

Construction of the Modern

The Berlin Art Collection of Dr. Carl Theodor Gottlob Grouwet (1919)

Between 1904 and 1919 Dr. Carl Theodor Gottlob Grouwet assembled an impressive collection of international modern art. In 1919 the friend of art and artists spent the entire spring reconfiguring, setting up, and decorating his spacious Charlottenburg apartment on Savignyplatz with his collected artworks. Step-by-step his long-cherished dream of opening an art salon in the heart of Berlin became a reality. Finally, at the beginning of April, the last artwork arrived in Savignyplatz from overseas; he had been waiting six-long years to add this work to his collection. A special place had been reserved for hanging this modern masterpiece. His salon would now be presented to the Berlin public on a Tuesday evening, the 29th of April 1919.

Carl Theodor Gottlob Grouwet was born in Bergisches Land in 1881, the youngest of six children, to parents Carl Wilhelm Gottlob Grouwet, the paper manufacturer, and Anna Amalia Henriette, whose maiden name was Feinbein. Encouraged in the arts as a youngster, Carl Theodor received, like his brothers, a classical secondary education and became versed in his parent's collection of Italian and German prints and drawings at a young age. As a later-born child unburdened by any hereditary obligations to assume the reigns of the family business, Carl Theodor, following an apprenticeship at the family plant, dedicated himself to his studies in art history, classical archeology, and literature at the Georg August University in Göttingen. In 1906 he received his doctorate in art history but elected not to pursue a career at the university since, as a gift for completing his degree, he was awarded partial control of the family business. Carl Theodor, as an aesthete and the first scholar in the family, but someone who did not deny his practical side, was tailor made for the luxury paper and carton container field: The luxurious and prized, exquisitely manufactured foldable cartons from Paris and Brussels for perfumes, clothes, and even pralines had captivated Theo—as he was called at home and by friends—at a young age. And by the 1890s, in contrast to the retrograde spirit of the *academia*, he had already discovered his passion for modern French art. Accordingly, he elected to start his own company, to develop new portfolios of wares, and to forge new business relationships.

For Theo the defining moment of his private studies of modern art and the starting of his own collection was tied to the year 1904: at the *Salon d'Automme* two outsiders ignited his interests who provided the foundation for his collection: Medardo Rosso and Odilon Redon, whose works he saw in a comprehensive collection at the nearby *Petit Palais*. To Theo it appeared as if the two new discoveries exuded a universal character and had a more promising future than their contemporaries. As a consequence he contacted both artists during his trip to Paris and purchased two sculptures from Rosso directly; the gallerist Ambroise Vollard provided him access to two paintings by Redon, which he brought back home with him to Bergisches Land in a bundle of artful French cartons, packages, and a varied assortment of papers.

The efforts Theodor invested in developing his company and in expanding his business relationships, the burgeoning production of luxury paper in all thicknesses and motifs including cartons and the testing of sandwiching two combinations of materials (for which he had started his own research and development department), led him multiple

times to Paris and, by 1910, already to New York and Moscow. Nothing gave him more pleasure than spending time looking at art after tending to his business engagements.

One year later Theo was once again in Paris. This time he attended the opening of the *Salon d'Automne* in person and was witness to a scandal that marked the birth of the *Fauves*. The provocative painting *La Femme au chapeau* by the young artist Henri Matisse was a repudiation of the familiar traditions of painting in its arrangements of large, seemingly swiftly applied fields of color. This painting shook Theo so profoundly that he moved heaven and earth in order to come into its possession. But fate would have it that Leo Stein, the brother of Gertrude Stein, would get to it first. The Stein siblings were, with their salon, an important part of the young Parisian avant-garde. Despite this defeat Theo still managed to head home with many *Fauvist* paintings by the artists surrounding Henri Matisse, including Andre Derain and Maurice de Vlaminck. Theo's passion for art and his own personal charm opened the doors of Stein salon to him. Here a new world opened up for Theo: a circle of intellectuals and artists who felt exactly as he did and who argued about the new art fervently, passionately, and full of hope among an impressive gathering of contemporaries. This circle was also important to Theo's luxury paper business, since it allowed him from that point forward to make many connections to Moscow and New York. The Stein salon became for Theo a crossroads for new encounters and acquaintances, out of which several close friendships also developed. The spirit of the Steinian enclave aided the young Theo early on in forming his own opinions while on the lookout for new discoveries, before his many business trips and increasing experience transformed him into a self-confident connoisseur of the new art. Thanks to his prospering luxury paper industry, subsequent years brought the freedom to experience first-hand many international art events and to support the artists and their developments via countless acquisitions. Paris was still the focus of Theo's attention; here he repeatedly made visits to all the galleries and many artist ateliers. A regular visitor of Pablo Picasso's atelier, he became an eyewitness to the difficult »birth« of the artist's work *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Much to Theo's dismay Picasso's gallerist Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler first offered this groundbreaking work to another collector.

From that point forward, wherever new currents were developing Theo was involved. By 1908 he had already been to the *Richter Kunstsalon* in Dresden, where he acquired multiple works by *Die Brücke* artists. In 1909 he was present at the opening of Heinrich Thannhauser's *Moderne Galerie* at the Arco-Palais in Munich; in the years thereafter he was able to follow first-hand the developments of the artist's circle around Wassily Kandinsky and Gabriele Münter in Munich, and attend the first exhibition of the newly formed artist's group *Der Blaue Reiter* and stock up on this new art. In 1910 business trips led him to New York and Moscow. Alfred Stieglitz's *291 Gallery* became his starting point in New York for getting acquainted with and acquiring new American art. The American Marsden Hartley, who he had already met and learned to appreciate at the Stein's salon, was exhibiting there. They had traveled together to New York. Later he followed Theo to Berlin. Moscow did not remain untouched by the French developments. Theo's friends, the industrialists Sergei Schtschukin and Ivan Morosov, had both contributed to this with their public collections. During his stays in Moscow Theo managed to attend the first three *Jack of Diamonds* exhibitions, where he got to know the artists and their work: Kasimir Malevich, Natalia Gontcharova, Alexandra Exter, Michael Larionov, and Varvara Stepanova. Theo brought numerous artworks home with him, with



Dr. Carl Theodor Gottlob Grouwet, Berlin 1912

the promise of developing his future Russian art collection through correspondences and photographic documentations.

The design and construction of Theo's new factory in Bergisches Land by Walter Gropius, as well as the simultaneous renovation and expansion of his company office on Friedrichstrasse in Berlin by the same architect, led him on frequent trips to the capital of the Reich from that point forward. Kandinsky and Pechstein had told him about the founding of Herwarth Walden's gallery already weeks before its opening. In one of the villas slated for destruction on Tiergartenstrasse, Herwarth Walden opened his first exhibition under the title *Der Sturm*. The day was also stormy. *Tout Berlin* was in attendance—in any case all of its impassioned artists, poets, writers, actors, and musicians. Together with Lovis Corinth from Vienna, the group of artists associated with *Der Blaue Reiter* and *Die*

Brücke had a brilliant showing. Several days later Theo was again in Paris in order to check in on the opening of the Futurist exhibition at *Bernheim Jeunes*. Theo again bought up many canvasses. The same exhibition of the Italians was to be shown in a slightly modified form just a few weeks later at Walden's gallery.

In the years thereafter Theo's traveling calendar was filled with one major art event after the next: The *Sonderbund* exhibition in early 1912 in Cologne, to which Theo loaned works by Van Gogh, Cezanne, Picasso, Kandinsky, and countless others. The New York *Armory Show* followed one year later, again Theo made the long voyage by ship. Once there Theo experienced his third defeat in attempting to purchase a masterpiece: *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* by Marcel Duchamp, an artist whose Parisian works he had already collected. This work was to really draw in the public. In just four weeks 70,000 newspaper article-roused visitors lined up around the block in order to ogle each work. Finally Theo was also able to get a look at the sculptures of which he had heard so much about by Romanian-born Constantine Brancusi, who lived in Paris. Unfortunately all of these works were on loan. A breathtaking studio visit in Paris for Theo was still to come. Before his second trip to New York Theo had had business to take care of in Moscow and had managed to follow up on the brightly colored developments in the ateliers of his Russian artist friends—fresh paintings that had been inspired by the Futurists whose works had been shown shortly before in Moscow.

The highlight of 1913 was the opening of his new factory building, which was attended by numerous guests. It was an enormous party: the entire town was in attendance, and many of his national as well as international business partners were present. Theo had developed himself into one of the most successful industrialists in the region. His reputation had grown in stature as a result of the opening of his company office in Berlin, which

included a commercial space facing the street, and which, like an illuminated crystal, presented the »Grouwets«—the luxury articles and cartons that had now become famous—to the Berlin shopping world in a novel and nearly museum-like manner. Through his blossoming friendship with Herwarth Walden, Theo had gained entry into Berlin's bohemian art scene, whose colorful, multilingual band of artists lent a pleasant and exciting tone to his opening night. Just two days earlier this group had been in a celebratory mood at the legendary *Erste Deutsche Herbstausstellung*, which Walden had organized. At the opening of this exhibition Theo had purchased numerous artworks by a bevy of artists.

The outbreak of the world war the following year effectuated an interruption in his travel activities, suddenly his friends were officially enemies. Theo no longer understood the world. Henceforth he was forced to manage all international art purchases via correspondence and based only on unavoidably deceptive black and white reproductions. In this manner he came across Malevitch's new paintings of Suprematism in 1915, and his *Black Square* in 1917, and, in the same year, the works of the American Georgia O'Keefe. Through her new life partner, Alfred Stieglitz, Theo received a photo of that epoch-making artwork titled *Fountain*—which had been turned down by the »jury-free« exhibition in New York—(photographed by Stieglitz in front of Marsden's painting *The Warrior!*), an artwork by Duchamp that left Theo speechless. Although Theo had negotiated with Duchamp and bought the work from him, it never arrived in Berlin. The artwork was lost in the confusion of the war, or had it perhaps brought about its own disappearance by means of its illusory-phantasmal character? In the manner of Duchamp? Marsden also sent him another work from New York. His canvas, *Portrait of a German Soldier* from 1914, which he had painted in pictogrammatic forms while still in Berlin, and which Theo had purchased before Marsden's departure, reflected all of the ambiguities of its time. Despite the vibrancy of its color it contained much sadness and melancholy. This painting became Theo's favorite during the war, yet it stood symbolically for the fallen men of all nations, the countless civilian victims, and also for the brutal bloodletting in the arts.

The war was finally over—new energies could be sensed. For Theo it was time to introduce his art collection to the public. Now the dawn of a new age could begin. At least in the arts. Perhaps he would be the one to help instigate it? Three weeks before the planned opening of his salon and following years of negotiations, the painting he had longed for, *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2*, was finally added to his collection. He had reserved for it a position of honor. Dr. Carl Theodor Gottlob Grouwet was content. The future was to belong to art.

H. N. Semjon, Berlin, April 2010

The Project *Construction of the Modern: The Berlin Collection of Dr. Carl Theodor Gottlob Grouwet (1919)* is further example of the kind of genre-spanning artwork that defines my artistic resume.

In this work the perceiving and spectatorship of art that touches upon the central theme and notion of the (total) work of art refers to an earlier installation of mine from 1994 at Galerie Alex Lachmann in Cologne: ...*avantgarde tendencies of the early 90's* ... For that exhibition I »invited« sixteen international artists and exhibited their work. Both the theme of the show and the artworks were developed and executed by me alone. The works were meant to exude the spirit of the early 1990s. The gallery going public was unaware that all of the works were »fakes« and that the artists did not even exist. Not even the »sold out« exhibition, indicated by the red dots next to each work, gave the viewers pause.

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The outstanding *Kunstbibliothek zu Berlin* provided access to and made it possible to work intensively with the relevant source literature and reminded me of my earlier studies of art history and classical archeology.

A friend who prefers to remain anonymous assisted me stylistically with the text and infused it with a linguistic »patina.« My friend Frank Zimmer assisted me by handling the copyediting and graphic layout of the accompanying exhibition materials.

Two young architecture students, Bjørn Mündner and Noël Schardt, convincingly turned the »salon space« and its many details into reality. Likewise Ann-Christin Mündner is to be thanked for her outstanding textile designs.

Last but not least special mention goes to Malte Seibt and Thomas Skiba from *Fine Art Services (f.a.s.)* who generously allowed me the use of their frame shop in producing the artworks.

H. N. Semjon