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Autor: Steiner, Jürg
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Zurich's new art building revives uncomfortable memories

Architect David Chipperfield's elegant Kunsthaus extension was hailed as a coup for Zurich. Yet the new building has become mired in accusations over the "plundered art" of contentious arms dealer Emil G. Bührle.

JÜRIG STEINER

Zurich's Mayor Corine Mauch was full of superlatives as she stood in the entrance hall of the David Chipperfield Kunsthaus extension at the inauguration ceremony in autumn 2021 – superlatives that betrayed her city's ambition in commissioning the British architect to transform what was hitherto a rather modest venue. In short, Zurich wanted the sophistication and global attention that a world-class art museum can attract.

Chipperfield's building, which cost 206 million Swiss francs, certainly has the necessary cachet. Berne boasts the Zentrum Paul Klee, Basel the Fondation Beyeler – both museums designed by Renzo Piano. But now Zurich has surpassed both, with Chipperfield turning the Kunsthaus into one of Europe's biggest museums.

Imposing structure, bright interior

The Kunsthaus is located in Zurich's densely built university quarter near the city centre, just up from the lake. This is where Chipperfield has added his imposing design made of Jurassic limestone. Although its facade is softened with slim vertical fins, the imposing new block has attracted criticism in Zurich, with some locals calling it an oversized, elitist extravagance. At the same time, few disagree that the building's bright interior provides a worthy setting for fine art.

But in wanting to show off its artistic credentials, Zurich has also stirred some uncomfortable memories of the past. This is because the Kunsthaus extension has been designed in part to exhibit the illustrious collection of erst-



while Zurich industrialist Emil G. Bührle (1890–1956) – a permanent loan of 170 works of art, including paintings by van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne and Renoir. Such an impressive roster of impressionists would normally be expected to grace Paris. Yet the association with Bührle, a contentious figure who manufactured arms, is awkward.

Art lover and arms exporter

The incredible story of Emil G. Bührle has long been critically reviewed and documented. Bührle was posted from Germany to Zurich in 1924, so that he could further the development of an anti-aircraft gun on neutral soil at armaments manufacturer Werkzeugmaschinenfabrik Oerlikon. Such an assignment would have been impossible in Germany, because the Treaty of Versailles had banned Germany from rebuilding its domestic arms industry. In no time at all, Bührle turned Werkzeugmaschinenfabrik Oerlikon into Switzerland's biggest arms manufacturer – and became the country's richest person.

Bührle, who gained Swiss citizenship in 1937, had excellent connections extending to the upper echelons of Nazi



Emil G. Bührle (1890–1956): art lover and arms manufacturer.



Germany. After 1945, he was of course flexible enough to adapt his business model to the new realities of the Cold War. He subsequently exported arms to all crisis regions around the world – not always legally, as it turned out.

He invested the wealth he made from the arms trade in various things – including art; Bührle had studied art as a young man. After the war, he bought countless works that Jewish gallerists and collectors had originally sold under duress – hence accusations that his amassed collection is essentially plundered art. Bührle was then able to develop close ties with the art-friendly Zurich elite by personally covering all the costs for the first extension of the Kunsthhaus.

Off limits

Following Bührle’s sudden death in 1956, this art collection, currently overseen by the eponymous Bührle Foundation, remained virtually off limits for decades at a private villa on the outskirts of Zurich. The address was the victim of an art heist in 2008, when thieves took advantage of lax security. It was only then that Bührle’s uninsurable collection –

The Chipperfield-designed Kunsthhaus extension is an imposing building with an elegant, rib-like facade.

Photo: Keystone

worth many millions of francs – gained a wider public. In 2012, the Zurich electorate voted to approve 75 million francs in public funding for the recently completed Kunsthhaus extension. The shadowy origins surrounding the Bührle collection set to be exhibited in the new building was common knowledge but barely mentioned at the time.

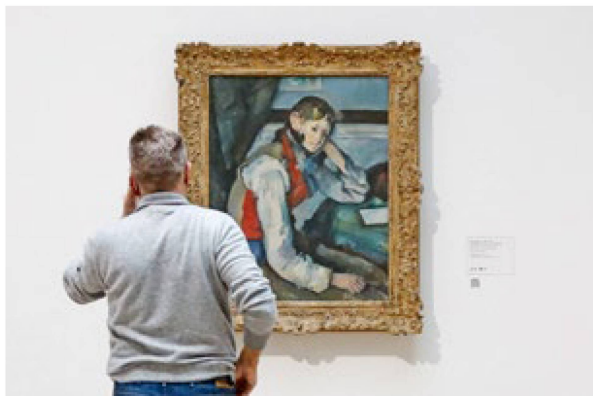
A “contaminated” museum?

In March 2022, it will have been exactly 20 years since the Bergier Commission presented its concluding report on the assets that Switzerland acquired during the Second World War. This historical study significantly increased awareness among the Swiss public of the country’s role as an accomplice in Nazi crimes. This begs the question why controversy in Zurich surrounding the origins of the Bührle collection has only erupted now that the paintings are already hanging in the new building.

Historian Erich Keller proffers an interesting theory in his book “Das kontaminierte Museum” (The Contaminated Museum), revealing the close links between the Bührle collection, the left-of-centre Zurich city council and the



Corine Mauch:
“The controversy surrounding Bührle is good for us.”



Paul Cézanne's "Boy in the Red Waistcoat" is one of the most prestigious works in the Bührle collection. It was stolen in 2008 before being recovered in Belgrade. It now hangs in the Zurich Kunsthaus. Photo: Keystone

Zurich Kunsthaus. He suggests the powers that be have been more interested in promoting Zurich as a centre of art than taking a serious look at the Bührle collection. According to Keller, they want to dissociate the collection from its founder – so that the art no longer stands for a man and his arms deals, but for Zurich, a city of culture.

This is why the existing provenance research into Bührle's art collection is inadequate, he says. Can Zurich really say for sure that there is no plundered art among the paintings, given that such research has remained in the hands of the Bührle Foundation? Former members of the Bergier Commission are now among those calling for an independent review.

The situation in Zurich contrasts sharply with what happened when the Berne Museum of Fine Arts was named heir to the trove of art dealer Cornelius Gurlitt, who died in 2014 – Gurlitt had inherited the collection from his father Hildebrand, who was a Nazi art dealer. After conducting an independent provenance assessment, Berne relinquished part of the collection – probably easier to do as Gurlitt was a relative outsider. Bührle, on the other hand, had intimate connections with the Zurich elite.

However, things now appear to be moving in Zurich. Mayor Corine Mauch announced that the city has called on the Bührle Foundation to ensure that the presentation of its works in the Kunsthaus extension is accompanied by the necessary context. "The controversy surrounding Bührle is good for us, even if it hurts," she told the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung".

The Bührle collection (in German): [revue.link/buehrle](https://www.revue.link/buehrle)

The Bührle collection (in English): [revue.link/artcollector](https://www.revue.link/artcollector)

Erich Keller, «Das kontaminierte Museum»: [revue.link/keller](https://www.revue.link/keller)

Switzerland in figures

Couples marrying, mountains swaying

19.2

Switzerland began 2022 with record temperatures, as Poschiavo in the Alps recorded a high of 19.2°C. It is hard to know whether to laugh or cry about such distinctly unseasonal weather. In January as a whole, 13 out of 14 Swiss weather stations recorded above-average temperatures.

22.2.22

Swiss couples prefer to marry in summer than in winter. This February was an exception – but not because of the mild weather. It had more to do with a unique date. On 22/2/22, almost all wedding venues in Switzerland were booked out. The couples who tied the knot on this quirky date presumably also did so for the right reasons.

6.2

Books are dead, they say. But the statistics say otherwise. In 2021, book sales in German-speaking Switzerland rose for the third year in succession – this time by five per cent. Fiction was up 6.2 per cent. And six of the top ten bestselling novels in German-speaking Switzerland were written by the following Swiss authors: Donna Leon, Benedict Wells, Christine Brand, Joël Dicker, Arno Camenisch and Silvia Götschi.

9,000,000,000

Nine billion cigarettes are consumed in Switzerland every year. The nicotine haze is quite thick at the moment, with sales of cigarettes and other tobacco products having risen since the beginning of the pandemic – the first time they have done so in ten years, climbing four per cent. People working from home is one of the reasons, say experts.

2

The numbers on this page often indicate change. But surely not in the case of the mighty, immutable Matterhorn. Wrong! Scientists say that the summit of Switzerland's iconic mountain is in constant motion, swaying a few micrometres back and forth once every two seconds – stimulated by seismic energy in the earth. The swaying is over ten times stronger at the summit than at the base of the mountain, rather akin to how the top of a tree sways more in the wind.

FIGURES COMPILED BY MARC LETTAU