Book Review : Modern Masters and the Gurlitt Status

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To mark the opening of the exhibition, the Gurlitt Status Report: Nazi Art Theft and Its Consequences at the Kunstmuseum Bern, art historian and founder of germanmodernism.org, Jean Marie Carey PhD reviews two recent catalogues exploring the Gurlitt acquisition by the Kunstmuseum Bern.
Claudia Blank, Matthias Frehner, and Daniel Spanke; eds., with many contributing authors. *Modern Masters “Degenerate” Art at the Kunstmuseum Bern*. Prestel: Munich, 2016; 376 pages with many color illustrations and photographs.

In the wake of the revealed discovery in November 2013 of what has become known as the “Gurlitt hoard” – the thousands of artworks seized in a 2012 raid by the by German Federal, Bavarian State, and Munich police upon the Schwabing apartment of then 80-year-old Cornelius Gurlitt – a number of thoughtful and well-researched books have emerged, notably *The Munich Art Hoard: Hitler’s Dealer and His Secret Legacy* (2015) by Catherine Hickley.[1]

Gurlitt, the peripatetic son of art dealer, gallerist, and sometime-curateur Hildebrand Gurlitt, died in May 2014, bequeathing his collection to the Kunstmuseum Bern. The lifting of the embargo by a German court to allow Gurlitt’s trove to be dispensed to the museum was far from universally acclaimed – in fact, with many works by 20th Century luminaries missing since the 1930s recovered from Gurlitt’s possession-jammed flat still of uncertain provenance – quite the opposite. Thus the museum of the city of Bern has been placed on defensive alert even while surely exulting over the acquisition of paintings, drawings, and prints by Franz Marc, August Macke, Henri Matisse, Ernst
Ludwig Kirchner, and many others that greatly enrich our understanding of the historical avant-garde.

A research catalogue and attendant exhibition was promised by the Kunstmuseum Bern, surveying the contents of its permanent collection as well for the presence of Raubkunst. And director Matthias Frehner kept his promise. The depth, if not the scope, of Modern Masters “Degenerate” Art at the Kunstmuseum Basel, the resulting publication, is even more ambitious than anticipated. It offers a comprehensively illustrated checklist of the paintings from the Gurlitt acquisition as well as many other fascinating images and tales, from an account of the activities of patron-donor Othbar Huber to archival photographs rarely seen of Kathe Thannhauser and Herwarth Walden. However the excellent series of volumes Gurlitt Status Report: – Confiscated and Sold, Kunstmuseum Bern - Nazi Art Theft and Its Consequences, Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany taking stock both more specifically and in consideration of the broader ramifications of the Gurlitt situation to some extent eclipses the Bern effort, launched from a collaborative co-exhibition at the Bundeskunsthalle Bonn.

Firstly it is necessary to understand, at least in brief, the legal underpinnings of claims against both museums and individuals who own or may possess Raubkunst – art looted by the Nazis – in their collections. The Washington Agreement of 1998 (subsequently updated and further supported by the Terezin Declaration of 2009) signed by 44 countries lifted the statute of limitations that would otherwise have applied to Nazi Germany’s theft of works of art from their Jewish owners. Even those who had ostensibly legally acquired stolen art at a much later date were called upon to return it or at the very least make a settlement with the victim’s heirs. In Switzerland, despite the establishment in 1996 of the Bergier Commission to investigate the role of the country’s banks, museums, and art dealers during National Socialism and the release of the formidable 2001 document Fluchtgut-Raubgut: Der Transfer von Kulturgütern in und über die Schweiz 1933-1945 und die Frage der Restitution (Flight Assets–Looted Assets: The Transfer of Cultural Assets in and Through Switzerland 1933-1945 and the Question of Restitution) the process has yielded fewer than ten instances of investigation and settlement.

The written material and reproductions of artwork for Gurlitt Status Report have been prepared with methodical clarity and academic rigor, inclusive of the uniform presentation and editing of the prose, which is dispassionate and cool throughout, though extremely readable in the manner of a mystery novel. After a preface and introduction by members of the curatorial teams explaining the implied kinetic state of inquiry of the book’s name, readers are introduced to one of the most pressing but least covered aspects of the case: Who were Hildebrand and Cornelius Gurlitt and the people who surrounded them? How did they manage such support, both public and clandestine, for their personal and business activities? These questions are addressed in Part I “Hildebrand Gurlitt – Curator, Art Dealer, Profiteer,” broken into five subheadings, including the unflinching “Being a ‘Mischling’: The German-Jewish Identity of Hildebrand Gurlitt by Shlomit Steinberg.
Johannes Gramlich and Meike Hopp use receipts and correspondence to create a low-key damning narrative in “‘Occasionally spirit is turned into money’ – Hildebrand Gurlitt as an Art Dealer during the Nazi Period.” In this regard the catalogue represents a step forward in terms of accessible scholarship, using graphs, maps, charts, and diagrams to illustrate many of its key points, such as the shaded regional map on page 36 showing Gurlitt’s transactions and business partner stakes around Germany in the years 1937-1943. The unsparing history of an amoral, ambitious, and finally, catastrophically myopic family interweaves analysis of process, opportunity, coincidence, and biography with the lingering consequences and effects they triggered: presence and absence in one; indexical traces of people and history; the slippages of permanence and impermanence; the crisis of faith in justice that such a case engenders. Every sentence in the section is vital to the next and packed with possibilities to pursue.

Section II, “The Gurlitt Art Trove,” begins the work – proposed in Matthias Frehner’s chapter “Must the Art History of the 20th Century Be Re-Written? …” of taking stock of the state of provenance research over the past 70 years. Yehudit Shendar explains the problems of relying on seemingly solid primary source documentation and Meike Hoffman presents a series of moving case studies, particularly those of August Macke’s *Landscape with Sailing Boats* (1913) and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s *Two Nudes on a Bed (Two Models)* (1907/1908). Section IV is an efficiently organized Appendix of an outlined Gurlitt biographical and collecting chronology, glossary, index of names and credits.

But it is the rich asynchronous arrangement of the artworks and creatively legible typography that commands admiration for the book’s designer, Sophie Friederich, and sets this catalogue on high order. Featuring all the known works from the Gurlitt bequeathal, each catalogue entry contains the standard empirical data including provenance and references and where necessary an explanatory paragraph is added. What is astounding is not just the staggering number of pieces but their range, which include not just “modern masters” and entartete Kunst but engravings by Albrecht Dürer, sketches from 18th Century illustrator Charles Eisen, caricatures of early 20th Century domestic life by Conrad Felixmüller, and richly-toned figural paintings by Henri Fantin-Latour. Some photographic images capture historic installations and exhibitions underway; others, family and personal moments spanning nearly 100 years. The superb color reproductions on matte paper flawlessly document the select examples of collected works.

These merits of Gurlitt Status Report on “visualization of knowledge” strategies mark it as an excellent instrument for researchers to notice individual paintings that could be subjected to specialized examination. Apart from its value as a source and a resource stimulating further research in this field, the inventory of works and chronology of the Gurlitt family’s activities constitutes an important contribution to the study of this landmark case. The organizers of the exhibitions deserve to be applauded for acknowledging the need for this type of scholarly research and for facilitating the publication of such a worthwhile project.
The companion *Modern Masters* catalogue is arranged in six main chapters (including “The Psychiatrist Should Come for Him”: The Pathologization of Art and Artists as Antimodern Strategy” by Bettina Brand-Claussen and “Swissness Under Multiple Threat: On Reactions to the ‘Geistige Landesverteidigung’” by Georg Kreis) with a foreword and introduction by Frehner, and is punctuated, as are many catalogues produced this decade, with single-page “take out windows” focusing on collectors and patrons of interest or anecdotes about individual works. A digression, for example, into the origins of the term entartete as a visible expression of a culture’s values in discussions of art back to Winckelmann (36-41) is quite interesting.

Frehner’s introduction provides an overview of the history of the public Swiss collection founded in 1879 and its connection to the dealers, patrons, and artists who have come into its orbit for the past 150 years. As a backdrop to the high expectations and major disappointments of the rulings around the Gurlitt bequest and the artworks contained therein, Frehner’s explanations of how the Bern collections were established, and what they comprised, are relevant, as they highlight perceptions about curating attitudes in Germany and Switzerland from the turn of the 20th Century to the present. One of the director’s main points – based practically perhaps as well as morally considering that only two of the more than 2,000 artworks and documents seized from Gurlitt’s apartment have been restituted – is that no amount of provenance research will compensate for National Socialism. Provenance law expert and historian Esther Tisa Francini further gives a rundown of the museum’s acquisition history using art historian Max Huggler’s dogged collecting advice to frame this saga in narrative form. (89-96)

Meike Hoffman’s “Provenance Research on the 1913 Painting *Dünen und Meer* by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner” takes the form of a case study, pointing out the reluctance of earlier art historians to take forced sales and museum seizures into account, and the sometime frustrating results of even dedicated and competent investigations. The Kirchner painting in question remains unauthenticated.
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner Dünen und Meer (Dunes and Sea), 1913, Oil on canvas, 90.5 × 120.5 cm, Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern

“Just People? Figural Sculpture in the Interwar Period and Its Political Aspect” by Franz Müller reveals that the avant-garde in Switzerland was also not uncontroversial. Müller uses an exquisite eye for formal analysis of pose and movement in reconstructing the monumental public sculptures of Wera I. Muchina, Josef Thorak, Hermann Haller, Otto Charles Bänninger, Jakob Probst and particularly Karl Geiser. Geiser “rejected heroes and goddesses along with muscle-bound athletes” (162) to undercut the prevailing aesthetic of the era. His three-figure Mädchengruppe for the Swiss pavilion at the 1937 World’s Fair in Paris, for example, is colossal without the rigidity and overwrought classicizing of Arno Breker, whose recent rehabilitation Müller subtly takes to task.

The surpassing chapter is the unassumingly named “Museum Collections in a State of Change” by the superlative writer and researcher Andreas Hüneke, who uses the rivalry and sometime cooperation between the famous curator-authors Alois Schardt and Max Sauerlandt to trace collecting practices from Halle an der Saale, Hamburg, and Berlin through the Nationalgalerie and the Kunstmuseum Moritzburg. Schardt, the first art historian to compile a catalogue raisonné and biography of Franz Marc, refused to deaccession the modern art masterpieces he had assembled for Moritzburg, eventually fleeing to the United States in 1936. Hüneke makes a trenchant comparison to current museum practices which often see temporarily unpopular or obscure works sold or traded to accede to fickle popularity or patron’s demands.

Perhaps the most significant achievement of this volume is to present the work of artists well
known in the early 20th Century who have fallen to a sort of second-tier of the historical avant-garde, including a full section on Swiss Expressionist painter Johannes Itten (1888 –1967), his contemporary Adolf Wölfi (1864-1930) and German “outsider” artist Franz Karl Bühler.

Johannes Itten *Sumpfpflanzen nach einem Gewitter (Marsh Plants after a Storm)*, 1916

24.8 × 31 cm, Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern

[1] Though the raid took place in 2012, the story was not revealed to the public until late in 2013 in the German magazine FOCUS. See: Der gerette Schatz, *FOCUS*, 3 November 2013. https://www.focus.de/kultur/kunst/tid-34646/titel-der-gerettete-schatz_aid_1146923.html