

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

'Van Gogh, Cézanne, Monet – The Bührle Collection Visits the Kunsthaus Zürich' **12 February to 16 May 2010**

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1. EMIL GEORG BÜHRLE (1890–1956)

Born in 1890 in Pforzheim, in Baden, Germany, Emil Bührle studied literature and art history at the Universities of Freiburg and Munich until the outbreak of the First World War saw him called up to serve in the German army. When the war ended, Bührle, along with his unit, was temporarily billeted in Magdeburg, where he met and, in 1920, married Charlotte Schalk, the daughter of a banker. Bührle joined a local tool and machine company in which his father-in-law had a stake. In 1924 Bührle took over management of the Schweizerische Werkzeugmaschinenfabrik Oerlikon near Zurich. Banned under the Treaty of Versailles, the German weapons industry was effectively outsourced to neighbouring countries, and Bührle's refinement of the Becker cannon, named for its inventor, at the behest of the German military command was part of what would come to be known as 'covert German armament'. Under Bührle's direction, the Oerlikon works thus grew to be one of Switzerland's major industrial heavyweights. In 1937 Bührle became a Swiss citizen, and soon thereafter sole owner of the Werkzeugmaschinenfabrik Oerlikon, Bührle & Co. He bought a large house in Zurich's Zollikerstrasse and began to collect art.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Bührle found himself in the difficult position to ensure his company sufficient raw materials and orders, and to reconcile these needs, in close collaboration with the Swiss federal government, with the interests of a neutral Switzerland spared involvement in the hostilities of war. His company's economic success was consolidated during the postwar period, as the nascent Cold War soon brought him orders from the USA and other members of NATO. When he died in 1956, Bührle left behind a broadly diversified company with international scope.

2. THE GROWTH OF THE BÜHRLE COLLECTION

Soon after purchasing a large house in Zurich's Zollikerstrasse in 1937, Emil Bührle began to acquire paintings, focusing from the start mainly on the French school. During the war years, the industrialist purchased some one hundred pieces from the Galerie Fischer in Lucerne, among other dealers, 13 of which proved after the war to have been stolen by Germans from their owners in occupied France and transferred to Switzerland. Although their eventual return was the object of considerable interest, Bührle was subsequently able to re-purchase nine of the 13.

In 1948 Bührle purchased Paul Cézanne's 'Boy in the Red Vest', one of the painter's best-known pieces, and in 1949 he acquired Auguste Renoir's 'Little Irene' from the portrait's subject. In both cases the collector was prepared to pay prices higher than what he was spending for significant Old Master paintings at the time, evidence of his increasing will to concentrate on French modernism. Bührle's deep pockets thus financed one of the last collections of international standing devoted to French

Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting. On his frequent trips to New York, London and Paris, among other destinations, the collector was able to inspect the offerings of the great art dealers in person. He enjoyed especially trusting relations with Arthur Kauffmann in London and Fritz Nathan in Zurich, and purchased numerous pieces as well from the Marlborough Fine Art Ltd. Gallery in London, Walter Feilchenfeldt in Zurich, Max Kaganovitch in Paris, and Paul Rosenberg, Germain Seligman and Georges Wildenstein in New York.

The intensive last phase of the collection was heralded in 1951 with the acquisition of three important paintings by Vincent van Gogh, including his 'Sower', from the heirs of Franz von Mendelssohn, a Berlin banker. In the case of Cézanne, Gauguin and van Gogh in particular, Bührle's aim was to juxtapose masterpieces with examples that demonstrated the individual development of the three great Post-Impressionists, showing, as a contemporary critic put it, the interaction between the passage of history and an individual's contribution. Although focusing in his choices on Impressionism to the end, Bührle was not unsusceptible to the art of his own era, however indirectly this interest was expressed. He began adding Fauves and Cubist works to his collection, and thus to include in it the forerunners of the Abstract school that would emerge in the 1950s. Bührle was also quite systematic in his collection of older artworks, explaining in a lecture he delivered at the University of Zurich in June of 1954 how he had discovered bridges to the past in the work of the French 19th century: 'Ultimately, Daumier led to Rembrandt, and Manet to Frans Hals. And, once in the 17th century, it was inevitable that I would discover an interest in other Dutch and Flemish masters... And finally, the striking atmospheric affinity of the true proponents of Impressionism with the Venetians of the 18th century led me to Canaletto, Guardi and Tiepolo.'

A large proportion of the collection amassed by Emil Bührle by the time of his death in 1956 is today held by a foundation.

3. PICTURES AND THEIR PROVENANCE

As of 1948, lawsuits at the chamber newly set up to assess the issue of looted art at the Swiss Federal Court in Lausanne (13) established the ownership of pictures purloined in France. Emil Bührle owned 13 of the 77 pictures stolen in France and retrieved in Switzerland. The lawsuit between him and the dealer Paul Rosenberg, who now lived in New York, was the first to be concluded; other court decisions were taken in 1949. Emil Bührle subsequently proposed to buy the pictures from their owners a second time. Of the 13 looted paintings, nine thus became Bührle's rightful property, and he returned the remaining four. The last transaction was concluded in February 1951.

Following the lawsuits of 1948/49 concerning looted art, the Swiss Federal Court determined that Emil Bührle had acquired the pictures stolen in France in good faith, and ordered the vendors to pay back the sums they had received. Bührle's financial losses thus remained within limits, but he was made acutely aware of the importance of carefully clarifying the origins of works of art.

From 1948, Emil Bührle employed a special secretary for the collection. His function was, not least, to compile information on the provenance and exhibition history as well as to gather specialist literature on all the artworks acquired. By comparison with other collections of the period, the pictures in the Bührle Collection are very well documented, even if information on previous ownership is by no means available for all works. At times, dealers withheld the information requested because they were afraid that revealing their sources would mean they were passed over in subsequent transactions.

Importance has always been attached to provenance, particularly that of Old Master pictures. The pedigree of a work coming from one or several famous collections was considered to be an indication of its authenticity, as guaranteed by the connoisseurship of its previous owners. Originating from a well-known collection could also be a mark of cachet for modern works. Since 1990, many new questions concerning looted assets and 'flight assets' in the form of art works have been the subject of

discussion – in connection with some spectacular restitutions. This has led to an even more intense awareness of provenance research than was the case in the 1950s.

In the exhibition's documentation area, three pictures from the Bührle Collection serve as examples of

- poorly documented provenance
- well-documented provenance
- incompletely documented provenance.

The information currently available on the provenance of all works owned by the Foundation Collection E.G. Bührle is to be found at www.buehrle.ch.

Poorly documented provenance

Emil Bührle bought 'Canal della Giudecca (S. Maria della Salute), Venice', by Paul Signac in June 1951 from the German dealer Hugo Perls, who had emigrated to New York. No invoice for the purchase has survived, and the information that we do have we owe primarily to the register and the card index of the Bührle Collection.

In the catalogue of the artist's work compiled by his granddaughter, well-known dealers and collectors are mentioned as previous owners. These include the industrialist Bernhard Koehler, whose house in Berlin was completely destroyed in 1945. It is difficult, indeed impossible to verify this historic information.

Well-documented provenance

Emil Bührle acquired 'Santa Maria della Salute, Venice', by Antonio Canal (il Canaletto) in April 1953 from Marlborough Fine Art Ltd. in London, where he was a frequent client. The painting had previously hung in the same place for almost 200 years, and its remaining provenance is also fully documented. The picture was ordered directly from the artist for John Campbell, second Duke of Argyll and first Duke of Greenwich, who displayed it at Adderbury House, Oxfordshire. Inherited by Campbell's daughter, it was taken from Adderbury after 1766 to Dalkeith Castle near Edinburgh, seat of the Dukes of Buccleuch and Queensbury. Catalogues dating from the years 1854, 1890 and 1911 prove that the picture hung there permanently. In 1952, two London dealers acquired it jointly from the Duke of Buccleuch. As the surviving invoice indicates, one of them sold it to Emil Bührle shortly afterwards.

Incompletely documented provenance

Emil Bührle bought the 'Sultane' by Edouard Manet in September 1953 from the French dealer Paul Rosenberg, who had emigrated to New York. The painting's provenance can be reconstructed over long periods, but important documentation is also missing. This has recently led to controversy.

Manet painted the picture in about 1871, probably as a present for his friend, the art critic Adrien Marx, as the dedication –painted over but now again visible – suggests. The 'Sultane' subsequently went to Marx's nephew Roger Marx, with whose estate it was auctioned off in Paris in 1913.

The Parisian art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel acquired the picture at the auction. However, no buyer could be found for the 'Sultane' for the next fifteen years. In 1928 it must have been acquired by the industrialist Max Silberberg in Breslau. No evidence documenting the purchase and payment of the asking price has survived, although the picture was published in several exhibition catalogues and in specialist literature from that year onwards as owned by 'Max Silberberg, Breslau'.

With the date '1937' and provenance 'Silberberg', the picture appears in the sales book of the Paul Rosenberg Gallery, which was domiciled both in Paris and in New York at that time. In 1939, Rosenberg sent the 'Sultane' from Paris to New York, while other pictures in his possession remained behind in France and were confiscated by the Germans.

What exactly happened to the picture between 1928 and 1937 can be only partially reconstructed. It is proven that Max Silberberg suffered heavy losses in the world economic crisis of 1929 and put the most valuable pictures in his collection up for auction in Paris in June 1932 – before the National Socialists seized power in Germany.

'La Sultane' was not in this auction, but the picture was displayed at sales exhibitions in New York and Paris as of 1934, and – according to current knowledge – never returned to Germany, until Paul Rosenberg acquired it in Paris in 1937.

The question of whether the 'Sultane' was sold for economic motives resulting from the world economic crisis or whether this divestment was a politically enforced loss caused by the Nazis' persecution of the Jews gives rise to differing interpretations.

Max Silberberg died in Auschwitz as a victim of National Socialism. His son Alfred Silberberg emigrated to England, where he built a new life for himself.

Silberberg's appearance on the list with all the other previous owners of the 'Sultane' given on the sales invoice issued at the time proves that neither the vendor, Paul Rosenberg, nor the buyer, Emil Bührle, was aware of any kind of irregularity when Rosenberg sold the picture to Bührle in 1953.

In the case of various pictures in the Bührle Collection sold during the war years, concerning which there was a temporary suspicion of irregularities in their previous history, it has since been proven that they were sold in orderly transactions – regular sales in difficult times.

4. THE FOUNDATION E.G. BÜHRLE COLLECTION AND THE ZÜRCHER KUNSTGESELLSCHAFT

Toward the end of his life, Bührle began to think about giving his collection a lasting form. Instead of creating his own gallery, however, he donated to the city of Zurich and to the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft an exhibition wing annexed to the existing Kunsthhaus. Bührle's participation in the life of the Kunsthhaus Zürich had commenced some time earlier. He had joined the collection committee of the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft in 1940 and, as a member of the board from 1944 to 1956, mainly oversaw the exhibition wing he had donated. In addition, his building fund also financed the museum's acquisition of Auguste Rodin's 'Gates of Hell' and two of Monet's water-lily paintings for its collection.

In 1958, in Bührle's memory, his collection was shown at the Kunsthhaus Zürich, and two years later his widow and children, Dieter and Hortense, founded the Foundation E.G. Bührle Collection, whose board for long has included the Director of the Kunsthhaus, as it does to this day. The collection, to which the family donated some two hundred paintings and sculptures through the foundation, took on international stature, with selected pieces shown under the title 'The Passionate Eye' in 1990/91 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Royal Academy of Arts in London, as well as in Montreal and Yokohama. The private museum in Zollikerstrasse in Zurich has attracted about 10'000 visitors annually. In 2006 the Foundation E.G. Bührle Collection and the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft agreed to move the collection to a permanent home in the planned Kunsthhaus extension on Heimplatz. When the collection, which still misses two valuable paintings stolen in February 2008, will be installed there, it will be available to the admiring gaze of many hundreds of thousands of visitors every year.

5. A COMMON FUTURE IN THE KUNSTHAUS EXTENSION

The Foundation E.G. Bührle Collection and the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft are joining forces to create the leading centre for French Impressionism outside of Paris.

Today, 60 years after it first saw the light of day, Emil Bührle's is still one of the leading collections of 20th-century art. It focuses on French Impressionist painting, which has always enjoyed vivid interest in Switzerland and is also represented in the Kunsthaus Zürich's own collection.

At the Bührle Collection's current home, however, in Zurich's Zollikerstrasse, the private collection had been seen annually by no more than 10,000 visitors before even those numbers dwindled to just a few hundred following the notorious robbery in February of 2008. The Kunsthaus, on the other hand, welcomes between 200,000 and 300,000 guests each year, eager to view its examples of French painting and of the schools that preceded and followed it.

For this reason, the Foundation E.G. Bührle Collection has accepted the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft's invitation to move into the Kunsthaus extension on Heimplatz, which is due to be completed by 2015. David Chipperfield's design offers the Collection over 1000 m² of display area, or more than a quarter of the space reserved in the extension building for the museum's permanent collection; the skylights planned for the extension's second upper level will afford ideal lighting conditions for the exhibition of just such Impressionist open-air paintings as the Bührle Collection boasts. The combination of the Kunsthaus Zürich's own collection with the Bührle Collection will make the museum Europe's leading centre for French Impressionism outside of Paris. The artistic concept for the New Kunsthaus provides for the museum's examples of classical modernism to be juxtaposed with the Collection's holdings, and thus to offer the viewing public a seamless experience of the epoch.

About 180 works are to be entrusted to the Kunsthaus for an unlimited period. In turn, the Kunsthaus undertakes to maintain the Collection, and to present it as a unified collection into perpetuity. The Foundation will be unable to remove the Collection, whether in its entirety or in part, so long as the Kunstgesellschaft cleaves to its undertaking to exhibit the Collection as an integral whole in the rooms provided for it within the complex. The Foundation may not sell any of the works comprised by the Collection.

The Foundation E.G. Bührle Collection will continue to enjoy juridical autonomy when the works of art move to their new location. Since the Foundation has no financial means at its disposal, the collector's family are studying the feasibility of a private donation to the Kunsthaus extension. The permanent loan of the paintings is itself of incalculable value.

Zurich and the Kunstgesellschaft alike routinely profited during Emil Bührle's lifetime from his active championing of the Kunsthaus Zürich; indeed, works like Claude Monet's large-format water lilies and Auguste Rodin's 'Gates of Hell', which are among the industrialist's gifts to the museum, have become an integral part of Switzerland's oldest combined collection and exhibition space. Furthermore, by financing an exhibition wing for the museum in the 1950s Emil Georg Bührle created a venue used to this day for unique events at which art and its public are brought face to face. Provided Zurich's electorate approves the necessary credit facility, to be put to a popular vote in 2011, the extension project from the drawing board of the renowned British architect will be built in all its pristine elegance, and the traditional collaboration of public museum and private collection will continue. If, however, the credit facility is not approved, Zurich will have missed its chance, and the Collection will remain in its present private museum, where security risks and restricted infrastructure render it inaccessible to the greater part of the public.

Zurich is thus faced with a unique opportunity: to consolidate in the form of a permanent partnership the affinity first recognized two generations ago. Together, the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft, the Board of the Foundation E.G. Bührle Collection and the collector's family have set their sights on success at the polls – among other things by staging a show of the Bührle Collection at the Kunsthaus Zürich, to run from 12 February to 16 May 2010. The exhibition includes comprehensive documentation of the history of the E.G. Bührle Collection, as well as a discussion of the Collection's future at the side of the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft.