

# The Life and Career of Hubert Looser

## Personal details

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| Born                | 5 April 1938 in Vilters/Sargans (Switzerland)                     |
| Married             | to Ursula Looser-Stingelin  |
| Two children        | from 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage: son (1969), daughter (1976)        |
| Siblings            | 7 children in total, of whom Hubert Looser is the second youngest |
|                     | Grew up and attended school in Vilters                            |
|                     | Parents were businesspeople who founded the company ELCO          |
| 1965                | Death of father   |
| 1977                | Death of mother   |
| Places of residence | Previously Zurich and Basel, and (since 1986) Zurich              |
| 1988: Foundation    | Established the Fondation Hubert Looser                           |
| address             | Fondation Hubert Looser, Freudenbergstrasse 140, 8044 Zurich      |

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## Education:

Primary and secondary school in Vilters  
Commercial apprenticeship at Micafil AG, Zurich  
Military service: officer in the armoured infantry  
Language schools in Paris, London and New York  
MBA from Columbia University, New York

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| 1958-1960 | Language courses and internships in Paris, London and New York   |
| 1960-1962 | MBA at Columbia University in New York   |
| 1962-1963 | 3-month stays in Mexico and Tokyo (Shell Japan)  |
| 1963-1964 | 3-month journey through Asia, visiting numerous cultural sites in Cambodia (Angkor Wat), Indonesia and Taiwan (museums of Chinese art). Visited the numerous temples of the Khmer civilization. These sparked my interest in prehistoric art; I purchased prints of the celebrated mural bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat (and later two Khmer sculptures). My cultural journey also took me through India, Pakistan, Iran and Egypt. |

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## Professional career:

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| 1964      | Joined the ELCO heating systems group  |
| 1964-1980 | Built up and headed the ELCO Group in France, Belgium and Luxembourg, with a production site in Mulhouse |
| 1966      | Inauguration of the ELCO assembly plant in Mulhouse  |
| 1969      | Remaco AG business brokerage firm established with the aim of diversifying ELCO                          |
| 1973      | Takeover of office technology firm Walter Rentsch AG   |
| 1973-1992 | Headed the Walter Rentsch Group, expanding it from 120 employees to 1,200                                |
| 1983      | Firm taken public as Walter Rentsch AG   |
| 1986      | ELCO Looser Holding AG taken public  |

1990/92      Stepped down as CEO of the two groups

### **Hobbies:**

History and art of ancient cultures, contemporary art  
jazz, swimming, golf, cultural holidays, capital markets, literature

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### **Humanitarian activity as a counterbalance to collecting**

1993-2011    After selling my shares in the company, I devoted considerable time to finding a new purpose in life. I had founded the **Fondation Hubert Looser** in 1988, with the aim of donating some of my wealth to the disabled and children in need, and to educating young people in countries such as Cambodia, Albania and Romania and in Africa. Later came AIDS projects in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Nigeria. Over the years, these activities took me to many countries where we supported or helped establish some 40 relief organizations and projects. The social divide that I witnessed there, with poverty and hopelessness on one side and art, wealth and excess on the other, made a profound impact on me and shaped my sense of social responsibility.

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### **Art:**

#### **First steps**

- 1957            While I was in Paris studying French, a Swiss man sold me some of his posters (including works by Marquet); and so my interest in art began.
- 1961            While studying in Spanish in Mexico, I visited artists' exhibitions on a public square in Mexico City on Sundays.  
I bought my first pictures by the Mexican Rodolfo Lonzano.
- 1962            As part of my training, I spent three months as an intern at Shell in Japan.  
Visited Japanese artists.
- 1965            At a school reunion in Appenzell, I discovered the local artist Karl Liner. I subsequently visited him regularly over a ten-year period, and purchased figurative and abstract works by both Liner and his father. Karl Liner introduced me to abstract art.

#### **The concept for my Swiss collection**

1970-1980    While living in Basel, I regularly visited galleries and museums. I bought pictures and sculptures, both for myself and for the Rentsch and ELCO companies, initially in Basel and later in Zurich. They included artists from the Gruppe 33 and others, such as Brignoni, Bodmer, Klotz, Eble, Schaffner, Seeligman, Aeppli, Le Corbusier, Glarner, Benazzi, Tinguely, Luginbühl, Thomkins, Oppenheim, von Moos, Wiemken and Weber. I often met the Basel artist Tavernaro for lunch, and learned a great deal about his work and art in general.

1985-1995 At Art Basel I encountered celebrated Swiss artists such as Soutter and Giacometti, and resolved to move my collecting onto a higher plane. The purchase of the Giacometti sculpture 'Annette,' with its wonderful patina, was my first major step into the 'big league' of art, the completion and culmination of my Swiss collection. 'Annette' became the benchmark for my subsequent collecting.

## **Expanding the collection to Europe**

I bought art not with any particular plan in mind, but simply because it appealed to me. I soon realized that what interested me most was the informal and the painterly – but also art that was surreal. In the 1970s I was a fairly frequent visitor to the Beyeler Gallery, drawing inspiration from the unique quality and modernity of the collector and gallery owner Ernst Beyeler. His art, though, was on the expensive side, and at the time I did not have the wherewithal to buy the works on offer.

Among the Europeans, I collected artists such as Baselitz, Graubner, Uecker, Piene, Merz, Penone, Vedova, Kounellis, Long, Caro, Cragg, Venet and Arman.

**1996** I saw Picasso's 1954 sculpture 'Sylvette' in an auction catalogue. I was spending three months in Mexico, brushing up my Spanish and visiting a number of cultural sites. To attend the auction I had to go to New York, which involved an extremely taxing, six-hour car drive from the hinterland of Mexico. It was the first time I had been to an auction and I was very nervous. As the bidding went on and the price inexorably rose, I began to sweat. But I won out in the end, and 'Sylvette' was mine. To this day, I'm overjoyed when that sculpture – a central work by Picasso – is shown in the big museums, such as the Guggenheim in New York in 2012. It contains within it the entire spectrum of Picasso's artistic skills: sculpture, painting and drawing. (Its relationship with the works by David Smith in my collection is striking.)

## **Expanding the collection to the US**

### **Focus on Abstract Expressionism**

**From 1995** I regularly attended Art Basel and other art fairs. I decided to devote the remainder of my assets to establishing a renowned international collection. I visited museums abroad, especially in the US, where I soon encountered works of high quality. I focused exclusively on buying major pieces by influential figures who had informed the work of younger artists. For me, what mattered was quality not quantity.

Initially, my attention was drawn to artists such as de Kooning and Ellsworth Kelly, a number of whose works I was able to acquire. Following the economic downturn of the early 1990s, the art market was at a low. Buyers in the top price segment were few and far between. Moreover, the two artists were scarcely represented in European museums. Before an auction in New York, Ellsworth Kelly found out who had bought his picture from the 1970s in London. And since that person was me, I had

the opportunity to meet Kelly in person. We met in New York, where he showed me his sculptures on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum. I was immediately struck by the stele 'Homage à Roy Lichtenstein.' I declared my interest in purchasing this sculpture, but was turned down by his gallery dealer. He informed me that Kelly produced only a few sculptures, and preferred to place them in museums. I didn't give up, though; and around two years later Kelly was in Zurich. I offered to place this sculpture in a public space in the city. We evaluated a number of possible locations, mainly on the lakeside promenade. He wasn't keen, and so I suggested that I could redesign my Japanese entrance garden to fit in with his sculpture. He agreed, and in 1999 I received the sculpture.

I made frequent visits to museums in Chicago, Washington, Houston and New York, in order to train my eye. I discovered that I was just as interested in Cy Twombly, Richard Tuttle and the Minimalists Donald Judd, Agnes Martin and Robert Ryman as I was in de Kooning and Kelly.

But de Kooning was my priority; I gained access to his estate via three gallery owners who were both surprised and pleased that a European was interested in the artist.

**2000**

I bought de Kooning's sculpture 'Hostess' in a gallery in Zurich, as well as a picture from 1977. Through tireless learning and training my eye, I was now sufficiently adept to exchange this work for an even more important one by de Kooning that I discovered a year later in a partner gallery in New York. I acted immediately; and this was another crucial moment in my efforts to raise the collection to a new standard of quality.

Shortly afterwards, I spent a week in New York and purchased a number of de Kooning catalogues from dealers. They contained pictures from the artist's late phase, beginning in 1983. In fact, I only really wanted one picture, some 2 m x 2 m in size; but when I asked a gallery owner where I might find the 1984-85 triptych depicted in one of the catalogues, I was told that it had been reserved for the National Museum in Washington. However, the museum took more than a year to make up its mind; and so it was that I was able to purchase this historic altarpiece, with its three panels measuring roughly 2 m x 2 m, which had been commissioned for St. Peter's Church on Lexington Avenue. It was another milestone in my collection.

In the years that followed I discovered the artist David Smith, who was also little known in Europe. In a gallery in London, I saw an exhibition of works by numerous artists from the period around 1945. Among them was a sculpture, 'Women Music' by David Smith, which embodied both Cubism and Surrealism. I bought it, along with an important drawing from 1932 entitled 'Hudson River' which had formed the basis for the monumental sculpture in the Whitney Museum. I was subsequently able to visit David Smith's estate and purchase more drawings. At the same time, I saw the striking outdoor sculpture 'Arc in Quote' in the stores of a New York gallery, and I finally acquired it after some tough negotiations.

Heiner Bastian, a well-known Berlin art consultant, showed me the Cy Twombly exhibition that he was curating at the Nationalgalerie. I remained in contact with him, and he played a key role in increasing my awareness of

quality in art. He acted as intermediary in my acquisition of four of the key works in my collection: two oil paintings and two sculptures by Cy Twombly. Probably the most protracted purchase I have ever made was 'Untitled 1986' by Cy Twombly.

I consider it one of the most important sculptures he ever produced, and I had to keep an eye on it for five years until I was finally able to acquire the work – the only one available at the time.

## **The dialogue principle**

At the same time, I became aware of the dialogues between artists and works. I was, for example, excited to discover how ancient Egyptian art had influenced Giacometti and Cy Twombly.

I was also fascinated by the dialogue between de Kooning and the sculptures of Chamberlain. In one of my rooms, these two major artists of post-war Abstract Expressionism come face to face.

I was also able to acquire works by other major artists, including Agnes Martin, Robert Ryman and Tony Smith. The purchase of Tony Smith's large sculpture 'Ten Elements' was the final big high point of my collecting. I now had a major focus on Minimal Art.

It was important for me to buy works by artists who have little or no profile in European museums. I was invariably attracted to tactility, originality, sensitivity, the sensual, emotional and spiritual. And of course the quality of the works was another important criterion.

Interestingly, either I failed to understand Pop Art or it simply wasn't among my favourite forms.

For me, the Italian Giuseppe Penone is an important European representative of Arte Povera. The first work by him that I acquired was the sculpture 'Grand Geste Végétal.' I bought it in 1989 on a whim, without the slightest knowledge of the artist. Ten years later I had the opportunity to visit Penone at his studio in Turin, and I was impressed by the diversity of his output. I was able to purchase an important sculpture, 'Ombra die Terra,' at an exhibition of Penone's work in the Centre Georges Pompidou. I invited him to Zurich, showed him my collection, and asked him to design two rooms in the cellar to accommodate my sculptures and other works by him that I planned to acquire. The two rooms by Penone now form a counterpoint to the American art of de Kooning and Chamberlain in the adjoining two rooms, so creating a dialogue between them.

This led on to the next step in my collecting. I was fascinated by the idea of extending the dialogue between the US and Europe, and so I acquired a large drawing by Arshile Gorky from 1932. You can trace Gorky's works back to their European origins, and the relationship to Miró and Picasso is obvious. In the US he was friendly with de Kooning, and he influenced both him and large sections of the American artistic community in their awareness of Surrealism from Europe.

Simultaneously, in my collection I set up a dialogue between Gorky and Swiss Surrealists such as Brignoni, Seeligman and Thomkins.

Since my collection was by now heavily dominated by American artists, I wanted to establish another counterpoint with a European artist. This I

managed to do with 'Anthropologie 37' (1960) by another artistic pioneer, the Frenchman Yves Klein.

From around 2006, the art market saw strong demand for well-known contemporary artists. Prices rocketed, and I was unable to keep up. I therefore switched to collecting less well-known artists; in a gallery in Zurich, I encountered first Al Taylor and later the French artist Fabienne Verdier.

Al Taylor's art is impossible to categorize as belonging to any school or indeed artistic movement.

The use of found everyday objects as 'occupation of the gap between life and art' can be seen as a homage to his first employer, Robert Rauschenberg.

My aim with Al Taylor was to bridge the gap to the avant garde. I did the same with a 1992 work by Richard Serra.

My interest in calligraphy dates back to the time I spent in Asia during my youth. The fascination with those artists and their skill in the media of paper and pottery came about when I was in Japan in 1963. Later, I purchased works by the Swiss Hugo Weber and ventured further into this area with Motherwell. In Fabienne Verdier, I found an artist who spent 10 years in China under the most difficult conditions imaginable, learning the art from older calligraphers, and is now regarded as one of the foremost practitioners of the technique. She produces large, expressive works, some of which I have added to my collection.

My interest in new media is reflected in a minimalist photo series by Joshua Cooper and a digital installation by Charles Sandison, though I haven't gone into this area in depth.

My collection roughly represents the period of my life from my thirties to the present day, with a clear focus on the informal, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism.

## **Looking back**

My collection is a small stone in a mosaic of art, focusing mainly on the period from the 1960s to around 2005. The freedom to collect either with or without a plan gives us collectors the chance to make one-off purchases of art that we then place in a private context, thereby giving them new meaning.

The contact with gallery owners from Switzerland, Europe and the United States has meant a particularly great deal to me. I regularly visited them in their galleries or at art fairs, striking up lasting relationships with some of them. The countless visits to museums trained my eye, gave me new ideas about how to present the works, provided access to artists both familiar and previously unknown to me in multifarious contexts, and fuelled my hunger for outstanding art. I am particularly grateful to have had the opportunity to meet curators and, through regular exchange, profit from their broad and

sometimes unbelievably in-depth knowledge. The high points of my collecting have of course been the personal contacts with various artists. I feel both honoured and extremely privileged to have encountered these individuals and their ways of thinking, to have visited studios crammed full of examples of their work, to have talked with them or even developed an idea for a commission.

Another challenge was to constantly measure the quality of the works I was looking to buy against those in museums. I soon realized that museums have large numbers of pictures in their possession, and can only exhibit around 10% of them. Because I was contemplating the idea of placing my collection in a museum one day, I wanted to collect only works by artists who are largely or completely absent from Swiss and European museums. I wanted pictures and sculptures that would have a fair chance of being exhibited to the public in a museum on account of their quality and the fact that they filled a gap, rather than languishing in a cellar and costing money.

### **The future of the collection**

After a number of years searching, I've found a partner that shares my philosophy and with which I can achieve my goals. The Kunsthaus Zürich will keep the groups of works and masterpieces that I've collected in the Fondation Hubert Looser together and make them accessible to the public on a long-term basis. To that end, the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft and the Fondation Hubert Looser signed an agreement in April 2012 that will enable the Kunsthaus Zürich to choose 70 works from my collection and exhibit them on long-term loan from 2017 in the Kunsthaus extension by David Chipperfield.

My collection is an outstanding addition to the holdings of the Kunsthaus Zürich: six new works – including earlier pieces – by the American artist Cy Twombly will complement the important group already held by the Kunsthaus. The art of John Chamberlain and David Smith will provide a striking counterpoint to the Abstract Expressionism of Jackson Pollock. The Kunsthaus will be able to display a representative gathering of wall-mounted sculptures by Donald Judd. Ellsworth Kelly and Al Taylor, too, have until now been significantly under-represented. One exceptional new highlight is my ensemble of nine works by Willem de Kooning, including the triptych from 1985 and the celebrated bronze sculpture 'Hostess' from 1973. There are also two paintings by the important abstract artist Agnes Martin – the first to enter the Kunsthaus – as well as prints by Brice Marden, while two images by Robert Ryman will establish a dialogue with those in the Kunsthaus collection. The mythical and archaic qualities of nature, hitherto represented at the Kunsthaus primarily by the works of Joseph Beuys and Mario Merz, are afforded new prominence with the addition of installations by Giuseppe Penone, while sculptures by Lucio Fontana complement the ensemble of his 'Concetti spaziali.' My large outdoor sculptural installation by Tony Smith will find a new home in the art garden.

I am delighted to be joining forces with the Kunsthaus Zürich, which will be staging dynamic presentations of its own collection from 2017 onwards, with annually changing constellations featuring its own works, those from the Looser Collection and, perhaps, other pieces on loan. The curators will

have several hundred square metres of space in which to showcase my preference for thematically arranged juxtapositions of different genres and formats. Hundreds of thousands of visitors a year will have the opportunity to see the Looser Collection at a prominent location in the heart of Zurich.

Before moving to the Kunsthaus Zürich for the exhibition that runs from 7 June to 8 September 2013, the Hubert Looser Collection received an outing in 2012 at the Bank Austria Kunstforum in Vienna. 'The Hubert Looser Collection,' published by Hatje Cantz, provides an enduringly valuable overview of my passion as a collector and the power of the collection, which present and future generations will better be able to appreciate once it is finally shown in public in Switzerland.

Zurich, 1 March 2013