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A summer house for modern art

Art enthusiasts visit the Beyeler Foundation in Riehen near Basel in their droves. Every exhibition held is a hit with the public. The museum, which opened in 1997, is the legacy of Ernst Beyeler, one of the leading art dealers in the period after the Second World War.

By Gerhard Mack

The lady does not exactly look out at the world graciously – one eye stares at us and the other is empty. Her arms are placed behind her head, her breasts are splayed, and the rest of her body is merely outlined. The similarity that the woman bears to Pablo Picasso's "Desmoiselles d'Avignon" is unmistakable. He painted the study in 1907, the same year in which he brought together prostitutes from this town in southern France to produce an epochal portrait of modernity. Cubism, the dissection of the body into various viewpoints, drawing on so-called primitive art from cultures beyond Europe, embraced everything that would shape art over the coming decades.

It certainly was not beautiful. Yet, the painting almost caused a marital breakdown. The Basel gallery owner Ernst Beyeler needed cash urgently. An opportunity had once again arisen to purchase a unique piece of art. He would gladly have given up Picasso's study for it. His wife Hildy was outraged. The French Madame had adorned their living room for years. She had been through good and bad times with them and had become part of the family. And she was now expected to give up her place. Not a chance! If that were to happen, then she would leave, too. "I preferred to keep Picasso and my wife," Ernst Beyeler later explained with a sense of irony.

Picasso, a friend

Picasso was the godfather of 20th-century art as far as Ernst Beyeler was concerned, and visitors to the Beyeler Foundation today will clearly recognise him as the leading light of the collection and the museum. A splendid room is usually dedicated to the Spaniard. And if a temporary exhibition takes up the majority of the rooms, his works are presented in relationship to it in dialogue form.

Ernst Beyeler got to know the painter personally and visited him on several occasions in the south of France. The most notable encounter was probably their first meeting at Picasso's home in Mougins in 1966, when the 45-year-old art dealer was given permission



Pablo Picasso's "Femme" played an important role in the lives of the couple Hildy and Ernst Beyeler

to freely select works. Jean Plangue, a painter friend living in Paris, had arranged the meeting. Picasso was familiar with and had regard for the catalogues that Ernst Beyeler promoted in his exhibitions at the art gallery in Basel's historic centre. The world-famous artist was intrigued, and the art dealer exuded enthusiasm. They got to know one another better. Picasso finally took his visitor into a room containing 800 paintings and said: "Pick out the ones you want!" Ernst Beyeler was left speechless but was urged on by the artist. After 45 works had been selected, Picasso allowed the gallery owner to acquire 26 of them. The Beyeler Gallery regularly held Picasso exhibitions after that. He selected 90 drawings for the artist's 90th birthday.

An encounter with stolen art

However, Picasso and Cubism was just one of the styles that Ernst Beyeler followed in

20th-century art. The other was abstraction and the balance of form and colour, the light that shows off the colours to their best effect and the rhythm that a painting can express. There is also a major work in this genre that Ernst Beyeler promoted from the early 1950s onwards. It shows a castle and a horseman, or we could also see in it the Greek Orthodox festival of Easter with three women around an open grave. Wassily Kandinsky's painting from summer 1910 is generally regarded as the beginning of abstract art.

The young art dealer acquired it in 1951 from Ferdinand Möller, an elder colleague from Cologne. Möller had obtained it from a museum in Hanover that had had to give it up under the Nazi regime because it was considered to be degenerate art. In the 1990s, the heirs of the work's former owner, Sophie Lisitzky-Küppers, who had only loaned it to the museum, came forward, sparking the debate about stolen art and its restitution. Ernst Beyeler was able to reach an agreement with the heirs. He had known nothing of its history when he purchased it. He had even sold the painting at one point to an ironing lady from Winterthur who had come into money. When she ran into financial difficulties in 1955, Ernst Beyeler bought the painting back and held on to it tenaciously.

G. David Thompson tried the hardest to get him to part with it. The collector from Pittsburgh, who had made his fortune in steel production, had put together a huge collection of modern art, ranging from Monet and Degas to Alberto Giacometti. Illness and embitterment over ignorance in his native city drove him to sell. In 1959, he offered Ernst Beyeler the opportunity to purchase a hundred works by Paul Klee in one go. The Basel dealer was unable to raise sufficient funds so Thompson demanded Kandinsky's "Improvisation 10". But Beyeler remained resolute.

From antiquarian bookshop to gallery

Beyeler became one of the foremost dealers in classic modern art during the 1960s. An estimated 16,000 pieces of art passed



Switzerland's most-visited museum: the Beyeler Foundation in Riehen near Basel where art and architecture complement one another congenially.

through his hands during 60 years as a gallery owner. Such success could not have been foreseen when the 24-year-old Ernst Beyeler took over the antiquarian bookshop of his employer, Oskar Schloss, in Basel's Bäumleingasse in 1945. Schloss had established a good reputation for rare books, but Beyeler was much more interested in paintings. He gradually sold off the stock, covered the shelves with sheeting and exhibited art. Initially displaying printed graphic work, Daumier was an important intermediary between books and visual art. The "Chateau d'Art", the name of the bookshop, focused entirely on art from 1947 onwards. The 1953 exhibition entitled "Tableaux Français" featured outstanding works by Picasso, Gauguin and Matisse.

Ernst Beyeler assembled his own collection over the years, which included almost all the major names in modern art: Vincent van Gogh, Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Georges Braques, Fernand Leger, Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Augusto Giacometti, Francis Bacon, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol, to name but a few. This unique collection was pieced together despite the challenges faced by the art dealer. In Basel, he found himself on the periphery of the international art trade. It was not easy to bring major collectors, museum directors and the wealthy with an interest in art to the rather

sleepy city – at least until Ernst Beyeler co-founded the Art Basel exhibition in 1970. He would never entertain relocating to Paris, New York or London. His ties with the city of his youth, the hilly landscape, the Rhine and the rowing club were too strong.

When art prices rocketed in the 1980s and the acquisition of new art became difficult, the Beyeler Gallery found itself well-stocked. Beyeler was able to use the proceeds to pay off his debts with past financial backers. In 1982, he set up a foundation and finally also had the museum in Riehen built. When the art that filled his modest home in Riehen went on public display for the first time in 1989 at the "Centro de Arte Reina Sofia" in Madrid, Ernst and Hildy Beyeler realised that a top-quality collection had been put together from the pieces that they had not been able or had not wanted to sell over the decades.

The congenial architect

In Renzo Piano the collector found an architect who had already designed various museums and was willing to enter into open dialogue. Ernst Beyeler had exacting requirements and several designs were rejected. The building, which was officially opened in 1997 and was extended by 12 metres two years later, is one of Piano's most successful museums: the exterior walls made of red porphyry represent stability and the park's winter garden a sense of openness. Twenty-two well-proportioned rooms pro-

vide a pleasantly understated environment for art. The 40 and more exhibitions that have gone on display there since its opening constantly put the collections and their artists in a new light. Ernst Beyeler always wanted to create a kind of summer house for art that would complement the city-centre location of the public art museum. This vision has proven incredibly successful, as the many visitors each year testify. His wife Hildy, who encouraged him to "create the museum", was also satisfied. Picasso's "Madame from Avignon" was relocated there with her blessing and has since sternly observed visitors from all over the world.

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ART FROM LATIN AMERICA

A special exhibition from the Daros collection in Latin America is currently on display at the Beyeler Foundation. The collection was started in 2000 by Ruth Schmidheiny and today contains around 1,100 works by artists from Latin America. The Casa Daros, a centre for the arts and culture, was opened in Rio de Janeiro in 2013.

The exhibition is on display until 27 April 2014; further information at www.daros-latinamerica.net