THE ART DEALER AS SCHOLAR
The Second in a Series of Exhibitions Celebrating
the 80th Anniversary of the Galerie St. Etienne

Galerie St. Etienne

The Galerie St. Etienne customarily issues an art market report every summer. This year, in connection with the gallery’s 80th anniversary, we have chosen to focus on the nexus between art dealing and scholarship. While commerce and art-historical scholarship may seem antithetical to one another, the two have been closely intertwined since the dawn of the modern era. The Galerie St. Etienne, whose origins date back to early twentieth-century Vienna, exemplifies a longstanding tradition.

Art dealing as we have come to know it was an outgrowth of industrial capitalism and the concomitant decline in aristocratic patronage. A new mechanism was required to connect artists with the emergent bourgeois collector class. At the same time, this class needed to be taught to appreciate art that increasingly strayed from the conventional realism promulgated by Europe’s art academies and salons. In Paris, dealers such as Paul Durand-Ruel and Ambroise Vollard pioneered an approach that focused on one-person exhibitions, often accompanied by explanatory catalogues. Exclusive representation—achieved contractually and/or through bulk purchases—became an important tool for developing and controlling an artist's market. Exclusivity in turn fostered expertise, and over time some dealers developed substantial archives. The archives of Wildenstein & Co. would eventually serve as sources for catalogues raisonnés on Courbet, Gauguin, Manet, Monet, Pissarro, Redon, Vuillard and others.

The evangelizing mission of the first modern art dealers inspired various forms of educational outreach. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler published more than 40 beaux livres (beautiful books), which paired avant-garde artists with like-minded writers. Kahnweiler, who represented Picasso, also wrote a seminal early text on Cubism. Dealers assiduously cultivated relationships with sympathetic critics and art historians. A special effort was made to place the new art in public institutions. “Museums,” said Durand-Ruel, “are our best publicity.” Traveling exhibitions were another way to spread the gospel. Though modernism originated in Paris, the French public proved remarkably resistant. Thus began the internationalization of modern art, as Parisian dealers courted more receptive audiences in nations like the United States and, especially, Germany. Durand-Ruel worked with Hugo von Tschudi, director of the German National Gallery, and with the Berlin dealer Paul Cassirer. Kahnweiler regularly traded exhibitions with Alfred Flechtheim, who at the height of his career had outposts in Berlin, Frankfurt, Cologne and Vienna.

Both photography and lithography—the invention of which made images accessible on a scale not surpassed until the Internet age—were instrumental in expanding the audience for modern art. In Germany, a hub of the international printing trade, many dealers established ancillary publishing houses. Cassirer’s Pan-Presse and Wolfgang Gurlitt’s Gurlitt-Presse specialized in limited-edition original graphics. J.B. Neumann focused almost exclusively on prints, both as a dealer and as a publisher. Karl Nierendorf, who took over J.B. Neumann’s gallery when the latter moved to New York in 1923, was the exclusive publisher of Otto Dix prints until 1927. Other dealer-generated publications, such as Herwarth Walden’s magazine, Der Sturm, combined art with avant-garde literary and political texts. Flechtheim founded a more mainstream cultural journal, Der Querschnitt, in 1921.

A disproportionate number of early modernist dealers—including Kahnweiler, the Wildensteins and Paul Rosenberg in France, and Cassirer, Flechtheim, Neumann and Walden in Germany—were Jewish, as were many of their clients. Modern art, it may be hypothesized, was for these Jews a secular faith that affirmed what proved to be a naïve trust in the future. Such, at any rate, was the case with my grandfather, Otto Kallir, who founded the Neue Galerie in 1923 and the Galerie St. Etienne in 1939. Otto’s father, a Viennese attorney, saw his son’s choice of profession as a step backward—"hinter der Budl" (behind the counter) he said—to the traditional domain of the Jewish shopkeeper. And it must be said that art dealing was not young Kallir’s first choice. He wanted to be an aeronautical engineer, but anti-Semitism at Vienna’s Technical University prevented him from pursuing a degree. A belief in human progress, which had sparked his enthusiasm for the nascent aviation industry, would henceforth color his approach to art.

Kallir was a born collector—first of coins, stamps and aeronautical memorabilia, then of historical manuscripts and art. He also, as a teenager, took painting lessons and...
prior apprentice at an uncle’s lithography shop. In 1919, he began publishing original prints, starting with a suite of lithographs by his one-time drawing instructor, Johannes Itten (who would later teach color theory at the Bauhaus). In 1920, Kallir was named artistic director of the newly incorporated Rikola Verlag. Rikola’s founder, Richard Kola, was an investment banker who had for some years been acquiring printing firms and publishers. Unusual for the time, Rikola was a publically traded publishing consortium, whose fortunes were initially fueled by a speculative spike in the stock market. The eventually catastrophic inflation that followed World War I made books and original prints seem like great investments. The German graphics Verlage were likewise sustained by this phenomenon. Max Beckmann, Lovis Corinth, Otto Dix and George Grosz are among the artists whose printmaking activities surged in the early 1920s.

Kallir called his publishing enterprise the Verlag Neuer Graphik and ran it, in loose association with Rikola, out of the premises of Vienna’s Galerie Würthle. Today the Verlag Neuer Graphik is best remembered for issuing the first editions of Egon Schiele’s six etchings and his two final lithographs. Schiele’s patron Arthur Roessler had had the lithographs printed shortly after the artist’s death in 1918, but was unable to sell them. Kallir’s genius lay in creating portfolios that combined the unsold lithographs with new editions of the etchings. It is interesting to note that, unlike today, portfolios were easier to market than individual prints. These publications catered as much to bibliophiles as to art collectors. Graphics portfolios and illustrated books were often issued in both regular and deluxe editions, the latter distinguished by features like lavish bindings, better paper, the inclusion of extra artworks and a smaller print run.

It is not clear whether the Verlag Neuer Graphik was financially successful. However, the stock valuation of the Rikola Verlag far exceeded its overall business income. In 1923, Kallir decided to distance himself from the failing firm, which was dissolved three years later. He struck out on his own and established the Neue Galerie. His Verlag was renamed the Johannes-Presse, after his newborn son. Hereafter, Kallir’s publications often complemented the gallery’s activities. He published prints by a number of contemporary artists, including Beckmann, Ludwig Heinrich Jungnickel, Oskar Kokoschka, Oskar Laske and Julius Zimpel. His favorite collaborator was Alfred Kubin, a consummate draughtsman who produced both stand-alone lithographs and elaborate illustrative print cycles. Kallir delighted the artist by commissioning facsimile reproductions of watercolors that were scarcely distinguishable from the originals.

Prior to World War I, modernism in Austria had been promoted mainly by artists, through communal exhibition societies like the Secession and the Hagenbund. Kallir belonged to the first generation of modern art dealers to establish a foothold in Vienna. Like his German colleagues, he showcased foreign as well as domestic material. The Neue Galerie mounted one-person shows of Beckmann, Corinth, Edward Munch, Auguste Renoir, Paul Signac and Vincent van Gogh. Group exhibitions covered French Impressionism more broadly, as well as American modernism, Italian Futurism and the Russian avant-garde. Kallir also presented the work of Austrians such as Gustav Klimt, Kokoschka, Kubin, Laske and Schiele. In 1931, he singlehandedly salvaged the legacy of Richard Gerstl, who had committed suicide in 1908 and who is today recognized as an equal of Kokoschka and Schiele. Occasionally the Neue Galerie collaborated with the Hagenbund to mount two-venue loan exhibitions. Kallir was less interested in selling than in educating. Contrary to his father’s belief, he was not merely a shopkeeper.

To bolster his intellectual bona fides, Kallir decided to get a PhD in art history. He deliberately chose a dissertation topic outside his professional comfort zone: the workshop of the Medieval sculptor Peter Vischer the Elder. In a typical (for him) tour-de-force, Kallir completed his doctorate in 1930, the same year that he published the first comprehensive catalogue raisonné of Schiele’s oil paintings. He would go on to update this book in 1966, issue a catalogue raisonné of Schiele’s prints in 1970, and publish oeuvre catalogues of Grandma Moses (the self-taught American painter whom he “discovered”) in 1973 and of Gerstl in 1974.

Catalogues raisonnés epitomize the inherent kinship between art dealing and scholarship. Dealers have a vested financial interest in selling authentic work. Their reputations depend on their “eye,” and the profession provides constant exposure to original works by the artists in whom they specialize. Sustained, direct contact with artists and/or their estates, first-hand engagement with private collections, day-to-day familiarity with the market and cumulative sales records provide the raw materials for documenting an oeuvre. But perhaps above all, dealers like my grandfather engaged in scholarship because they were passionately committed to the artists they represented and wanted to share their knowledge with the world.

Following the American stock market crash in 1929 and Hitler’s ascent to power in 1933, demand for modern Austrian art plummeted. Political and cultural conservatism came hand-in-hand with economic hardship. Artists who had international markets, such as Cézanne and Van Gogh, weathered the storm, but Schiele prices experienced a precipitous 80% decline between 1930 and 1932. When Kallir fled Austria after the Nazi Anschluss in 1938, he had no difficulty exporting
works by Klimt, Schiele and Kokoschka, whom Hitler considered “degenerate.” However, these artists were virtually unheard of in New York when the Galerie St. Etienne opened its doors here in 1939. The Museum of Modern Art was happy to enrich its collection with German Expressionist paintings expunged from Hitler’s museums. No such welcome greeted Austrian modernism abroad.

Kallir quickly recognized that museum support was much more important in the United States than it had been in Austria, where domestic modernism was a known quantity. Among the Austrian Expressionists, only Kokoschka—who had spent considerable time in Germany—enjoyed any international name recognition. In the aftermath of its 1940 Kokoschka exhibition (the artist’s first in the U.S.), the Galerie St. Etienne was able to sell a painting, London, Large Thames View, to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo. But Kallir was rebuffed when he invited MoMA’s director, Alfred Barr, to “name his price” for any other Kokoschka oil in the gallery’s inventory. Kallir’s offer to lend the museum his entire Kokoschka collection, plus major paintings by Klimt and Schiele, was likewise politely tabled.

Nevertheless, smaller American museums proved hungry for material. Kallir launched a tour of St. Etienne’s Kokoschka exhibition in 1941 and then, with the help of his able associate Hildegard Bachert (who joined the staff in November 1940), he began packaging other gallery shows to travel. Many of these exhibitions featured relatively low-value prints by artists such as Daumier, Goya, Düer, Rouault, Toulouse-Lautrec and the French Impressionists. By 1943, the gallery had three shows of Walt Disney celluloids and drawings going simultaneously. Käthe Kollwitz was eventually the subject of several dozen presentations. Grandma Moses, whose career really took off after World War II, was another perennial favorite. At its peak, St. Etienne’s traveling exhibition program comprised ten concurrent ventures. From 1950 onward, the traveling shows were fewer in number but more ambitious in scope.

Meanwhile, Kallir persevered in his efforts to gain museum support for Klimt and Schiele. If he could not sell the paintings, he would give them away. In 1956, he donated Klimt’s Pear Tree to the Fogg Museum at Harvard, and in 1951 he sold Schiele’s Portrait of Paris von Gütersloh to the McMillan Land Company at a bargain price of $1,500, on the promise that the painting would be given to the Minneapolis Institute of Art. The Museum of Modern Art and the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh acquired Klimt paintings from the gallery in 1957 and 1960 respectively. (To sweeten the deal, Kallir gave the Carnegie a Schiele drawing.) Schiele’s first and second American one-person shows—mounted at St. Etienne in 1941 and 1948—were financial failures, but the third attempt proved a turning point. The gallery’s 1957 Schiele presentation was a hit with the press, public and collectors alike. Barr again came calling, again Kallir offered to donate a painting, and again Barr turned him down. Schiele, Barr opined, was interesting only as a draughtsman. So MoMA bought two watercolors, and Kallir gave them a drawing and a lithograph.

Kallir’s staunchest ally in the museum community was undoubtedly Thomas M. Messer. Kallir initially proposed collaborating on a Schiele show prior to St. Etienne’s 1957 exhibition, when Messer was director of Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art. Failure to get any sort of cooperation from Austria delayed the project by a few years, but in 1960 Schiele’s first American museum retrospective opened at the ICA. With major loans from American collections, the Israel Museum, the Hague Gemeentemuseum and the Israel Museum, the show then traveled to the Galerie St. Etienne, the J.B. Speed Museum in Louisville, the Carnegie Institute and the Minneapolis Institute of Art. An even grander sequel, also instigated by Kallir, was the 1965 Klimt/Schiele exhibition at the Guggenheim (where Messer was now director). In gratitude, Kallir gave the Guggenheim Schiele’s Portrait of Johann Harms.

Over the next two decades, the seeds planted by Kallir began to sprout. A growing market for Klimt and Schiele brought other dealers into the field: Felix Landau in Los Angeles, Serge Sabarisky and Helen Serger in New York, Wolfgang Fischer in London. Kallir eagerly mentored young art historians like James Demetrion and Alessandra Comini, both of whom contributed essays to the Guggenheim catalogue. As director of the Des Moines Art Museum, Demetrion mounted a Schiele exhibition in 1971, and Comini published the artist’s first English-language biography, Egon Schiele’s Portraits, in 1974. Interdisciplinary academics such as Carl Schorske brought Freud, Mahler, Schoenberg and others into the mix, establishing fin-de-siècle Vienna as a pivotal chapter in modern cultural history. In the early 1980s, museums in Hamburg, Edinburgh, Venice, Vienna and Paris mounted encyclopedic surveys of the artistic renaissance spearheaded by Gerstl, Klimt, Kokoschka, Kubin and Schiele. Capping this trend, the Museum of Modern Art mounted a “Vienna 1900” blockbuster in 1986 (and, for the occasion, finally bought a Schiele oil).

Sadly, Kallir did not live to see “his” artists triumph at MoMA. Hildegard Bachert and I were left to consolidate my grandfather’s legacy following his death in 1978. Despite the increased popularity of Austrian modernism, there remained a lingering need to educate a public still biased toward French art. At the same time, it was becoming more difficult to get first-rate Austrian material for sale. To fulfill our educational imperative, as well as to maintain the quality of our exhibitions,
Hildegard and I needed loans. Over the ensuing years, lenders to Galerie St. Etienne shows included the Kunsthalle Bremen and the Ludwig Roselius Museum in Bremen, Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Lenbachhaus in Munich, the Guggenheim, Metropolitan Museum, Whitney and MoMA in New York, the Phillips Collection and National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., and the Wien Museum and Belvedere in Vienna. Some of our exhibitions built on past precedent, such as a 1983 Paula Modersohn-Becker retrospective (following up on the artist’s first American solo show at St. Etienne in 1958), or our 1986 survey of the Wiener Werkstätte (first exhibited at the gallery in 1966). Other shows were American “firsts” in their own right: a 1984 presentation of Arnold Schoenberg’s paintings and a 1993 exhibition of Richard Gerstl (whom we paired with Kokoschka, owing to the rarity of Gerstl’s work).

The Galerie St. Etienne’s loan exhibitions were well received, but they did not garner the attention they would have, had they been presented at a museum. And so we began curating exhibitions for outside institutions. To some extent, this was a continuation and expansion of St. Etienne’s earlier traveling exhibition program: shows largely drawn from inventory that eventually reached dozens of venues across the U.S., Europe and Asia. But some of these were major curatorial collaborations, such as a 1994 Schiele retrospective, which opened at the National Gallery of Art and then traveled to the Indianapolis Museum of Art and the San Diego Museum of Art. Among our larger international projects were numerous Japanese Grandma Moses shows; Gustav Klimt—Oskar Kokoschka—Egon Schiele at the Museo del Vittoriano in Rome and Revoltella Museum in Trieste (2001-02); Gustav Klimt: In Search of the Total Artwork at the Seoul Art Center (2009); and Egon Schiele: Self-Portraits and Portraits (2011) and The Women of Klimt, Schiele and Kokoschka (2015-16), both at the Belvedere in Vienna.

Since our exhibitions were conceived as scholarly endeavors, we seldom published traditional gallery catalogues. Instead, every St. Etienne show was accompanied by an art historical essay and a detailed checklist. For more ambitious exhibitions—whether at the gallery or at museums—we wrote or compiled proper books that were co-published by commercial publishers. Among the gallery’s autonomous publication projects, the most significant was undoubtedly Egon Schiele: The Complete Works, which included the first comprehensive documentation of the artist’s works on paper and sculpture, in addition to updates of my grandfather’s catalogues of the paintings and graphics. By the early 1980s, there was a pressing need for such a publication. Watercolor prices were pushing into the high six figures, and the market was rife with fakes. There was a reason, of course, that no one before had ever attempted to catalogue Schiele’s watercolors and drawings: there are close to 3,000 such items, and virtually no reliable lifetime records. Here, the expansion of the market helped, prompting dealers, auctioneers and museums to produce more comprehensively illustrated catalogues. The Galerie St. Etienne hired a team of art history graduate students, and we began combing every available source. The Schiele catalogue raisonné was published by Abrams in 1990. An expanded edition was released in 1998, and the first phase of a digital version (egonschieleonline.org) was launched in 2018.

Whereas I tended to focus on Schiele and his Austrian colleagues, Hildegard Bachert, who fled Nazi Germany in 1936, was more oriented toward her own national heritage. For all of us—my grandfather, Hildegard and myself—art was a way to recuperate and redeem a past that had otherwise been fundamentally destroyed. Kollwitz had been a household name when Hildegard was a child in Mannheim, and the artist became her lodestar in the New World. Although Kallir had shown and corresponded with Kollwitz back in Austria, Hildegard was largely responsible for the Galerie St. Etienne’s intensive engagement with the artist. She was instrumental in the compilation of all the Kollwitz catalogues raisonnés, starting with the 1955 graphics catalogue by August Klipstein. Prior to this time, Hildegard recalled, “there was very little scholarly knowledge about Kollwitz…Some of the prints we had were very rare, but we didn’t know it! We discovered aspects of Kollwitz’s achievement no one had ever seen before.” Hildegard subsequently worked with Alexandra von dem Knesebeck on a 2002 update of the Klotzstein catalogue, and with Annette Seeler on the 2016 catalogue of Kollwitz’s sculptures. Hannelore Fischer, director of the Käthe Kollwitz Museum in Cologne, became a dear friend, as did every major American and European Kollwitz collector. In addition to curating innumerable St. Etienne shows, Hildegard organized an in-depth presentation of the Neumann family’s comprehensive Kollwitz collection for a pair of Swiss museums in 1994, and contributed an essay to the catalogue of the National Gallery’s 1992 Kollwitz exhibition. Now 98, Hildegard retired last October, but she remains in regular touch with the gallery.

Today’s international art world bears scant resemblance to the small, relatively provincial scene that existed in New York eighty years ago. On the plus side, there is far greater professionalism today: deeper art-historical knowledge, more attention to conservation issues and the proper care of fragile works. The large galleries that dominate our global marketplace routinely...
employ teams of archivists, registrars, art handlers and other specialists. On the other hand, none of these specialists can boast the comprehensive intimacy with specific bodies of work that formerly accrued to singular dealer/scholars and that sustained the Galerie St. Etienne over three generations. Long-term connoisseurship is further undermined by an environment in which successful artists rarely stick with the dealers who launched their careers. Art fairs foster a “greatest hits” approach, and fewer people now build in-depth, focused collections. Even before the Internet pulled the rug out from under the print media, serious art criticism was largely superseded by journalistic coverage of the art business per se: a heady mix of mind-boggling prices, glamour, celebrity, scandal and corruption.

Still, art dealing is a peculiar sort of business. As my grandfather understood, it entails more than just selling merchandise. Yes, some people collect for social status or in the hope of turning a quick profit. But all collectors need intelligent guidance. No one wants to be stuck with a fake, or a work so damaged it no longer reflects the artist’s original intent. One of the biggest questions facing the art world today is whether it is still possible to combine dealing with scholarship. If so, how does one achieve such an amalgam, when the circumstances that once fostered it no longer exist? And if dealer/scholars are passé, who or what has the unique combination of qualifications necessary to replace them?

—Jane Kallir