

# On Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza's beginnings as a collector of modern art

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The Moltzaus and Thyssens at the Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett's 36th auction held at the broadcasting studio of Süddeutscher Rundfunk in Villa Berg, Stuttgart, at the beginning of May 1961

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Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza visited R. N. Ketterer's gallery in Campione d'Italia on 14 September 1964 and wrote in the guest book: 'Expressionism is a drug / here I am again [...]'.<sup>1</sup>

Such a statement attests to the powerfully engaging effect German Expressionism came to have on the baron, who put it into words years later in interviews and articles. In November 1979, for example, he told the Zurich-based *Du* magazine: 'I became interested in German Expressionism at an early age, even while I was studying. But I couldn't talk to my father about it. It was only when I became a collector [...] that I gradually began purchasing modern paintings. I started with Expressionists and then added to the collection step by step'.<sup>1</sup> Three and a half years later, in July 1983, he likewise wrote in *Apollo* magazine's special issue devoted to the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection: 'German Expressionism was for me the departing point of my collection of twentieth-century masters, that at least in terms of quantity have now overtaken my collection of Old Master paintings'.<sup>2</sup>

This latter article is interesting because it recalls a practically linear progression in his collecting, beginning with German Expressionism and continuing with other avant-garde movements. However, the question inevitably arises: did the baron's collecting really run such a straight course? Was he initially only interested in German Expressionism?

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Wolfhart Draeger: 'Gespräch mit Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza'. In *Du. Die Kunstzeitschrift*. Zurich, February 1980, p. 47.

2

Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza: 'German Expressionism. A Personal Choice'. In *Apollo*, London, no. 257, July 1983, p. 78.

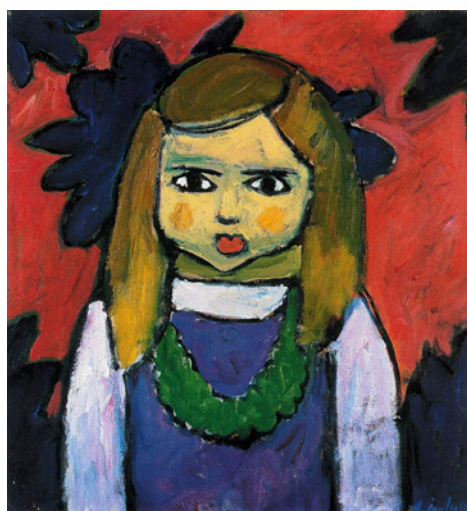
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'List of paintings with information about their location', 1 January 1964, in Stiftung zur Industriegeschichte Thyssen-Archiv, Duisburg, hereafter Duisburg Archives, TB/2711.

To shed greater light on Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza's first steps in collecting modern art I will quote from a hitherto unknown document entitled 'Verzeichnis der Gemaelde mit Standortangabe' [List of paintings with information about their location] in the Stiftung zur Industriegeschichte Thyssen-Archiv in Duisburg.<sup>3</sup> It is a typed inventory dated 1 January 1964, of which the baron himself, his secretary Joseph Groh – possibly its author – the accounts and security departments, and the picture gallery received copies. It is 20 pages long and includes several sublists: among them, one featuring 334 works by

fig. 1

Alexej von Jawlensky  
*Small Child*, c. 1908  
Oil on canvas, 52.5 × 49 cm  
Fridart Foundation, Amsterdam



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Information confirmed by Maria de Peverelli of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collections, Zurich, to whom I am grateful for her help.

5

See Paloma Alarcó and Guillermo Solana: *German Expressionism in Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza's Collection*. Madrid, Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2020. *Church in Malcantone*, by Hofer, that is not included in the show, was acquired by Fiona Campbell-Walter, third wife of the baron, at the 37<sup>th</sup> auction of the Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett, at the beginning of May 1962, and has always been in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection.

6

Simon de Pury: *Office Memorandum*, 21 August 1981, in Duisburg Archives, TB/3837.

'[Old] Masters'; another with 11 paintings by 'nineteenth-century masters'; and, most relevantly for this article, one of 51 'modern pictures' acquired between 1961 and 1963. Besides naming all the paintings belonging to the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection as of 1 January 1964, the document provides valuable information about their location.

We will focus on the last list, that of the 51 'modern pictures.' Contrary to what might be expected, only 18 of these works are Expressionist. Five of them – *Doris with Ruff Collar* (c. 1906) and *Fränzi in front of Carved Chair* (1910), by Kirchner; *Group of Houses in Spring* (1916), by Itten; *Summer in Nidden* (c.1919–20), by Pechstein; and *Still Life with Dice* (1923), by Klee – are currently part of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza's permanent collection. A further six works are documented as having been inherited by the baron's children: *The Little House* (1906), by Schmidt-Rottluff; *Woman in front of Birch Trees* (c. 1907), by Kirchner; *Three People Strolling* (1914), by Macke; *Young Couple* (c. 1931–35), by Nolde; *Magic River (Dream across the River)* (1937), by Feininger; and *Church in Malcantone (Ticino)* (1938), by Hofer.<sup>4</sup> And three more pictures – *House in Dangast (The White House)* (1908), by Heckel; *Horse Fair* (1910), by Pechstein; and *Sun over Pine Forest* (1913), by Schmidt-Rottluff – are now in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection. I will not discuss any of them at length because detailed information about them can be found in the catalogue of the recent exhibition *German Expressionism in Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza's Collection*.<sup>5</sup>

The remaining four Expressionist works the Baron purchased between 1961 and 1963 – some of which were later sold – are: *Small Child* (c. 1908), by Jawlensky; *Path to Staffel* (1919), by Kirchner; *Steamboat at High Seas (Hamburg)* (c. 1920), by Nolde; and *Red Houses with Windmill* (c.1923), by Pechstein. What do we know about each one? The first [fig. 1] was acquired by the baron on 13 July 1961 through Menburg-Coray, Ascona. From Hans Heinrich's collection it passed to Roman Norbert Ketterer and was no longer listed among the Thyssen holdings by August 1981 according to an inventory drawn up by Simon de Pury of the modern pictures in the collection.<sup>6</sup> The catalogue raisonné of the artist's work states that Ketterer sold it to the Fridart Foundation in Amsterdam.

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fig. 2  
**Ernst Ludwig Kirchner**  
*Path to Staffel*, 1919  
Oil on canvas, 120 × 120 cm  
Hilti Art Foundation, Vaduz,  
Liechtenstein



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fig. 3  
**Emil Nolde**  
*Steamboat at High Seas (Hamburg)*,  
c. 1920  
Watercolour on paper, 25,5 × 27 cm  
Thyssen-Bornemisza Collections

The second painting, Kirchner's *Path to Staffel* [fig. 2], came from Ketterer's private collection and was acquired by the baron at the end of 1961. At the beginning of 1964, it decorated Villa Alcyon, the baron's residence in St Moritz, but shortly afterwards – possibly after the baron and his third wife, Fiona Campbell-Walter, divorced in the summer of 1964 – it was deposited with Ketterer. The dealer included it in his 1965 exhibition *Moderne Kunst II* and again in *Moderne Kunst III*, in 1966, and *Moderne Kunst VI*, in 1969. It now belongs to the Hilti Art Foundation in Vaduz, Liechtenstein. Of the nine works the baron acquired from Ketterer's personal collection, it is the only one he later sold.

Nolde's *Steamboat at High Seas (Hamburg)* [fig. 3], the third of the works listed, was acquired by Fiona on 3–4 May 1962 at the Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett's 37th auction and became hers – and still is – after she divorced the baron. Lastly, Pechstein's *Red Houses with Windmill* (c. 1923) [fig. 4] was purchased on 3 June 1961 at the Kunsthaus Lempertz auction house in Cologne. Surprisingly, only a few months later the baron gave it to Ketterer to be included in the 37th auction. It did not sell





fig. 4

**Max Pechstein**  
**Red Houses with Windmill, c. 1923**  
 Oil on canvas, 70.5 × 80.5 cm  
 Frank Brabant, Wiesbaden

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According to the catalogue raisonné of the artist, following a subsequent auction at Hauswedell & Nolte, Hamburg, on 6 June 1980, the work now belongs to Frank Brabant, Wiesbaden.

## 8

As shown by a photograph of Fiona and her daughter Francesca Thyssen of about 1963, where part of Kirchner's *Doris with Ruff Collar* is visible hanging on the wall.

and in 1964 it was still on deposit at Ketterer's gallery in Campione d'Italia. It was finally put up for auction on 9 December 1965 at Sotheby Parke-Bernet, New York, listed as number 119.<sup>7</sup>

Of all the above works, the only ones that decorated Villa Favorita in January 1964 were: *Church in Malcantone*, by Hofer; *Woman in front of Birch Trees*, by Kirchner; *Still Life with Dice*, by Klee; *Three People Strolling*, by Macke; and *Young Couple*, by Nolde. Kirchner's *Doris with Ruff Collar* and *Path to Staffel* hung in Villa Alycon, in St Moritz.<sup>8</sup> And a number of very significant paintings were on deposit: *Group of Houses in Spring*, by Itten; *Fränzi in front of Carved Chair*, by Kirchner; *Horse Fair* and *Summer in Nidden*, by Pechstein; and *The Little House* and *Sun over Pine Forest*, by Schmidt-Rottluff. The 1964 inventory records Heckel's *House in Dangast* as being on deposit in Essen, possibly at the Museum Folkwang.

However, as stated earlier, these Expressionist pieces accounted for no more than 18 of the 51 modern works the baron acquired between 1961 and 1963 – that is, only 35 percent. The second largest group in the 1964 inventory is what we might classify as 'post-war abstraction'. Much less known than the previous group, these paintings are largely in keeping with the art in vogue in the 1950s, and some 15 can be ascribed to this category.

Of these works, six were acquired by the baron and baroness at the Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett's 36th and 37th auctions in May 1961 and 1962. They are: *Composition Blue-Red (Seascape)* (1949), by Alfred Manessier; *The Stones* (1951), by Helena Vieira da Silva; *City* (1952–53), by Francis Bott – the first piece of modern art to be acquired for the collection, in strictly chronological terms; *The Lovers and the Beach* (1954), by Gustave Singier [fig. 5]; *Metaphysical Landscape* (1955), by Willi Baumeister [fig. 6]; and *Provence. Morning, Sun and Sand* (1959), by Singier. Another abstract canvas, *Composition on Greenish-Blue Ground* (c. 1955), by Serge Poliakoff [fig. 7], was also acquired by the baron and his wife at the first of those auctions, but it was no longer in the collection by 1964 as it was sold at the Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett in 1962.



fig. 5  
Gustave Singier  
*The Lovers and the Beach*, 1954  
Oil on canvas, 89 × 116 cm  
Private collection



fig. 6  
Serge Poliakoff  
*Composition on Greenish-Blue Ground*, c. 1955  
Oil on canvas, 73 × 60 cm  
Private collection

fig. 7  
Willi Baumeister  
*Metaphysical Landscape*, 1955  
Oil on canvas, 34 × 44 cm  
Private collection



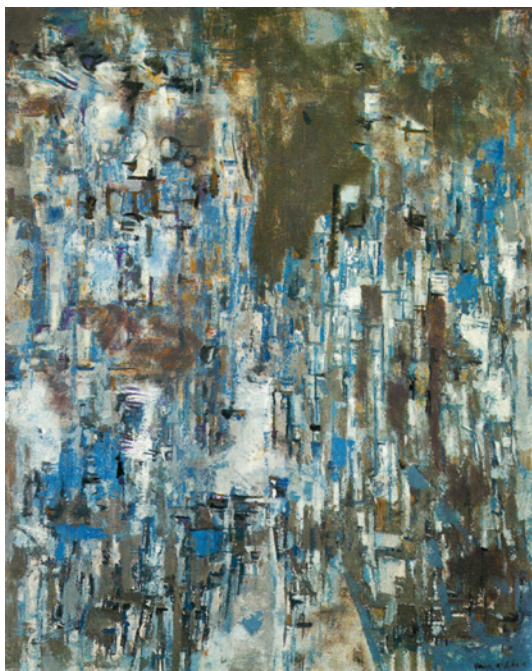


fig. 8  
**Helena Vieira da Silva**  
***Alleyway*, 1961**  
 Oil on canvas, 100 × 81 cm  
 Thyssen-Bornemisza Collections

The baron and baroness purchased another two abstract – or quasi-abstract – works at the 31st Venice Biennale in 1962: *Objects by a Window* (1962), by the Italian artist Giuseppe Ajmone, and *Composition D* (1961), by the Japanese Tadashi Sugimata. They acquired the other paintings from dealers and auction houses such as Sotheby's London (*Grey Composition* (1948), by Nicolas de Staël); Knoedler of New York (*Alleyway* (1961), by Vieira da Silva [fig. 8]); Galerie Nathan in Zurich (*Mediterranean Landscape* (1953), by De Staël); Galleria Levy in Milan (*Autumn* (n.d.), by Edmund Alleyn, and *Samedi Soir* (n.d.), by Jean Lefebvre); and Toninelli Arte Moderna in Milan (*Composition* (n.d.), by Jean-Paul Mousseau and *Brown and Silver I* (1951) by Jackson Pollock).

New information about the last of these paintings – acquired in 1963 – has been gleaned from the documents examined at the Thyssen Archives in Duisburg. For example, we now know that it was not the first Pollock the baron considered acquiring as in May 1961 Marlborough in London had offered him the possibility of buying *Search for a Symbol* (1943), *The Wooden Horse* (1956, now in the Moderna Museet in Stockholm) and *Composition No 6* (year unspecified), all by the US artist.<sup>9</sup> A year later, on 15 May 1962, the antiquarian and collector Robert Bouyeure, a friend of the baron's, sent him a photograph of *Brown and Silver I*, which Toninelli had brought from New York to Milan and offered to take to Chiasso, near Lugano.<sup>10</sup> The purchase was finalised in 1963, after the work was shown in a Pollock retrospective at Toninelli Arte Moderna in Milan and Marlborough Galleria d'Arte in Rome.

Of this large group of works, few decorated the homes of the baron and baroness. According to the January 1964 inventory and Fiona's testimony, only the oil paintings *Mediterranean Landscape*, by De Staël, *Alleyway* by Vieira da Silva, and *Brown and Silver I*, by Pollock graced the walls of Villa Alcyon, in St Moritz.<sup>11</sup>

## 9

Letter from Frank Kenneth Lloyd to Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza, 18 May 1961, in Duisburg Archives, TB/2703.

## 10

Letter from Robert Bouyeure, Milan, to Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza, 17 May 1962, in Duisburg Archives, TB/2706.

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Interview by Guillermo Solana with Fiona Campbell-Walter, Madrid, 1 November 2019.





fig. 9  
**Zoran Music**  
***Horses and Riders*, 1951**  
 Oil on canvas, 93 × 123 cm  
 Thyssen-Bornemisza Collections

The fact that only a few of the abovementioned painters were subsequently accorded a prominent place in art history explains the short period for which most of them belonged to the collection. This was not true of the two paintings by Nicolas de Staël or Pollock's canvas, which are now in the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza; of the Manessier, now in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection; or of Vieira da Silva's *Alleyway*, which is still owned by the Thyssen family.<sup>12</sup> As for the rest, except for Baumeister's *Metaphysical Landscape* (sold at Grisbach GmbH, Berlin, in 2002)<sup>13</sup> and Signier's *The Lovers and the Beach* (sold at auction by Sotheby's London in 2002),<sup>14</sup> none remained in the collection by August 1981.

The third sizeable group of paintings in the 1964 inventory consists of canvases and works on paper from the Italian post-war figurative art currents. They were mostly acquired at the Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett's 36th and 37th auctions: *The Ornate Dress*, by Massimo Campigli (1956); *Red Horse and Rider* (1952), by Marino Marini; *Horses and Riders* (1951), by Zoran Music [fig. 9]; and *Rhythmic Evocation* (1952), by Mario Sironi.

<sup>12</sup>  
 I am grateful to Maria de Peverelli for supplying this information.

<sup>13</sup>  
 Auction of 7 June 2002, lot 92.

<sup>14</sup>  
 Auction of 27 June 2002, lot 214.



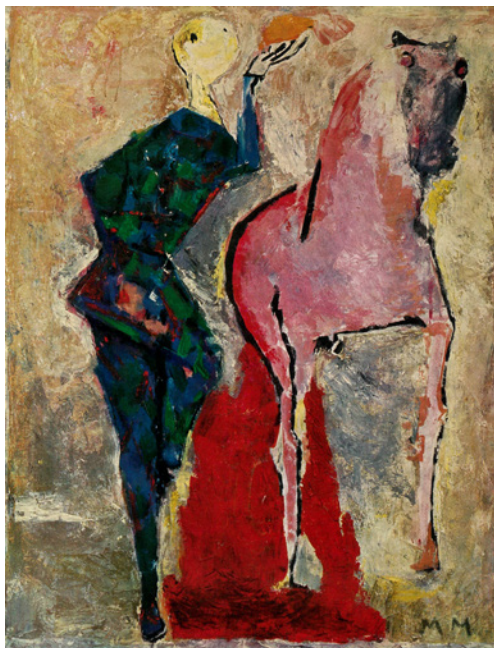


fig. 10  
**Marino Marini**  
*Juggler*, 1959–60  
 Oil on canvas, 150 × 120 cm  
 Private collection

A second work by Marino Marini – *Juggler* (1959–60) [fig. 10] – was purchased by the baron and baroness directly from the artist's Milan studio in 1963. According to Fiona's testimony: 'I dragged a very reluctant Heini to his studio as I had wanted to buy a bronze statue of the Fallen Rider for the garden. Heini, still in the early days of his more contemporary life cycle, refused to buy anything. Heading for the door after a leisurely and wonderful visit with Marino, I said we can't leave empty handed, and Heini said ok, choose a painting. As there were some paintings leaning against the wall near the front door, I chose one'.<sup>15</sup>

Of all these works, only *Music's* hung in the sitting room at Villa Favorita in January 1964. And since, like the previous group, they were very much contemporary when acquired and, accordingly, subject to fluctuating art trends, only a few remained in the collection after 1981. *Music's Horses and Riders* still belongs to the Thyssen family;<sup>16</sup> Marini's *Juggler* passed to Fiona after her divorce from the baron in 1964<sup>17</sup> and was sold at Sotheby's London in 2000;<sup>18</sup> and the gouache entitled *Red Horse and Rider*, also by Marini, was sold at the same auction house in 2002.<sup>19</sup>

What other pictures did the baron acquire during those first three years? To start off with, two Impressionist paintings: *Cornfield* (1879), by Renoir (purchased at Marlborough London, in 1961) and *The Blue Row Boat* (1886), by Monet (acquired at Sotheby's London the following year). In January 1964, both works hung in Villa Favorita: Monet's in the sitting room and Renoir's in the breakfast room. *The Blue Row Boat*, as stated in the catalogue raisonné of Monet's oeuvre, passed into Fiona's collection in July 1964. *Cornfield* remained in the holdings and joined the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection in 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Fiona Campbell-Walter's correspondence with Guillermo Solana, 1 October 2020.

<sup>16</sup> I am grateful to Maria de Peverelli for supplying this information.

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, when it was shown at the Palazzo Venezia in Rome in 1966, it was listed as 'Saint-Moritz, collezione Baroness Fiona Thyssen-Bornemisza'.

<sup>18</sup> Auction of 25 October 2000, lot 6.

<sup>19</sup> Auction of 25 June 2002, lot 282.

Except for a couple of portraits of the baron and his wife and a few minor works, by the start of 1964 other paintings that do not fall into the previous categories had also found their way into the Thyssen collection. The first is Max Ernst's Surrealist *Solitary and Conjugal Trees* (1940), acquired at Sotheby's London in 1963 and now owned by the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza. Ernst's German descent may have influenced this acquisition which, like that of the Pollock, heralded future developments in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection.

Another four that are worthy of mention are a work by André Derain entitled *Dorothee* (n.d.) a Christmas gift to Hans Heinrich in 1961 from the Knoedler Gallery in New York and currently unidentified; a canvas by the Italian Futurist painter Roberto Iras Baldessari, *The Carousel* (1920) (acquired at Toninelli Arte Moderna, Milan, in 1962); a Matissian picture by German painter Rudolf Levy, *Still Life with Watercress* (1922) (acquired at the Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett, in 1961); and a watercolour entitled *Suburban Wall (Shell Petrol Pump in the Town)* (c.1930), by the Mannheim-based German painter Xaver Fuhr (also from the Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett's 36th auction in 1961).

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What does this tell us about how Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza got into collecting modern art? Let's go back to 1954.

Hans Heinrich's first purchase of a painting that did not involve buying back a work previously belonging to his father's collection and put up for sale by one of his siblings dates back to early 1954. It was El Greco's *The Annunciation* (c.1596–1600), sold by the Knoedler Gallery in New York. Stavros Niarchos – a shipowner, art collector, and friend of the baron's – had also expressed an interest in the painting. During the years that ensued until May 1961, Hans Heinrich continued to buy only Old Masters in keeping with the tastes of his father – in whose opinion art history ended in the eighteenth century – and the latter's advisor Rudolf J. Heinemann. But a lot happened in those barely seven years to change his perception of modern art.

One of the factors that most greatly influenced this change was the shift in collectors' tastes, driven, among others, by the London auction house Sotheby's. Whereas up until then the art market had been dominated by classical art, in the mid-1950s Impressionism and Postimpressionism began to take centre stage with a string of highly successful auctions such as the Biddle sale at the Galerie Charpentier in Paris (1957), the Weinberg sale at Sotheby's London (1957), the Lurcy sale at the Parke-Bernet Galleries in New York (1957), and the Goldschmidt sale also at Sotheby's (1958). An important contributing factor was the acquisitions made by a group of Greek shipowners headed by Niarchos, whose fortunes were greatly boosted following the Second Arab-Israeli War (1956) and the consequent closure of the Suez Canal, as their large oil tankers and cargo ships were able to sail around the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>20</sup>

In February 1957, Niarchos – with whom the baron often coincided at St Moritz during the three months of the year he used to spend at the Swiss resort<sup>21</sup> – acquired 58 Impressionist and Postimpressionist paintings from the collection of the actor Edward G. Robinson through Knoedler. And according to Fiona's testimony, that purchase had a decisive influence on Hans Heinrich's perception of modern art.<sup>22</sup> It is even quite possible that at this point he began to regard himself as a somewhat antiquated collector out of touch with the fashions of the period and motivated solely by his father's tastes. Indeed, several documents show that until well into the 1960s at least the baron did not consider the collection he had inherited – already hanging on the walls of Villa Favorita, with hardly any space for new acquisitions – to be his own.<sup>23</sup>

At the end of 1957, Niarchos opened an exhibition of his collection at the Knoedler Gallery. It was followed by subsequent shows at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Tate Gallery in London, and the Kunsthhaus in Zurich (the baron kept a copy of the catalogue of the latter exhibition in his library at Lugano). But he was not the only one to exhibit his private collection. In the autumn of 1958, another of the baron's shipowner friends, Ragnar Moltzau, showed his collection of modern art at the Tate Gallery in London. Did these exhibitions – especially that of the Niarchos collection – influence the shows the

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Nicholas Faith: *The Rise and Fall of the House of Sotheby*. New York, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985, p. 48–53.

**21**

Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza: *Interviews/memoirs*, I, 25 July 1987, pp. 67–68, in Duisburg Archives, TB/01147-Part One.

**22**

Interview by Guillermo Solana with Fiona Campbell-Walter, Madrid, 1 November 2019.

**23**

As an example of these testimonies, following the exhibition *From Van Eyck to Tiepolo* at the National Gallery at the beginning of 1961, Hans Heinrich wrote to the director of the institution: '[I] would like to thank you for the nice words you said and all the efforts made by you to make the collection of my father popular'. Letter from Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza to Philip Hendy, 26 April 1961, in Duisburg Archives, TB/2702.



baron decided to organise in the winter of 1959–60 at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam and the Museum Folkwang in Essen? They may well have.

In addition, judging by the works of modern art the baron acquired between 1961 and 1963, it is quite likely that he was not particularly drawn to the Impressionist and Postimpressionist painting then in vogue at the leading auction houses. This may have been due to his father's indoctrination. But perhaps it can also be explained by the fact that during those early years as a collector he viewed the French trends of the last quarter of the nineteenth century as alien to the family tradition, which was focused on German and Dutch art.

In the abovementioned interview published in *Du* Hans Heinrich pointed out that he had been interested in German Expressionism 'at an early age, even while I was studying'.<sup>24</sup> Although it is unlikely – if not impossible – that this interest dates back quite so far, it may have started developing in 1958. At least that is what may be inferred from the fact that the baron kept in his library at Villa Favorita a catalogue of the exhibition *Brücke 1905–1913, eine Künstlergemeinschaft des Expressionismus* (Museum Folwang, 1958) in which two works by Schmidt-Rottluff are marked with a circle, despite not being reproduced in the publication: the watercolour *Brickworks* (1909), and the oil painting *Sun over Pine Forest* (1913).<sup>25</sup>

The following year, however, Hans Heinrich's interests veered decidedly towards modern art as a result of his relationship with Stavros Niarchos and David Rockefeller, as he himself recalled in 1983.<sup>26</sup> Specifically, in the autumn of 1959, Niarchos and his wife Eugenia Livanos – then very good friends with the Thyssens according to Fiona<sup>27</sup> – invited them on a week's cruise around the Aegean on their schooner *Créole*, which was decorated with Impressionist and Postimpressionist works from their collection. They were not alone. David and Peggy Rockefeller and Jack and Drue Heinz accompanied them on the cruise. And as the American banker later recalled, 'our cruise brought out the fact that we were all interested in art'.<sup>28</sup> Although Jack and Drue Heinz owned several early Picassos as well as Morandis and Modiglianis, Rockefeller's collection was unquestionably the most important, including pieces by Corot,

<sup>24</sup>  
Draeger 1980, *op. cit.* note 1, p. 47.

<sup>25</sup>  
Catalogue numbers 209 and 160, respectively.

<sup>26</sup>  
Thyssen-Bornemisza 1983, *op. cit.* note 2, p. 76.

<sup>27</sup>  
Interview by Guillermo Solana with Fiona Campbell-Walter, Madrid, 1 November 2019.

<sup>28</sup>  
David Rockefeller: *Memoirs*. New York, Random House, 2002, p. 448.

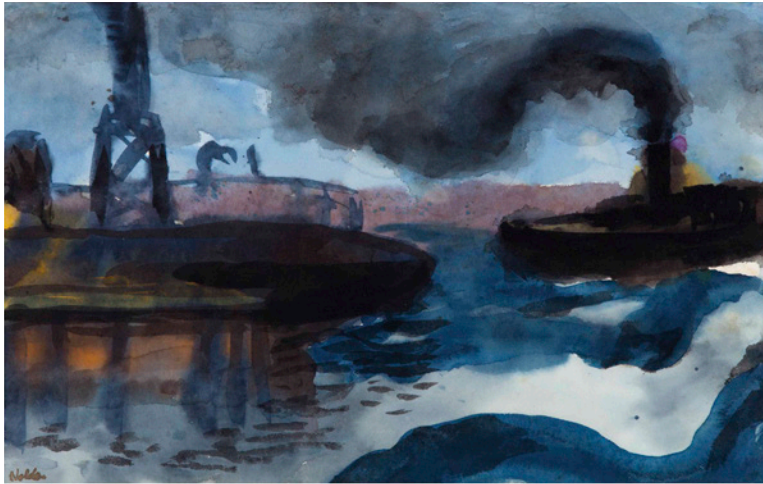


fig. 11

**Emil Nolde**

***Port of Hamburg, n.d***

**Watercolour and black ink on**

**Japanese paper, 30 × 46.8 cm**

**Private collection (former David  
Rockefeller Collection)**

Boudin, Fantin-Latour, Manet, Degas, Monet, Pissarro, Seurat, Signac, Redon, Bonnard, Vuillard, Matisse, Vlaminck, Dufy, Van Dongen, Hopper, Burchfield, and Campigli. Could that cruise have changed the baron's opinion about modern art? It may well have.

A few months later, in May 1960, the Niarchoses and Rockefellers paid a visit to the baron in Lugano and travelled from there to Stuttgart to view the works up for auction at the Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett. They placed bids on several lots and Rockefeller found out when he was back in New York that he had won *Bouquet of Autumn Leaves* (1930), by Klee; *Street Fight* (1934), by Grosz; *Concarneau* (1931) and *Cape Thistle* (1950), by Feininger; *Port of Hamburg* (n.d.), by Nolde [fig. 11]; *Two-masted Sailboat off the Coast* (c. 1925), by Vlaminck; and *Tower of Mothers* (1937–38), a sculpture by the artist Käthe Kollwitz. It is not known which works Niarchos acquired at that year's event, but what does seem certain is that the involvement of Rockefeller and Niarchos in the auction paved the way for the baron's acquisitions of a type of art in which he had begun to develop an interest at Essen late in 1958 but whose dealers may have been unfamiliar to him. But how was he to go about collecting it?



fig. 12

**Massimo Campigli**  
***Santa Trinità dei Monti Steps*, 1954**  
 Oil on canvas, 96.5 × 130 cm  
 Private collection (former David Rockefeller Collection)

The earliest reference likely to have provided the baron with a starting point may have been his friends' collecting activities. If we bear in mind Hans Heinrich's initial lack of interest in Impressionist and Postimpressionist art, David Rockefeller's foray into German art of the start of the century may have proved fairly enlightening. During the following years the American banker continued to acquire chiefly works by painters already present in his collection, such as Pissarro (in 1962), Signac (in 1964), Bonnard – one of his favourites – (in 1960 and 1963), and Matisse (in 1962 and 1963). However, some of the works he purchased in 1959–60 – during which he was in close contact with the baron and his wife – may have influenced Hans Heinrich's first steps as a modern collector, for example Rockefeller's acquisition of Campigli's *Trinità dei Monti Steps* (1954) [fig. 12] and Nolde's abovementioned watercolour *Port of Hamburg* (n.d.).

Niarchos's progression as a collector poses more of a problem as the information we previously had only covered his purchases up to 1959, which were centred on Impressionism and Postimpressionism. However, we recently learned from Fiona Campbell-Walter that a few days before the Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett's 37th auction in May 1962 she and Niarchos's wife, Eugenia Livanos, agreed on the lots each couple was interested in.<sup>29</sup> In the end, Fiona – and not the baron, who was





fig. 13  
**Willi Baumeister**  
*Moby Dick III*, 1951  
Oil on panel, 65 × 54 cm  
Former Niarchos Collection



fig. 14  
**Max Ernst**  
*The Song of the Frog*, 1953  
Oil on canvas, 65 × 92 cm  
Former Niarchos Collection

unable to attend the auction – bid on behalf of both couples and after the event the following works joined the Niarchos collection: the watercolours *Blue Staircase with Two Figures* (1920), by Klee, and *Couple* (c. 1930), by Nolde (belonging to the same series as the one the baron purchased the previous year); the oil paintings *Moby Dick III* (1951), by Baumeister [fig. 13] (Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza and his wife also bid for work by this artist at the same auction) and *The Song of the Frog* (1953) by Ernst [fig. 14] (as we have seen, the baron bought a work by this German Surrealist painter the following year); and the tempera by the American painter Mark Tobey, *Encircled* (1961).<sup>30</sup>

Another collector belonging to the baron's close circle was the Norwegian shipowner Ragnar Moltzau, whom we mentioned earlier in connection with the exhibition of his collection at the Tate Gallery in 1958 and who sat beside the baron and his wife – they even changed the places assigned to them in the seating plan – at the Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett's 1961 auction. Moltzau's vast picture collection ranged from Impressionist paintings from 1875 onwards to abstract canvases of the 1950s, and also included artists such as Bonnard, Braque, Cézanne, Dufy, Ernst, Gauguin, Léger, Matisse, Miró, Modigliani, Munch, Picasso, Rouault, and Vlaminck. But what is perhaps most

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Ingeborg Henze-Ketterer and Wolfgang Henz's correspondence with the author, 17 October 2020. I am grateful to Roman Norbert Ketterer's daughter and her husband for their invaluable assistance in understanding the beginnings of Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza's collecting.

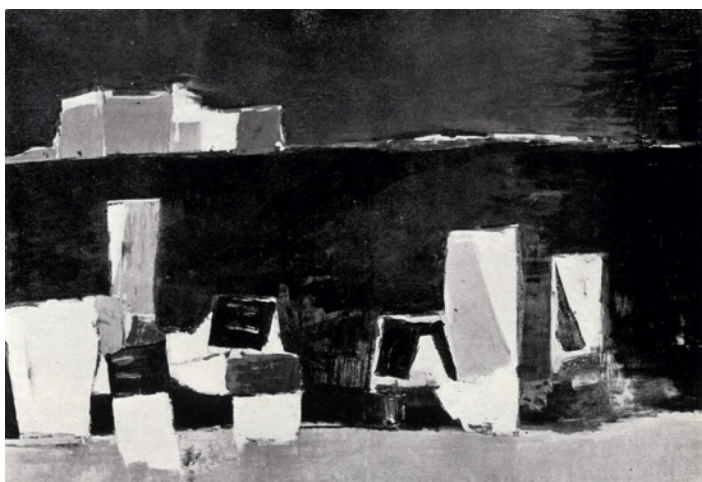


fig. 15  
**Alfred Manessier**  
*Summer Evening at the Baie de Somme, 1947*  
Oil on canvas, 100 × 81 cm  
Former Moltzau Collection



fig. 16  
**Nicolas de Staël**  
*Landscape, Martigues, 1953-54*  
Oil on canvas, 97 × 146 cm  
Former Moltzau Collection

surprising is the large proportion of works executed after 1945: 58 out of 103 – nearly 60 percent – judging by the London show. Some of the youngest artists represented in the collection, then considered ultra-modern, were Bazaine, Bissière, Corneille, Dubuffet, Estève, Manessier [fig. 15], Music, Poliakoff, Soulages, and De Staël [fig. 16]; four of them are also among the baron and his wife's first acquisitions.

Having mentioned some of the modern art collections of the baron's closest acquaintances, I now wish to return briefly to 27 May 1960 – that is, only a few days after Niarchos and Rockefeller visited Lugano and Stuttgart for a preview of the works up for sale in the Stuttgarter Kunstskabinet's 35th auction. That day the Museum Folkwang's new premises, designed by Werner Kreuzberger, Erich Hösterey and Horst Loy, opened with an exhibition of *Fifty Masterpieces of Modern Painting* from other museums and private collections and a display of its nineteenth- and twentieth-century holdings. A new guide to its collections was also published, featuring works by Baumeister, Derain, Ernst, Feininger, Xaver Fuhr, Heckel, Hofer, Jawlensky, Kirchner, Klee, Macke, Manessier, Music, Nolde, Pechstein, Poliakoff, Renoir, Schmidt-Rottluff, Singier, and Vieira da Silva; the baron would acquire pieces by all these artists until 1964.





fig. 19  
**Alfred Manessier**  
*Crown of Thorns*, 1951  
Oil on canvas, 58 × 48,5 cm  
Museum Folkwang, Essen  
[acquired in 1957]

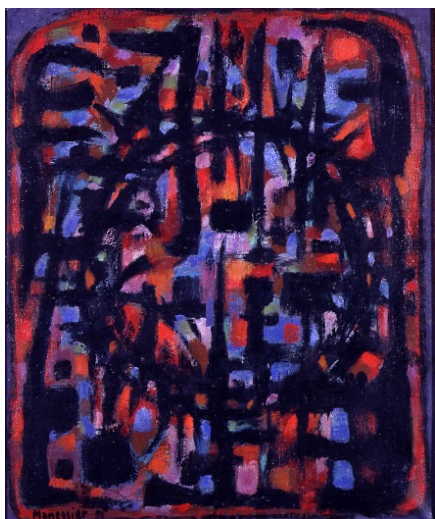


fig. 17  
**Lyonel Feininger**  
*Gemeralda IX*, 1926  
Oil on canvas, 100 × 80 cm  
Museum Folkwang, Essen



fig. 18  
**August Macke**  
*Modes. Woman with Parasol in front of Milliner's Shop*, 1914  
Oil on canvas, 60.5 × 50.5 cm  
Museum Folkwang, Essen

This connection is even more evident if we compare specific works in both collections. For example (always citing the paintings in the Museum Folkwang first), *Olive Garden* (c. 1910) and *Cornfield* (1879), by Renoir; *Gemeralda IX* (1926) [fig. 17] and *Magic River (Dream across the River)* (1937), by Feininger; and *Modes: Woman with Parasol in front of Milliner's Shop* (1914) [fig. 18] and *Three People Strolling* (1914), by Macke. And it is even closer as far as the abstract works are concerned: *Crown of Thorns* (1951) [fig. 19] and *Composition Blue-Red (Seascape)* (1949), by Manessier; *Orange Composition with Blue Circle* (1953) [fig. 20] and *Composition on Greenish-Blue Ground* (c. 1955) [see fig. 6], by Poliakoff; *Morning. High Tide* (1956) [fig. 21] and *The Lovers and the Beach* (1954) [see fig. 5], by Singier; and *Grey Town* (1956) [fig. 22] and *Alleyway* (1961) [see fig. 8], by Vieira da Silva.

To sum up, of the 22 modern paintings the baron and his wife acquired in 1961, 17 were by artists featured in the catalogue of the Museum Folkwang collections – that is, 77 percent. This proportion had fallen to just under 60 percent (9 out of 15 works) by 1962 and dropped significantly to 36 percent (4 out of 11) the following year.





fig. 20  
**Serge Poliakoff**  
*Orange Composition with Blue Circle*, 1954  
Oil on canvas, 89 × 116 cm  
Museum Folkwang, Essen  
[acquired in 1958]

fig. 21  
**Gustave Singier**  
*Morning. High Tide*, 1956  
Oil on canvas, 129.2 × 162.8 cm  
Museum Folkwang, Essen  
[acquired in 1957]



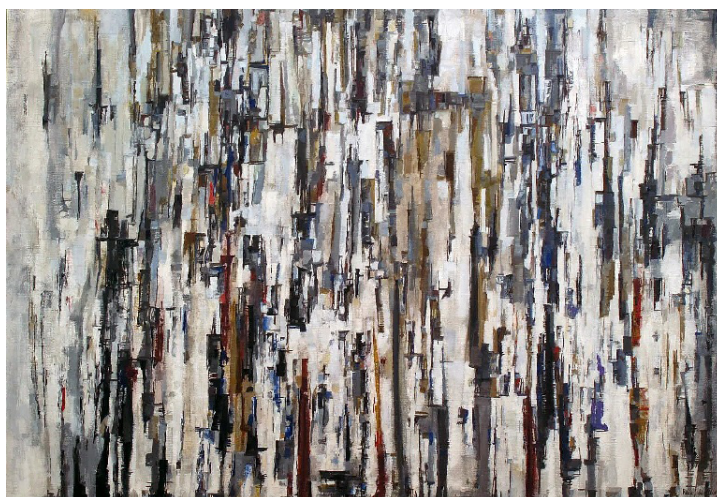


fig. 22  
**Helena Vieira da Silva**  
*Grey Town*, 1956  
 Oil on canvas, 113 × 160 cm  
 Museum Folkwang, Essen  
 [acquired in 1958]

**31**

According to the seating plan kindly provided to the author by Wolfgang Henze, they were due to sit in different rows, the Thyssen couple in front of Moltzau and his wife.

**32**

Letter from Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza to Heinz Köhn, 8 May 1961. In Duisburg Archives, TB/2703.

**33**

Letter from Heinz Köhn to Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza, 16 May 1961. In Duisburg Archives, TB/2703.

How close was the baron's relationship with the Museum Folkwang? Apart from the exhibition of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection at the Essen museum from January to March 1960, there is evidence that the baron and baroness coincided with Heinz Köhn – director of the Museum Folkwang – and his wife at the Stuttgarter Kunsabinett's 36th auction.<sup>31</sup> Seeing them purchase a Nolde watercolour, *Young Couple*, Köhn probably invited them to visit the museum and view the Nolde collection of Ernst Henke, president of the Folkwang Museumsverein, the Association of the Museum Folkwang. A few days later, on 8 May, the baron wrote to Köhn thanking him for his kind invitation and informing him he would be free to visit Essen in September.<sup>32</sup> In a second letter dated 16 May, Köhn replied to the baron: 'I shall definitely be here in Essen in September and hope to show you the brand new Museum Folkwang'. He also stated he was sending him the museum guidebook.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the guidebook – featuring 22 reproductions in colour and 109 in black and white – which baron kept in his Lugano library, served him as a model in his shift towards modern art. But if so, it must have occurred after the Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett's 36th auction. Could the baron have seen the Museum Folkwang's new premises before September 1961? We can only speculate. Though there is one fact that could back this hypothesis: in January 1961, the baron received the minutes of the meeting of the Folkwang Museumsverein, proof of his already existing connection with this association or with its president, Ernst Henke.<sup>34</sup>

\* \* \*

We have examined what happened after that January in the analysis of the 1964 inventory. I simply wish to point out a few factors which, in my opinion, led the baron to focus his collecting on German Expressionism following his initially more disparate acquisitions of modern art.

The first, referred to earlier, is related to his personal tastes, which were probably closer to German Expressionism than Fiona's. To what extent are these differences reflected in the works that decorated Villa Favorita (predominantly German art of the beginning of the century) and Villa Alycon (more modern works, some decidedly abstract) in January 1964? We can only hypothesise. Whatever the case, it is evident that the active role Fiona played in the first acquisitions of modern art for the collection and her own artistic tastes went to the background when the couple divorced in the summer of 1964; and it should be remembered that Villa Alycon went in the settlement to Fiona.

A second factor, almost as important as the first, was the close relationship the baron established with Roman Norbert Ketterer, the owner of one of the finest collections of German Expressionist art of the period and the executor of Kirchner's estate. The fact that in mid-May 1961 – that is, barely a few days after the Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett's 36th auction – Ketterer decided to sell the baron two of the best works in his collection, followed by a further four that same year and three more in subsequent years, greatly influenced the future of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection (suffice it to recall

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As confirmed by the 'Minutes of the general meeting of the Association of the Museum Folkwang of 20 January 1961', held in Duisburg Archives, TB/2703.

that without them, the German Expressionist works acquired by the baron at the start of 1964 would be significantly lower not only in quality but also in number: 12 instead of 18). And if the transfer of ownership of those works was not sufficient to convince the baron he was on the right path, Ketterer's very possible collaboration on the baron's project to show 15 Expressionist works at Villa Favorita at the start of 1964 must have provided him with new, unquestionable reasons.

Lastly, a third and possibly more circumstantial factor is the short-lived success of the abstract and Italianizing post-war trends. Their demise has been confirmed by art history over the years and certainly cannot have escaped the attention of a regular reader of artistic literature like Hans Heinrich. It is known that the baron carefully studied the provenance of works before purchasing them and was averse to taking unnecessary risks. And if a painting failed to live up to his initial expectations, the periodic classifications of his pictures as 'top', 'good', 'medium', and 'mediocre' quality were a basis for selling off those of more dubious value. In short, as the baron soon realised, none of the movements to which his first acquisitions of modern art belonged provided a better starting point for building his new collection than German Expressionism. ●