

Collectionism and Modernity. Two Case Studies: The Im Obersteg and Rudolf Staechelin Collections



MARC CHAGALL
Self Portrait, 1914
Oil on cardboard laid down on canvas
50,5 x 38 cm
Im Obersteg Foundation, permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel
Photography: Mark Gisler, Müllheim

- DATES:** 18th March 2015 / 14th September 2015
- ORGANIZATION:** Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and The Phillips Collection in collaboration with Im Obersteg Foundation and Rudolf Staechelin Collection
- PLACE:** Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid) Sabatini building. 4th Floor.
- CURATORSHIP:** Rosario Peiró
- COORDINATORS:** María de Prada
- ITINERANCE:** The Phillips Collection. Washington D.C. (USA) (10th October 2015 – 10th January 2016)
- RELATED ACTIVITIES:**
- *The shape of time. Filming the museum.* Film Program
 - *Abierto por obras.* Family workshop for children aged 5 to 7 accompanied by adults
 - *Artist's workshop.* For children aged 8 to 11 and child care associations
 - *A propósito de...* White Fire. The Modern Collection of the Kunstmuseum Basel. Guided tours of the exhibition for adults

This exhibition brings together two leading collections of early modernist art that now form part of the holdings of the **Kunstmuseum Basel** (Basel, Switzerland), the **Im Obersteg Collection** and the **Rudolf Staechelin Collection**, offering an opportunity to enjoy works by the most reputed early modernist masters, the vast majority of which have never before been seen in Spain. It is moreover a chance to explore the phenomenon of collecting, with a focus on its centrality to the formation of modern art.

Private collections of early modernism have traditionally been studied and exhibited with an emphasis on the contemplation of the works on display, neglecting the economic, social and political implications inherent to the activity of collecting in a context like that of Europe in the first decades of the 20th century. Nevertheless, collecting is above all discursive, and may be studied as such. A collection of whatever kind is made up not only of the works it contains but also of the narratives it successfully generates.

The Im Obersteg Collection and the Rudolf Staechelin Collection were formed in the early 20th century in Basel, a city on the banks of the Rhine that borders on both France and Germany. The two collections have several points in common, though each also denotes the specific taste of its initiator. They were started by members of liberal bourgeois families that would subsequently acquire some importance in their country's history. Multifarious and internationalist in their interests, Karl Im Obersteg and Rudolf Staechelin were friends who both formed part of the Basel Arts Committee. They saw clearly how they wanted their collections to develop, and they made swift progress, taking charge of them personally with decisiveness and keen intuition. In both cases, they applied personal criteria that have been borne out by time.

Although they initially acquired work by modern Swiss artists, their collections were later joined by pieces by world-renowned artists like Pablo Picasso, Vincent van Gogh and Marc Chagall. One striking case which illustrates the relationship between the two collectors, as well as their different criteria, is that of Picasso's *Seated Harlequin* (1923).

Initially bought by Im Obersteg, it came to belong to both collections, since he sold it to his friend Staechelin, using the capital he obtained to buy another work more to his taste. The work became famous in 1967 when the people of Basel acted in defense of their artistic heritage to prevent its private sale, organizing a fundraising campaign to permit its acquisition by the city's museum just as the Staechelin family was planning to sell it. The news reached Picasso himself, who was so impressed by this unprecedented civic gesture that he donated four more works to the city.

The Im Obersteg Collection and the Rudolf Staechelin Collection have enriched the public artistic heritage of Basel since they joined the holdings of the Kunstmuseum Basel, where they complement the institution's rich collections and can be viewed by all the people of the city.

The Im Obersteg Collection

Karl Im Obersteg was born in Basel in 1883 to a family of entrepreneurs involved principally with the transport sector. His father built up a solid business which was successfully carried on by his son. Like many other wealthy families of the time, the Im Obersteg family put together a classic collection of historic engravings, furniture, books and other pieces.

In taking his first steps as a collector, Karl Im Obersteg distanced himself from the nature of the family collection and turned instead towards modern art. In 1916 he acquired his first work by a contemporary Swiss artist, **Cuno Amiet**, who remained a close friend, and with whom he kept up an exchange of interests and advice that was to mark the development of the collection. It was Amiet who put him in touch in 1918 with the resident community of artists in Ascona, where Im Obersteg had gone to recover from the after-effects of a severe bout of influenza. Ascona was to prove a watershed in his life. This small village in Italian-speaking Switzerland, on the shores of Lake Maggiore, was a place of rest and recreation for the upper classes, and also a haven for a group of exiled Russian artists. Among them was **Alexej von Jawlensky**, whose use of color had an extraordinary influence on Im Obersteg, becoming the basis for his vision of art and, largely, for the configuration of his collection, in which the Russian painter is the best represented artist.

Karl Im Obersteg also acquired works by **Ferdinand Hodler**, one of the most renowned Swiss artists of the day along with Cuno Amiet. In so doing he followed the same path as many of the pioneers of Swiss collecting, influenced like him by the exhibitions organized by the dynamic cultural institutions of Basel. Nevertheless, his collection was formed in accordance with very personal criteria related more to his enjoyment of the works than to their market value, as can be seen from the abundant correspondence between the collector and the artists.

Karl Im Obersteg purchased groups of works with the idea that they should form dialogues with one another, while he sold or exchanged those which did not work well within the meticulous arrangement he prepared for his and his family's private enjoyment. Color is one of the salient features of the Im Obersteg Collection, but so too is an Expressionist tendency in both the forms and the subjects, which often represent underprivileged or socially marginalized figures. As an expert, he was also interested in masterpieces by the best artists of the time, such as **Picasso**, **Cézanne**, **Modigliani** or **Soutine**, and he dealt directly with **Paul Guillaume**, the Paris representative of many of these artists.

Even the selected works by these acknowledged masters had to fit perfectly within the guidelines established by his previous acquisitions. If they did not, he solved the problem by immediately putting the work up for sale, as he did with **Picasso's** *Seated Harlequin*, mentioned above.

After the impact caused by the 1933 retrospective exhibition on **Marc Chagall** in Basel, he tried to obtain certain works by the artist for his collection. At the end of three years of searching and negotiating, he came into the possession of one of them by exchanging another previously acquired work by Chagall with the artist himself. After further acquisitions, the Im Obersteg Collection was to owe much of its international reputation to its set of works by Chagall.

During the Second World War, no new works were added to the Im Obersteg Collection. When the war was over, it was augmented with complementary works by the various artists who had interested him in previous years. However, the acquisition of other pieces tending towards abstraction indicates a change of attitude from his initial lack of interest in this current of contemporary art, probably under the influence of the late work of Jawlensky, who died in 1941. In the last years of the collector's life, his son Jürg collaborated actively in developing the family's legacy, and it was he who inherited the collection upon Karl Im Obersteg's death in 1969.

The Rudolf Staechelin Collection

Rudolf Staechelin was born in 1881 to a family of developers and financiers who came to wield considerable influence in the city in the span of two generations. He was educated with a view to entering his father's business, and so the origins of his interest in art are not known beyond the fact that he belonged to a new sector of the bourgeoisie that was trying to earn itself a philanthropic reputation through the acquisition of artworks.

The Rudolf Staechelin Collection began in Geneva in 1914, when Staechelin, in emulation of other industrial entrepreneurs of his generation, acquired a set of works by contemporary Swiss artists. Basel's awakening to modern art through major exhibitions of contemporary French artists encouraged the formation of a "new taste" and stimulated investment on the part of this group of young collectors. The acquisitions for the collection therefore bore a direct relation to the exhibitions held in those years: the one dedicated to French Impressionism at the Kunsthalle in Basel (1912), the show on the French masters from Courbet to Signac (1913), the exhibitions of the drawings of Picasso (1914) and the work of Ferdinand Hodler (1917), and the one devoted to French and Swiss painters (1915). The documentation related to Staechelin's transactions have been preserved, and this documentary corpus allows the collector's movements to be studied with precision. According to these documents, his most important acquisitions of French art took place between 1917 and 1918, with the assistance of influential galleries and dealers from all over Europe, and especially France, Germany and Switzerland. To cite one example, it was at the Maison Moos gallery in Geneva that he acquired his first important group of French works, among them *Nafea faa ipoipo* by **Paul Gauguin**, *Paysage avec deux figures* by **Pierre-Auguste Renoir**, and *Nature morte: Les harengs saurs* by **Vincent van Gogh**.

The galleries were well aware of Staechelin's conditions, one of his rules being to buy only paintings executed during an artist's "mature" or "classical" period. He was praised for his clear and direct taste, since he would not accept works unless they had a balanced composition and were clearly representative of their artists' careers. Indeed, although he owned various works by his favorite artists, such as **Camille Pissarro**, **Paul Cézanne** and **Pablo Picasso**, he never attempted to acquire examples of all the different periods of each one. The collection thus maintains a restrained and homogeneous air, since it expressly excludes certain manifestations of modern art such as cubism or abstraction. In applying this criterion, Staechelin's intention was that the works in his collection should be worthy of acquisition by a museum, since one of his goals was its public display.

In 1920, Staechelin showed his collection at the Kunsthalle in Basel at the request of Wilhelm Barth, who was institutionally responsible for the diffusion of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art in the city. The show was arranged in four sections that ran across the whole collection: French 19th century masters (34 works), modern French painters (7 works), Swiss painters (47 works), and contemporary German painters (27 works).

From then on, various gestures confirmed Staechelin's vocation for public service, and his desire to turn his private collection into a larger foundation. The public display of his collection of Asian art was followed by the purchase of a mansion for the permanent exhibition of the rest of the collection. This was the origin of the Staechelin Foundation, created to ensure the protection of the accumulated patrimony. In 1945, the collector attended his last meeting of the board of trustees of his foundation, at which it was concluded that no further acquisitions were possible. After his death, the Foundation began to organize an exhibition of his collection in conjunction with the Kunstmuseum Basel, the institution Staechelin had collaborated with throughout his life. The show opened in 1956.

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