

A chance encounter

New information on Balthus's *Card Game*¹

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Balthus
The Card Game, 1948–50
(detail)

[\[+ info\]](#)

fig. 1

Erica Brausen, 1959,
photograph by Ida Kar

**1**

This article draws attention to one of the tasks of museum curators: to investigate the provenance of the works belonging to the permanent collection. A painting's ownership history is often incomplete, with collectors who remained anonymous or periods in which all trace of the piece is lost. Our work consists in trying to fill in these blanks while immersing ourselves in the – very often fascinating – lives of the people who owned these paintings before they entered the Museum.

2

Jean-Yves Mock, formerly Erica Brausen's assistant at the Hanover Gallery, tells of this episode in his biography of her. See Jean-Yves Mock: *Erica Brausen. Premier marchand de Francis Bacon*. Paris, L'Échoppe, 1996, p. 1.

3

On Brausen's life, see Mock, *op. cit.* note 2, and the obituaries published in the British press, such as Barry Joule: 'Obituary: Erica Brausen'. In *The Independent*, 30 December 1992 (see <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-erica-brausen-1565959.html>, last accessed 13 February 2019).

It all began one day in 1953 when the director of the Hanover Gallery in London saw a stranger enter the premises. From the far end she watched him walk around in silence before going up to her to congratulate her on the selection of pictures hanging on the walls. 'It's closing down', replied the owner laconically. However, her sincere admission of bankruptcy turned out to be her salvation. For that anonymous visitor happened to be an art-loving banker who decided on impulse to save the gallery and became its new owner.²

It had not been easy for Erica Brausen (1908–1992) to open her gallery [fig. 1]. Born in Germany, she emigrated to Britain not long before the outbreak of the Second World War and came up against the restrictions German citizens then faced, such as being banned from setting up their own business. After marrying a friend to obtain a work permit, Brausen joined the staff of the Redfern Gallery. Only in 1947, thanks to the financial support of the US businessman Arthur Jeffress, was she able to fulfil her wishes: to open the Hanover Gallery.³

Following its opening Brausen succeeded in turning the establishment into one of the most active and modern galleries on the European post-war scene. At 21 she had gone

fig. 2

Francis Bacon
Painting, 1946
 Oil and pastel on canvas,
 197.8 × 132.1 cm
 The Museum of Modern Art,
 New York



to live in Paris, where she had struck up close relationships with artists and intellectuals of the international avant-garde. One of the artists she met in the French capital was Joan Miró, who encouraged her to settle in Palma de Mallorca in 1935. On the island Brausen ran a bar that was frequented by the local cultural elite until she found herself forced to flee by boat to Britain at the height of the Spanish Civil War. By then she had built up a large web of contacts that enabled her to organise exhibitions in London for artists such as Paul Klee, Alberto Giacometti, Kurt Schwitters, Max Ernst, Hans Arp and Hanna Hoch, among others. From the outset she combined this focus on artists with a firmly established European reputation with a more experimental side that turned the gallery into a launchpad for a new generation of British painters. Notable among them was, without a doubt, Francis Bacon.

Encouraged by Graham Sutherland, Brausen visited Bacon's atelier in 1946. What she saw in the studio of the then unknown painter fascinated her so much that she came away with *Painting* [fig. 2]. Barely two years later, in 1948, she managed to sell the work to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. After this stroke of fortune, she was contacted by many other institutions, keen to follow in the footsteps of the first and most important contemporary art museum in the world. In November 1949 she staged the artist's first one-man show, which played a decisive role in launching him on the international scene.

Nevertheless, although the collaboration between Brausen and Bacon was a resounding success both for the gallery and for the British artist's career, their relationship did not only bring joy. In 1953 Arthur Jeffress decided to withdraw his financial support owing precisely to his dislike of the artist's works. It was at this point, when everything seemed to be coming to an end, that the visit of that above mentioned stranger prevented the gallery's imminent closure. His name was Michael Behrens (1911–1989).

Michael Behrens and Erica Brausen

The new owner of the Hanover Gallery was not only a reputed banker who went on to buy the Ionian Bank in 1958; in 1953 he had diversified his investments by purchasing a restaurant called La Réserve. However, his personal interest in the gallery was not merely commercial. It seems that Michael Behrens's decision was prompted by his fondness for art, as well as by his unquestionable business acumen. Indeed, he was not only a frequent visitor to the West End galleries but also owned a small art collection.

'Michael Behrens soon developed great admiration and regard for Erica', recalled Jean-Yves Mock years later.⁴ Mock, her assistant from 1956 onwards, explained about the relationship between the banker and the art dealer in his biography of Brausen. Together they kept the gallery running for a further two decades, until 1973, and weathered the greatest crisis of her entire career: Francis Bacon's desertion after he signed a contract with the Marlborough Gallery in 1958.

Despite being attracted to art, Behrens did not purchase works from his own gallery and did not take the opportunity to snap up for a good price a few significant twentieth-century pieces that passed through the establishment during those years. The impulse which had spurred him to bail out the gallery did not lead to additions to his collection. There was, however, one exception. In his account Mock tells of a work the banker did acquire from the Hanover Gallery.⁵ It was not a Francis Bacon, or a Lucian Freud, an artist whose first solo show was staged by the gallery. Nor was it an Alberto Giacometti or a Henry Moore. The painting he purchased for 2,970 pounds was a Balthus. He earned a sizeable profit when he decided to sell it in the early 1980s, with Erica Brausen acting as an intermediary.⁶ It was precisely after it changed hands that the banker became aware of the business opportunities he had let slip away and of the profits he could have made had he invested in some of the artists his business had represented.⁷

4
Mock, *op. cit.* note 2, p. 2. Mock worked at the Hanover Gallery until it closed in 1973 and later became a curator at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.

5
Mock, *op. cit.* note 2, p. 2.

6
Despite closing the London gallery, Brausen continued to be an art dealer throughout her whole life and collaborated with Gimpel Fils at their Zurich gallery.

7
Mock, *op. cit.* note 2, p. 2.

A Balthus in the Hanover Gallery

fig. 3
Balthus
The Card Game, 1948–50
Oil on canvas, 140 × 194 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid
[\[+ info\]](#)



fig. 4
Photograph of one of the rooms
of Balthus's solo exhibition
at the MoMA, New York, 1956

The Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza owns only one Balthus, *The Card Game* [fig. 3]. Interestingly, the work also passed through the Hanover Gallery and later belonged to a British private collection. The coincidences between the history of Behrens's picture and the provenance of our painting led us to harbour hopes it might be the same canvas.

It is known that *The Card Game* was painted by Balthus between 1948 and 1950. Shortly afterwards the painter sent it to his dealer Pierre Matisse in New York, where it was also shown in the solo exhibition organised by the Museum of Modern Art in 1956 [fig. 4]. On 14 April 1959 the canvas was acquired by Erica Brausen for 2,970 pounds and shipped to

London.⁸ It passed from the Hanover Gallery to an anonymous collector and later appeared in the Thomas Ammann Fine Art gallery in Zurich. In 1982 it became the property of the prominent collector Hans-Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza and when the museum named after him opened in 1992 Balthus's canvas was among the works that were sent to Madrid.

To discover whether *The Card Game* could be the work that once hung in the British banker's house, we first contacted the Thomas Ammann gallery to see if they could supply us with the name of the previous owner. After examining its archives, the Zurich gallery informed us that the entire sale operation had been conducted by Erica Brausen and that the owner had remained anonymous.⁹ Despite not solving our enigma, this piece of information tied in with Mock's account of the sale of Behrens's Balthus, in which the German dealer also acted as an intermediary.¹⁰ It brought us a little closer to confirming the hypothesis that the Thyssen canvas might have previously belonged to the English banker. But the definite confirmation it was the same work came when, on examining his biography, we discovered that he was also the father of the painter Timothy Behrens (1937–2017).

8
Information provided by email by Tate Library & Archive, which holds the archives of the Hanover Gallery, on 24 January 2019.

9
Email from Patrizia Solombrino of Thomas Amman Fine Art, 25 May 2018.

10
Mock, *op. cit.* note 2, p. 2.

Tim Behrens and *The Card Game*

fig. 5

From left to right: Timothy Behrens, Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon, Frank Auerbach and Michael Andrews at Wheeler's, Old Compton Street, 1963, photograph by John Deakin



As a young man Michael Behrens's son Tim became involved with the artists of the British New Figuration movement of the second half of the twentieth century. The youngest of all the painters of the School of London, he came into contact with them through Lucian Freud, whom he met in 1955 while studying at the Slade School of Arts. During the following nine years, Behrens and Freud became close friends and even lived together. Thanks to Freud, he became acquainted with the whole London art scene and, among many other artists, coincided with Bacon, who was still represented by Tim's father's gallery at the time [fig. 5].

Despite owning the Hanover Gallery, Michael Behrens did not approve of his son's decision to devote himself to art and their relationship was very strained. Indeed, the young artist's first solo exhibition in London was not held at Erica Brausen's gallery but at the Beaux-Arts Gallery, where Frank Auerbach and Michael Andrews also showed their work.

It was not until his mature years that Tim Behrens, then established in La Coruña, remembered his past and admitted the importance of his father's influence on his artistic leanings. 'After the war', he recalled, 'when I was nine or ten, my father started collecting art and I started painting. But as we always got on badly, it took me half a century to recognise the obvious connection between the two beginnings'.¹¹ The painter went on to tell of how some Saturdays he had accompanied his father to London's West End galleries and how Michael came to own several works by Matthew Smith,

¹¹

Tim Behrens: 'T. Behrens por T. Behrens'. In *T. Behrens* [exh. cat.]. Madrid - La Coruña, Círculo de Bellas Artes - Kiosco Alfonso, 2003, p. 23

fig. 6

Michael Andrews

Portrait of Timothy Behrens, 1962

Oil on cardboard, 122 × 122 cm

Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid

[\[+ info\]](#)



Corot and Forain. When recalling his father's collection he briefly mentioned all the artists who had belonged to it but spoke at greater length about a painting that had made a particular impression on him: a Balthus entitled *The Card Game*.

Thanks to Tim Behrens's statement and the importance he attached to the Balthus canvas during his formative years, we now know which work his father purchased from Erica Brausen. All the pieces of the puzzle fit together and we can put a name to the private collector in whose home the picture now in the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza hung for years.

Balthus, Tim Behrens and Michael Andrews

It so happens that a portrait of Tim Behrens is on display not very far from where the Balthus usually hangs in the Madrid museum [fig. 6]. When the young artist and banker's son was immortalised by the painter Michael Andrews in 1962, the striking image of the pair of children playing cards was already engraved on his retina. ●