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Collection withdrawn from Swiss museums in protest against Unidroit

Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth gets twenty-six works from the blue-chip Staechelin collection on a three-year loan

Jason Edward Kaufman

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Basel/Fort Worth

To protest against Switzerland's pending ratification of the Unidroit Convention (The Art Newspaper, No.51, September 1995, pp.26-29) Ruedi Staechelin has withdrawn his family foundation's collection of outstanding modern paintings from museums in Basel and Geneva where they have been exhibited for half a century, and he shipped them off to the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth for three years beginning in October.

The unrestricted loan includes paintings by Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, and others. "I do this in the hope that the Swiss Parliament will see that Unidroit has effects," says Mr Staechelin, warning that ratification will result in other collections leaving the country, as well.

The purpose of Unidroit is to stem illicit traffic in cultural goods by requiring member States to enforce the patrimony and export laws of other member States. The Swiss government signed the agreement in June 1996 but it remains to be ratified by Parliament. (As yet only Paraguay and Lithuania have fully enacted Unidroit.) The Association of Museums of Switzerland and the Center for Preservation of Cultural Heritage consider the convention “a necessary step in the battle against illegal trade in art and its devastating worldwide impact.” But many Swiss museum directors, dealers, and collectors like Mr Staechelin fear that Unidroit will have serious negative implications for the art world. International loans will decline as owners opt not to risk having their property confiscated. Moreover, many countries will introduce austere export restrictions to broaden the scope of their newly enforceable claims. As a result, international trade will diminish and works of art forbidden from export will lose a significant percentage of their value.

Mr Staechelin, who is Sotheby’s representative in Basel says that he has no plans to sell. (He disposed of Gauguin’s Breton-period “Entre les lys” (1889) in November 1989 at Sotheby’s New York; it was acquired by a Japanese dealer and is currently at Galerie Beyeler in Basel.) On the other hand, he says that the Foundation “has no intention of sitting idly, watching its collection depreciate in value. The US is a country where I feel safe as it has rejected Unidroit.” He regrets that the Basel Kunstmuseum and the Geneva Musée d’art et d’histoire are “the first victims of the anti-culture policy of the Swiss federal Office of Culture.” He is pleased his holdings will be seen by a new audience in Texas.

After considering several American institutions, Mr. Staechelin selected the modest-scaled, well-heeled, scholarly Kimbell where, from October to January 1998, all the major works will be shown together in a special exhibition dedicated to Rudolf Staechelin, the lender’s grandfather who assembled the collection in the years following the World War I. After the show closes, the Picasso, Matisse, some Pissarros and perhaps other works will return to Mr Staechelin’s home some ten kilometres outside Basel.

The rest will remain at the Kimbell, integrated with the museum’s permanent collection. “I intend to honour the three-year loan, whether Switzerland ratifies or not,” says the collector, “but I expect that within this period they will have made a decision. If they have not ratified, and the other countries have not ratified, I will bring the paintings back and I intend to keep them again in the Basel Museum. If Switzerland has ratified Unidroit, I have not yet made up my mind what to do.”

Switzerland’s loss of the Staechelin collection adds to an exodus of art that has included the famous Thyssen-Bornemisza collection from Lugano and portions of the Barbier-Mueller collection from Geneva. The European Fine Art Fair (TEFAF) in Basel has also announced plans to go elsewhere, and Mr Staechelin believes other fairs may relocate as well.

Kimbell Director Edmund Pillsbury says that “Mr Staechelin’s desire, as I understand it, is not to jeopardise the cultural patrimony of Switzerland, but rather to protect it; to make the country an attractive place for collectors to have works of art.”

There has been no public response from the Swiss government. According to Mr Staechelin, “There is a feeling among the art community in Switzerland that the government doesn’t take art very seriously. My intention is to show the Parliament, most members of which know very little about art, that Switzerland has become an important cultural nation not because of an imperial past, but because, like America, we had a free and open border.”

Further information on the collection and on the Unidroit issue can be found on-line at <http://Staechelin.ch>.

The twenty-six Staechelin works heading for Texas

Cézanne, “La maison de Docteur Gachet”, 1873; Cézanne, “Verre et pommes”, 1879-82; Corot, “Olevano la Serpentara”, 1827; Degas, “Femme à sa toilette”, 1892; Gauguin, “Paysage aux toits rouges”, 1885; Gauguin, “Nafea faa Ipoipo”, 1892; Van Gogh, “Tête d’une vieille femme”, 1886; Van Gogh, “Les harengs saures”, 1886-88; Van Gogh, “Le jardin de Daubigny”, 1890; Hodler, “La malade”, 1915; Hodler, “Le Mont-Blanc”, 1918; Hodler, “Paysage de Montana”; Hodler, “La malade”; Hodler, “La morte”, 1915; Manet, “Tête de femme”, 1870; Matisse, “Madame Matisse au Châte de Manille”, 1911; Monet, “Temps calme, Pourville”, 1881; Picasso, “Arlequin au loup”, 1918; Pissarro, “La carrière, Pointoise”, 1874; Pissarro, “Le sentier du village”, 1875; Pissarro, “Une rue à l’Hermitage”, 1877; Pissarro, “Vue de la Seine”, 1901; Pissarro, “Fenaison”, 1889; Pissarro, “Le monument Henri IV et le Pont des Arts”, 1901; Renoir, “Gabrielle”; Toulouse-Lautrec, “Nature morte”, 1894

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