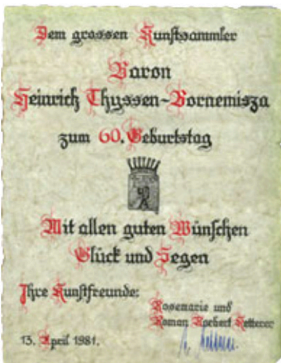


# Thyssen and Ketterer: two friends and a collection

Marta Ruiz del Árbol



Birthday greetings to the Baron from Norbert Ketterer and his wife

On 13 April 1981 Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza celebrated his 60th birthday, receiving particularly special greetings from his old friend the art dealer Roman Norbert Ketterer<sup>1</sup> and his wife, written in Gothic script on paper imitating parchment.

Just prior to that date, on 10 February of that year, Norbert Ketterer had received the Federal Cross of Merit on the occasion of his 70th birthday. Awarded by the Federal Government of Germany, led by Helmut Schmidt, it was intended as a recognition of Ketterer's contribution to the revival of German Expressionist art during the post-war period and the important role that he had played in its promotion on an international level.<sup>2</sup> The official honour drew attention to a career that had begun as early as 3 May 1945<sup>3</sup> at a time when he was a member of the provisional town council that had replaced the National Socialist one in Eslingen in compliance with orders from the North American forces.<sup>4</sup> At that date Ketterer was director of the Südöl company of that small town near Stuttgart and there was little to indicate that very soon afterwards, in 1946, he and his brother Wolfgang would open the Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett, the auction house that would rapidly become the reference point for the revival and rediscovery of German Expressionist art over the following years.

Ketterer's heirs recount how, after the end of World War II, he was unfamiliar with the German art created prior to the Third Reich and which had been declared "Degenerate" by the Nazis. Soon after seeing some initial examples, Ketterer, however, decided that his mission would be to interest collectors and directors of museums in this field of art through his auctions.<sup>5</sup> In 1947 the Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett held its first auction devoted to the graphic work of Max Slevogt. Contrary to what might have been expected in the context of devastated, post-war Germany where this type of art had been banned for more than twenty years, the event was a great success, encouraging the Ketterer brothers to continue. From that point onwards their activities focused on works by other members of the Die Brücke [the Bridge] group of Expressionist painters, in particular that of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.<sup>6</sup> In 1953 Roman and Wolfgang decided to pursue their business activities separately.

According to Zwirner, "The market for classic modern art [in Germany] was dominated by Roman Norbert Ketterer's successful Stuttgart-based auction house."<sup>7</sup> During those post-war years their auctions acted as a measure for the financial value of works of art that were undergoing a constant process of reassessment. They also became social events attended not only by leading art world and museum figures but also by the principal collectors of the day.

In parallel, Norbert Ketterer built up a private art collection which, by the end of the 1950s, consisted of some of the greatest works by the Die Brücke group. Between March 1960 and June 1961, the high



Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza. Photo, Evelyn Hofer



Roman Norbert Ketterer, 1973



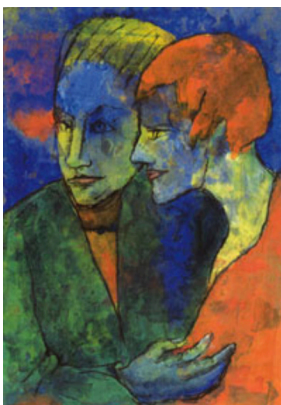
Front cover of the exhibition *Meisterwerke des deutschen Expressionismus* held in 1960-1961

point of his career as an art dealer and auctioneer, he anonymously loaned a selection of these works to an exhibition entitled *Meisterwerke der deutschen Expressionismus* [Masterpieces of German Expressionism] that travelled to Bremen, Hannover, The Hague, Cologne and Zurich,<sup>8</sup> and which is now considered to be one of the key exhibitions in the rediscovery and reassessment of Expressionist art in Central Europe. The exhibition also seems to have been starting point for the close relationship that would develop in later years between Ketterer and Baron Thyssen.<sup>9</sup>

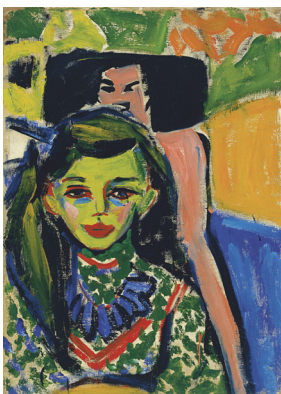
“Gradually I began to think”, the Baron noted, “that every artistic effort that was being done in the first half of this century at a time when major achievements had been made in most major areas could not be totally devoid of interest.”<sup>10</sup> In May 1961, encouraged by David Rockefeller and Stavros Niarchos, the Baron attended one of the famous auctions held by the Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett. His decision to attend may also have been influenced by the interest that the exhibition of Ketterer’s Expressionist art collection had aroused in the media. It is possible that Baron Thyssen had visited the above-mentioned exhibition and that this encouraged him to meet the man who had assembled these works. Whatever the case, the Baron had a copy of the exhibition’s catalogue in his private library.<sup>11</sup>

During this auction, the first devoted to modern art that he attended, Baron Thyssen marked a turning-point in his activities as a collector. Up to this point the acquisitions made by Heini (as he was known to his friends) had been confined to the field of Old Master paintings. Now, however, the fascination that he felt for what he described as the “bold colour and [...] the very particular atmosphere”<sup>12</sup> emanating from *A young Couple* by Emil Nolde encouraged him to take part in a tense bidding war that resulted in the highest price paid to date for a work on paper by that artist.<sup>13</sup> With the acquisition of this watercolour by Nolde, Baron Thyssen broke away from the tradition established by his father, who considered 20th-century art to be of little interest.

From that point onwards Norbert Ketterer became, in the Baron’s words, “a good friend who guided my first steps in the nearly unknown territory that was for me then 20th-century art.”<sup>14</sup> Following the acquisition of the Nolde, the Baron acquired a series of Expressionist masterpieces that entered his collection via Norbert Ketterer. In 1961 alone he acquired *House in Dangast (The White House)* by Erich Heckel, *Horse Fair* and *Summer in Nidden* by Max Pechstein, *Sun over Pine Forest* by Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and *Doris with ruff Collar* and *Fränzi in front of a carved Chair* by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. With the exception of *Summer in Nidden*, all these paintings had been included in the *Meisterwerke des deutschen Expressionismus* exhibition.



Emil Nolde  
*Young Couple*,  
1931-1935  
Thyssen-Bornemisza  
Collections



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner  
*Fränzi in front of a carved  
Chair*, 1910  
Museo Thyssen-  
Bornemisza, Madrid  
[\[+ info\]](#)



Lyonel Feininger  
*The Lady in Mauve*, 1922  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

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We thus see the Baron initiating his profound interest in 20th-century art through the Die Brücke artists, in a manner comparable to Norbert Ketterer a few years earlier. As the Baron noted on numerous occasions, it was the fact that these works had been declared “Degenerate Art” by the Third Reich that encouraged him to become interested in them and to collect them. The process of rehabilitating artists so disparaged by the Nazi regime had begun shortly after the war ended but it was still ongoing in the early 1960s, and the desire to perpetuate the memory of artists who had been so persecuted must have influenced the Baron’s attitude.<sup>15</sup> This connection with Expressionism, which was widespread among European liberals of the time and which went beyond the merely artistic, was a starting point that led the Baron to alter the course of his family’s collecting tradition and to widen its scope as far as the early 20th century and far beyond. In fact, the very year that he acquired the watercolour by Nolde, Baron Thyssen also purchased a painting by Nicolas de Staël, while in 1963 he acquired a work by Jackson Pollock.

By coincidence, just a year later, in 1962, Roman Norbert Ketterer moved to Campione d’Italia. This small Italian town was located only a few kilometres from the Villa Favorita, the Thyssen family residence in the Swiss canton of Lugano. By that time Ketterer had separated from his first wife and was looking for a new location for his business where he could benefit from lower taxes and extend his contacts.

“We lived so near to each other that we could have shouted across the lake”, Ketterer recalled in his memoirs.<sup>16</sup> Over the course of the following years the relationship between the two men became close and cordial. The Baron’s new neighbour recalled, for example, how this change of residence had resulted in financial problems that obliged him on occasions to “ring the Villa Favorita and announce my willingness to sell something from my private collection” and every time, the Baron chose “the best from my collection, in every case a painting that I was reluctant to sell.”<sup>17</sup> The frequent visits between the two are also recorded in the visitors’ book of Galerie Ketterer: “Expressionism is a drug, here I am again”,<sup>18</sup> the Baron light-heartedly wrote on 14 September 1964 on the occasion of a visit that resulted in the decision to purchase *The Lady in Mauve* by Lyonel Feininger.

Reciprocal admiration is the dominant note in this friendship. On the one hand Baron Thyssen manifested his complete confidence in Ketterer on numerous occasions. The dealer not only became his principal intermediary for the purchase of Expressionist works,<sup>19</sup> but also acted on various occasions as an advisor to the Baron in relation to other matters. In 1973, at the Baron’s request, Ketterer travelled to the Swiss capital Berne in order to acquire at auction a series of lithographs by Toulouse-Lautrec. The quality and rarity of these prints meant that there was enormous interest from numerous potential



Pablo Picasso  
*The Frugal Meal*, 1904  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

[\[+ info\]](#)



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner  
*Curving Bay*, c. 1914  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

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purchasers and Ketterer was thus given *carte blanche* when bidding for them. In conversation with Simon de Pury, who was also present at that auction of 21 June in Berne, Ketterer recalled the anxiety that he felt due to the responsibility of the commission.<sup>20</sup> During the auction Ketterer also acquired Picasso's etching *Le repas frugal* as he was very struck by that particular impression, which was inscribed with a dedication by Picasso himself.

For his part Ketterer more than once praised Baron Thyssen's excellent eye for art that enabled him to know when he had encountered an outstanding work of art. Asked about this by Ketterer and for his definition of quality in a painting, Baron Thyssen said that it was about something that "linked eye and heart".<sup>21</sup> Norbert Ketterer also appreciated the Baron's desire to promote the exhibitions at the Villa Favorita, singling out one held in 1983. On that occasion and as a result of the Baron's diplomatic negotiations it was possible to see a remarkable group of works by Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse and Picasso loaned from museums in the Soviet Union.

At about the same time, the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection had begun to travel and was sent on loan to museums and collections across the globe. Following a number of exhibitions of works from the Old Master holdings, held in leading museums world-wide, the Baron decided to exhibit his recent, 20th-century acquisitions. In order to do so he turned to Ketterer and asked for his help with what would be the first exhibition of Modern Masters from the Collection, held at the Bremen Kunsthalle. On the express wish of Baron Thyssen, Ketterer selected the group of works to be seen and designed the catalogue. Held from February to March 1975, the exhibition highlighted Baron Thyssen's energetic activities as a collector. Among the paintings on display, and in his addition to his beloved Expressionists, were works by the Surrealists including Miró, Dalí, Tanguy and Max Ernst, as well as artists associated with the Informalist trends of the second half of the 20th century, such as Vieira da Silva.

*Curving Bay* by Kirchner, a painter passionately admired by both friends, was the last work that the Baron acquired from Ketterer, entering the collection in 1987. From that point on the Baron's efforts focused on finding a permanent home for his collection, while Ketterer was engaged in the same endeavour in relation to the enormous Kirchner Estate. Thanks to the activities of these two outstanding individuals we are now able to enjoy the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid and the Museum Kirchner in Davos.

## Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Jérôme Faller of Galerie Henze & Ketterer in Wichtrach/Berne for providing information relating to the life of Roman Norbert Ketterer.
- 2 A copy of the document that announces the award of the Cross of Merit is in the Archive of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum. It was sent to the Baron by Ketterer with an accompanying letter, dated 2 April 1981, from Campione d'Italia.
- 3 Germany surrendered four days later on 7 May 1945.
- 4 In Paloma Alarcó: *Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza. Pintura Moderna*. Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2009, p. 20.
- 5 Ingeborg Henze-Ketterer et al: "In memoriam Roman Norbert Ketterer". In Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. *Der frühe Holzschnitt, 1904 bis 1908*. Wichtrach-Berne, Galerie Henze & Ketterer, 2003, p. 5.
- 6 After the artist's death his artistic estate remained in the house in Frauenkirch that he shared with Erna Schilling. When the latter died in 1945 everything was taken to the Kunstmuseum in Basel where the director, Georg Schmidt, drew up an inventory. The estate stamp dates from this period. When the artist's nephew Walter Kirchner died in 1954 the heirs appointed Ketterer the administrator of the estate.
- 7 Rudolf Zwirner: *Die Entwicklung des Kunsthandels nach 1945*. Teil I. *Der Europäisch-Amerikanische Dialog*. 9 June 2006. At [www.artnet.de/magazine/die-entwicklung-des-kunsthandels-nach-1945-teil-1/](http://www.artnet.de/magazine/die-entwicklung-des-kunsthandels-nach-1945-teil-1/)
- 8 The exhibition was shown in the following venues, in chronological order: the Kunsthalle, Bremen; the Kunstverein, Hannover; the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague; the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne; and the Kunsthaus, Zurich. The exhibition comprised 160 works by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Max Pechstein, and Otto Müller.
- 9 Javier Arnaldo has stated that: "Knowledge of Roman Norbert Ketterer's collection [...] was crucial for the Baron" in "Reconstructing the artistic experience of Die Brücke". In Aya Soika (ed.): *Expresionismo Brücke*. [Actas symposium, 31 March-2 April 2005]. Madrid, Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2005, p. 15.
- 10 Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza, "German Expressionism. A Personal Choice", in *Apollo*, vol. CXVIII, no. 257, July 1983, p. 76.
- 11 The library is now on deposit in the Library of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza.
- 12 Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza, op. cit., p. 76.
- 13 Described in Peter Vergo, *Twentieth-century German Painting. The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection*. London, Sotheby's Publications, 1992, p. 316.
- 14 Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza, op. cit., p. 76.
- 15 As stated by Paloma Alarcó in op. cit., p. 21.
- 16 Roman Norbert Ketterer, *Legenden am Auktionspult. Die Wiederentdeckung des deutschen Expressionismus*. Gerd Presler (ed.). Munich, Ketterer Kunst Verlag, 1999, p. 244.
- 17 Roman Norbert Ketterer, *Dialoge*. Stuttgart-Zurich, Belsler, 1988, vol. 1, p. 176.
- 18 Roman Norbert Ketterer 1988, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 191.
- 19 Almost half the Expressionist works now on display in the galleries of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza were acquired through Ketterer.
- 20 Roman Norbert Ketterer 1988, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 192-198.
- 21 As stated by Baron Thyssen in Roman Norbert Ketterer, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 180.