

ART KONRAD BERNHEIMER

“Instilling taste means creating hierarchies of taste”

Talking about art is always a pleasure, opening a door to knowledge; but conversing about art with certain people is a true privilege – a unique, vital experience. The conversation of four or five world experts can immediately immerse you into art, not only because of their knowledge, but also for their experiences in this evocative field where humankind opens up to transcendence: proof that pleasure and spirit are absolutely compatible. One of these very rare people, in the world of art in particular, is Konrad Bernheimer.

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Bernheimer belongs to the fourth generation of one of the world's most prestigious and successful dynasties of art dealers. Chairman of the Fine Arts Section at the “grand dame” of art fairs, TEFAF Maastricht, he has been a member of its Board for 20 years; he is also on the TEFAF New York Committee; and, of course, is the Chairman and owner of Bernheimer Fine Old Masters, and owner of Colnaghi – the former, founded in 1760, is one of the world's most important art galleries, and the oldest. Colnaghi has sold works by Rubens, Rembrandt, Vermeer – miracles do exist – Goya, Velázquez... to the Louvre, the MET, the Prado, and the most prestigious private collections, such as New York's Frick Collection. We had this conversation on art at 26, Bury Street, the headquarters of the Colnaghi gallery in London.

Carmen: TEFAF is the only art fair that still gives me butterflies when I visit it and I am not the only one. From what I hear and see, when it comes to the sale of exceptional artworks, galleries do over 30 % of their business at art fairs and these are on the rise the world over. But, thinking about it logically, which is necessary when it comes to art, I wonder if so many new fairs...

Konrad: It's good news, Carmen, good news. The fact that not only you get butterflies is part of the essence of TEFAF. Allow me to be a little passionate and bold enough to contradict you...

Carmen: What a way to start an interview!

He laughs spontaneously. Konrad has politeness and poise in his blood; a cultivated man with panache. For him, good manners also means being amusing and living life in an absolutely personal way. Born in 1950



in Venezuela, he is the son of Kurt Bernheimer, a Jew of German ancestry, and of Mercedes Uzcátegui, a Catholic from a prominent Venezuelan family. The Bernheimers escaped Nazi persecution and, after the war, Konrad returned to Germany following in his family's footsteps.

Konrad: ...There are not so many fairs. I mean, there are many fairs, but very few are really good. Some fairs are good and prestigious like Art Basel, Frieze and FIAC – but they are contemporary art fairs. TEFAF is the only one that offers art from every period.

Carmen: In your opinion, what drives someone to become a collector? I think there are many reasons, but I've always found that true collections, those that endure over time, are those of people who followed a passion and ran the risk of making mistakes. For instance, Patty Phelps de Cisneros who had a passion for purchasing works by Latin American artists with whom she felt

a connection... Her passion proved to be visionary as many of the pieces would be impossible to acquire today.

Konrad: Passion is very important. However, there are other things if you broaden the spectrum: social prestige and social connections. When you become a collector, you enter a different world, the world of art. You make friends who open up new worlds and connect you with museums, with other collectors, with the market. Think of that first generation of American collectors – when Colnaghi got its big break – between 1880 and 1930... people like Isabella Stewart Garden, like the Mellons. Frick did not have the reputation he had until he put together his collection, and suddenly, he was in the spotlight of New York's society.

Carmen: Nothing is more appealing for a collector than talking about art with another collector.

Konrad: It goes beyond that: they even change their schedules – in March they are in Maastricht, in June in Basel, in October in NY... You start by adapting your schedule to the events of the art market. Something that is very common in the contemporary art market is the idea of acquiring work as an investment. Most think, “If I buy this today, it will be worth so much in several years' time.”

Carmen: Of course... Tell me about an example when you did something like that.

Konrad: Let's see, it's better if I tell you about something I didn't do. In the 80s I was offered a picture of a woman by an unknown painter – and it looked like a photograph. My wife said we should buy it; it cost 17,000 German Marks, but I said we weren't going to buy a picture by anybody for that price. Well, the work was by Gerhard Richter. Today, that picture would be worth millions...

Carmen: A Richter for 17,000 Marks! According to the TEFAF annual report regarding the art market, among the drives to become a collector, “the first is emotional”, the second is social prestige, and the third is investment. Art has many attributes.

Konrad: With regard to risk, being informed is hugely important. Had I had known who Richter was, I might have bought that picture. For instance, you visit the Prado Museum and see a picture you like a lot. You start researching who the painter is – perhaps the artist still has work on the market, like Clara Peeters, whose still lifes occasionally appear. Passion must first be awakened

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by looking, looking, and looking some more until you discover what you like.

Carmen: Most contemporary collectors tend to get carried away, sometimes with very bad results – but sometimes with very good ones.

Konrad: You must also keep a limit in mind. I am astonished by the prices of the contemporary art market. Take Jeff Koons. But look at what he himself collects... 17th-century paintings. The same with Baselitz: 17th-century painting and 19th-century drawings. And then they paint in a different style and make lots of money – but with that money, they buy a Caspar David Friedrich for a much lower price than what their own works fetch.

Carmen: I am often asked what makes a talented artist succeed and my answer is always the same: their work must be in the right place at the right time, and be bought by the right person.

Konrad: When someone buys a picture from me, I want it to be because they like it and want to live with it – not because they are thinking of making money. Besides, I am certain of the works in which I specialise – the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries: I am sure that if now they are worth so much, in 100 years (even though I won't see it), they will still be worth the same, or more. If today you spent a fortune on a picture by Basquiat, Hirst or Richter, who can say whether that work, today worth 50 million, will have the same or a higher value in 100 years time? In contrast, with a Rembrandt, you know you cannot find



works of that kind on the market: there are none left.

Carmen: Imagine I am a client who comes to you. What would you recommend?

Konrad: Never buy a low-quality picture by a well-known artist, but a very high-quality one by a lesser-known painter.

Carmen: Let's take Rubens as an example.

Konrad: There are many works by this very prolific artist. Yet you must be very careful; when he was famous he had a huge studio meaning that in the making of many of his works, not only was the hand of Rubens involved; therein lies the problem. Sometimes Rubens is not actually Rubens because he had a workshop and much help; the great worth of artists like him resides in their masterworks. This is the case with Goya, with El Greco... With all the big names; you must be very careful about what you are buying. You need much expertise that is provided by dealers, but not by auction houses. It's easier with contemporary art: you don't have the workshop problem; everybody knows that Hirst or Koons come up with the idea, but then their "factories" do the work; artists don't make the work that emerges from their studios. Just like the exhibition by Hirst in Venice at the Pinault Museum – a number of giant sculptures: sure, he had the idea and created the designs, but his studio did the work.

Carmen: I agree with you that it's better to buy a good work by a lesser-known artist than a poor-quality piece by a great artist. In 2016, sales of works by Picasso dropped, and the reason is that no exceptional work of his has come onto the market. Collectors preferred to acquire exceptional works by Léger, Chagall, and other lesser known artists.

Konrad: If you were a client who came to me, I would tell you to buy using your eyes, not your ears.

Carmen: Sorry? I didn't get that.

Konrad: A prominent American collector rang me up years ago to say that a very important Rubens was about to be sold at Christie's and he wanted me to go and see it. I said that it was a fantastic work and, if he wanted to spend that money, he should buy it. Shortly before the auction, as always happens, people started to say that it was not in such good condition, etc. My duty was to call my client and tell him that, although I still thought the work was magnificent, some people were not so sure. He replied: "I've never bought using my ears, I buy using my eyes. If you are convinced, go for it."

Carmen: What a wonderful client!

Konrad: Deciding on a purchase using your ears is what we often see in contemporary art collecting: people buy

only a "brand" – not works by artists, but brands. They buy a Koons as if they were buying an Hermès wallet. That's why there are so many Russians who haven't a clue, but they buy one Picasso after another...

Carmen: This also happens in corporative collections: there is much homogeneity in contemporary art collections. I don't believe it's because they don't want to make mistakes, but because of that notion of the brand-artist. It's about not looking, and has nothing to do with having a degree in art. You must train your eye to make your own judgement.

Konrad: When you are starting, you don't know what you actually like. My trick when someone comes and tells me they want to start a collection is to take them to a museum. I walk with them for an hour in rooms that display affordable works of art, those are still found on the market, and I suddenly exclaim, "Very well, now tell me what you'd like to collect and why. I make them choose: regardless of the fact that they like everything, they need to begin with something. So, little by little, I've been able to start a number of collections. For me, this is also a good exercise as I have to defend the works and help; for instance, warning about pieces I know will never come onto the market. [He stops to think for a second...] Instilling taste means creating hierarchies of taste. No matter how much you want a Vermeer, you won't find it. Besides, great masters also have their good and bad moments: not all pictures by Goya are magnificent.

Carmen: There's something I find fascinating, and it's how our way of looking at paintings changes over time...

Konrad: Yes, taste changes over time. For instance, taste changes for political reasons, and these are very important changes that influence a collection. An example is the collection of the Pinakothek in Munich which sold paintings that were disliked by politicians in the 30s and 40s. A Raphael was sold because they didn't like it. It might have been a portrait of a homosexual friend, for instance... Anyway, they didn't like it. Today it is the great self-portrait by Raphael at the National Gallery in Washington. The Pinakothek had about 60 pictures by Brueghel because a Bavarian archduke loved the artist. But back then, they thought that he wasn't such a good Flemish artist and they sold them to buy works by German artists...

Carmen: There is a whole series of aspects to bear in mind when acquiring a work. TEFAF for instance, has the most rigorous committee to decide what works will be eligible to be sold at the fair. With regard to forgeries and attributions, what are TEFAF's procedures?



Above, Carmen Reviriego talks with art and antiques collector Konrad Bernheimer.

Konrad: There's a big difference between a "fake" and an attribution. There are very few cases when a forgery has been discovered, but attribution is very important: a work might have been painted by Cranach the Elder, or by Cranach the Younger, or by Cranach together with his studio, just like with Rubens: it might be a work he painted or perhaps his studio was involved.

Carmen: But in practice, what does the process consist of?

Konrad: At TEFAF, we have a Vetting Committee which is among the world's most important. Over 200 experts examine every picture at each stand, all specialised in a country or an area of art. For two days – the art gallery owners are not present – they study the paintings thoroughly. It works very well, affording the buyer total certainty. This committee is at the heart of TEFAF's prestige.

Carmen: Is the same process carried out at TEFAF's modern and contemporary art section?

Konrad: At TEFAF, our modern and contemporary art sector is always much more rigorous than at Basel or Frieze because our selection standards are the same as for antique art. When choosing between a Basquiat and a Cranach, you are deciding which one will be a member of your family.

Carmen: As the price tag goes up for works, collectors consider other criteria for assessing their acquisitions.

Konrad: Yet there is a difference. Some Old Masters have already passed the test of time: Goya, Rubens, Picasso... But Basquiat has not. Baselitz, Koons... of course they haven't. It's probably not something they seek. Koons is a master of marketing. The moment that Koons's works were installed at Versailles or Punta della Dogana, he no doubt felt enormously proud... and it suits him wonderfully in terms of marketing. We must

differentiate between an artist par excellence and one who is a marketing genius.

Carmen: What importance do you attach to a catalogue raisonné?

Konrad: A catalogue raisonné is very important. For instance, if we have a work by Pompeo Batoni, the first thing we'd do is look him up in the catalogue raisonné. If he's not there, we have to do more in-depth research. Conversely, sometimes the work is indeed in the catalogue raisonné, but all the other experts don't accept the work. It is a fascinating world: sometimes, art consists of looking for the point where the ice is thickest as you walk across a frozen lake.

Carmen: Another complex topic is restoration. When it should be done... and when not. Techniques have actually advanced greatly today. Seeing a "naked" work, without all the oxidised coats of varnish that have yellowed and darkened it over the years is very exciting: it's seeing it exactly as the artist did when they painted it.

Konrad: At this point, let's stop and think. I would accept a restoration when it makes aspects of the work that were hidden visible. However, when the damage is so great that the work has to be reconstructed, then I'd say no, because you wouldn't have the original work, but a reconstruction. When acquiring a picture, this aspect must be considered – should the varnish be eliminated, or should lost details be reconstructed to have a complete painting.

Carmen: Your opinion...

Konrad: It's very difficult. First, you must find a truly reliable restorer and always be in touch with them. I always go to the studios when they are working on paintings owned by the gallery and we always take the first steps together. Removing the varnish very carefully just to see what's under it, to see whether you have reached the pictorial layer with the cotton or if you are still on the layer of varnish. It's a very fine line, so the process is rather complicated. You can even see the drawing under the painting, see how the master began to create the painting; very often they began with a drawing and then painted over it. You can see how the real thing emerges – feel really close to the 17th-century master: you can see their hand, their doubts... As you said; it's the most exciting stage. Collectors usually see works at exhibitions, fairs and galleries, when the work



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has already been done. Here is where you fall in love: you are before the picture, knowing that it will be a part of your family, there will be a long relationship between you both. One of the most fascinating moments is when you are at a collector's home and they take you from one picture to another telling you where they bought it, why, from what dealer, at what time in their life.

Take Mr. Frick... An incredible collection of English portraits hangs in his library: Gainsborough, Reynolds... And right in the centre of it, above the fireplace, is his own portrait: he wanted to see himself on the same level as the others.

In the sensitivity of this “gentleman of the world” there is something inherited from his mother Mercedes Uzcátegui, echoes of Latin America, Spain and the Basque Country that I associate with the family chapel in Rubio, Venezuela, the place that welcomed them at the foothills of the Andes, where the family arrived in the 17th century... Humble but solid, on the keystone of the chapel's arch is a cross – it is a Jewish family – and above it, a tower with a dome reminiscent of Germany. Perhaps I am wrong, but I believe that this encounter between a Bernheimer and an Uzcátegui is part of the secret of a unique sensitivity. ~