz built one of the largest ever exhibitions connected to disability and impairment. The collection uniquely connects art and disability in a cultural manner, beyond a simple cabinet of curiosities.

imagesofdisability.org



Centre Square, Middlesbrough, TS1 2AZ
mima.art 01642 931232 @mimauseful







IMAGES OF DISABILITY

Art and Images from the Witz Collection



INTRODUCTION

The exhibition 'Images of Disability' is a collaborative project made possible through funding from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the University of Manchester, UK, with the support of the National Medical Library, Prague, Czech Republic, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, London. The exhibition is a collaboration between the AHRC, the University of Manchester, the National Medical Library, Prague, Czech Republic, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, London. The exhibition is a collaboration between the AHRC, the University of Manchester, the National Medical Library, Prague, Czech Republic, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, London.



Images of Disability

The exhibition 'Images of Disability' is a collaborative project made possible through funding from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the University of Manchester, UK, with the support of the National Medical Library, Prague, Czech Republic, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, London. The exhibition is a collaboration between the AHRC, the University of Manchester, the National Medical Library, Prague, Czech Republic, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, London.



Images of Disability

The exhibition 'Images of Disability' is a collaborative project made possible through funding from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the University of Manchester, UK, with the support of the National Medical Library, Prague, Czech Republic, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, London. The exhibition is a collaboration between the AHRC, the University of Manchester, the National Medical Library, Prague, Czech Republic, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, London.

Images of Disability

17-29 March 2020

Presented by Professor Simon McLevin

Images of Disability is an exhibition of historical and contemporary images and texts revisiting creative disability research and practice.



WOMEN
in the Würte Collection

**IN CONVERSATION
THE WÜRTE COLLECTION**

Bringing the Würte Collection into the present has meant opening its doors to a new audience. While the collection is a shared one, the collection has become the starting point for a series of conversations and collaborations with contemporary artists and organisations across the South of England.

Artists from 'Invisible History' (Sussex County), 'The Women of Colour' (Black and People of Colour), 'The Women of Colour' (Black and People of Colour) and 'The Women of Colour' (Black and People of Colour) have contributed new work to the collection. It is a shared one, the collection has become the starting point for a series of conversations and collaborations with contemporary artists and organisations across the South of England.

The artists involved are diverse and bring different perspectives to the collection. The artists involved are diverse and bring different perspectives to the collection. The artists involved are diverse and bring different perspectives to the collection.

What began as a small collection of objects has grown into a large collection of objects. What began as a small collection of objects has grown into a large collection of objects. What began as a small collection of objects has grown into a large collection of objects.

The collection is a shared one, the collection has become the starting point for a series of conversations and collaborations with contemporary artists and organisations across the South of England.

Together these artists offer the collection a new perspective. Together these artists offer the collection a new perspective. Together these artists offer the collection a new perspective.



CAFÉ
ENTRANCE










[Accessibility](#)
[Donate](#)
[About](#)
[Contact](#)

[Magazine](#)
[Community](#)
[What's on](#)
[Opportunities](#)
[Resources](#)

[Disability Arts Online](#) > [Review](#) > [Hans Würtz Images of Disability: a small selection demonstrating the huge contribution of disabled people to cultural life](#)

Hans Würtz Images of Disability: a small selection demonstrating the huge contribution of disabled people to cultural life

[Review](#)
[disability representation](#)
[history](#)
[MIMA](#)
[Simon McKeown](#)
[Visual Arts](#)

[North East](#)

Written by: [Alison Wilde](#)
14 May 2026

Images of Disability was an exhibition at Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) from 17 – 29 March 2026. Presented by Simon McKeown, it featured a selection of objects from Hans Würtz's historical collection of disability and impairment-related imagery, alongside contemporary creative responses by local disability groups. Alison Wilde and Stephen Millett give their reflections.



Images of Disability

Hans Würtz compiled his collection of disability-related images and artworks in Germany between 1910 and 1933. Originally comprising over 7,000 items, from antiquity to the interwar period, including oil paintings, sculptures, and glass plate negatives, losses over time have reduced the collection to around 4,500 items; mainly pictures and reproductions. Even with this reduction, this is still a significant and important archive.

As someone who had the privilege of exploring the Hans Würtz archive last year, invited by Simon McKeown to present at the 'For Art History' conference at the University of York (alongside a great team: Rachel Gadsen-Hayton, Alexandra F. Morris, Simon McKeown, Oliver Musenberg), I became fascinated with the archive, and why this multitude of things had been collected. I was especially intrigued by Würtz's reasons for creating the archive – particularly in the period of 1912-1932 – and his clear desire to move attitudes away from deficit-led medical understandings to cultural and pedagogical ones. But most of all, I wondered what the archive could mean to us now.

<https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/reviews/hans-wurtz-images-of-disability-a-small-selection-demonstrating-the-huge-contribution-of-disabled-people-to-cultural-life/>

Why does any of this matter?



Images of Disability: The Würtz Collection reveals that disability has never been absent from society, culture or everyday life. Through extraordinary ivories, sculptures, prints, photographs, and popular imagery collected across centuries, the archive demonstrates how disabled people were continually seen, represented, remembered and materially preserved within European visual culture.

Emerging from the traditions of the *Kunstkammer* and cabinet of curiosities, these objects were not discarded or hidden, but valued, collected and treasured for their artistry, rarity and human significance. The collection challenges contemporary assumptions that disability was historically invisible, instead uncovering a rich and continuous history of presence, participation, creativity and social recognition embedded within art, material culture and collective memory.



Critically museums including the Louvre have chosen to ignore or badly present this history.



The Collection holds immense cultural value and offers a wealth of unexplored material for the analysis of historical images and ‘imagination’ of impairment and disability to be utilised today.

Würtz addressed this concern in his lifetime, arguing that, “My collection [...] should mainly serve as an impulse for [...] literary and religion historians, art researchers, philosophers, psychologists, educators, poets, playwrights and novelists” (Würtz 1932, 73). Progressive sections of the Berlin press commented that the Collection was “unique” and demanded the attention of a museum



We welcome further exhibitions of the collection

With thanks to all the *Images of Disability* team and its supporters

With extra thanks to:

Kath and Andy Barnett and Alexandra Morris

Images of Disability is a collaborative project made possible through funding from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the German Research Council (DFG) with the support of Teesside University, Middlesbrough, UK, Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany and in partnership with the National Medical Library, Prague, Czech Republic and the Jedlicka Institute, Prague, Czech Republic without whom this project would not have been possible.

Please see www.imagesofdisability.org

Professor Simon Mckeown info@simon-mckeown.com

Meet the rest of the team



Karolina Hyžy

Teesside University

Karolina Hyžy is the team's art historian. She is also a widely experienced international provenance researcher. Her task is to analyse the objects in the Würtz Collection within their original and appropriated contexts prior to the Collection's publication and first exhibition in Germany before Hitler was elected Chancellor.



Dr Sebastian Pampuch

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Sebastian Pampuch is a disabled scholar and trained anthropologist. He undertakes research particularly around the representation of disability within the Würtz Collection. His previous research, which resulted in his first book, concerns African exile biographies during the Cold War.



Šimon Krýsl

National Medical Library

Šimon Krýsl is the Head of the NML Medical Museum and expert in the Würtz Collection, Prague (CZ). Besides the Würtz Collection, his research concerns Jewish medicine in the Czech lands and the history of health education and medical technology.



Petr Kolář

Jedlička Institute, CZ

Petr Kolář is a conservator and expert in the Würtz Collection, Prague (CZ).



Veronika Löblová,

National Medical Library

PhDr. Veronika Löblová, is the Librarian of the NML Medical Museum and Curator of the Würtz Collection, Prague (CZ).



Dr Paul Darke

Videographer, UK

Dr Paul Darke is an independent film maker and director of Outside Centre (UK).

Sample Literature

Berger, John (1972): *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin Books (based on the BBC television series of the same name)

Fuchs, Petra (2001): *»Körperbehinderte« zwischen Selbstaufgabe und Emanzipation: Selbsthilfe - Integration - Aussonderung*. Luchterhand 2001.

Mey, Günter/Dietrich, Marc (2016): From Text to Image—Shaping a Visual Grounded Theory Methodology. *FQS* 17(2), Art. 2.

Musenberg, Oliver: (2002). *Der Körperbehindertenpädagoge Hans Würtz (1875–1958): eine kritische Würdigung des psychologischen und pädagogischen Konzeptes vor dem Hintergrund seiner Biografie*. Kovač.

Musenberg, Oliver (2014): *»Das Material ist völlig unbefangen gesammelt« – der Pädagoge Hans Würtz und eine »Krüppelbilder- und Plastikensammlung«*. In O. Musenberg (Hrsg.), *Kultur – Geschichte – Behinderung. Die kulturwissenschaftliche Historisierung von Behinderung* (S. 183–205). Athena-Verlag.

Müller, Michael R. (2012): Figurative Hermeneutik. Zur methodologischen Konzeption einer Wissenssoziologie des Bildes (Figurative Hermeneutics. On the methodological conception of a sociology of knowledge of the image). *sozialersinn*, Volume 1/2012, 13, pp. 129–161.

Osten, Philipp (2004): *Die Modellanstalt. Über den Aufbau einer „modernen Krüppelfürsorge“ 1905–1933*. Mabuse Verlag, Frankfurt am Main.

Schönwiese, Volker/Wegscheider, Angela (2023): *“Don’t forget about self-help” the fight for disability rights in Austria in the 1920s and 1930s*, *Disability & Society*, 38:6, pp 1009–1028, DOI:10.1080/09687599.2021.1976111

Würtz, Hans (1932): *Zerbrecht die Krücken. Krüppel-Probleme der Menschheit. Schicksalsstiefkinder aller Zeiten und Völker in Wort und Bild*. Verlag Leopold Voss, Leipzig.

Dodd, Jocelyn et al (2004): *Buried in the Footnotes: The Representation of Disabled People in Museum and Gallery Collections*

Pierre Bourdieu (1979): *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*