

## FOCUS IM OBERSTEG COLLECTION

### CUNO AMIET

The Cuno Amiet showcase exhibition combines the works of Amiet of the Im Obersteg Collection with those of the Kunstmuseum, the latter to a large extent consisting of private donations and bequests. Cuno Amiet and Karl Im Obersteg were friends. The Basel-based art collector and owner of a shipping company notably provided assistance and support to the artist during the tragic loss of his retrospective collection when the Munich Glass Palace was destroyed by fire in 1931. The presentation of this trailblazing Swiss painter features predominantly early works and will last until the end of March 2017.

The work of Cuno Amiet (1868-1961) had a strong impact on the first two decades of the Im Obersteg Collection's history. Overall, ten artworks by Amiet were included in the collection between 1916 and the end of the 1920s, although it now consists of seven artworks only. Two portraits of musicians were either sold or given away and the painting *Fruit Harvest* of 1926 was lost to the conflagration at the Munich Glass Palace in 1931. Despite the fact that Im Obersteg later refrained from buying further works by Amiet and instead turned his attention to international art, the friendship between the two men continued. A great communicator and humanitarian, Amiet thus initiated the tradition of artist friendships which were to have a lasting influence on the Im Obersteg Collection both in terms of breadth and contents.

Engaging in active letter correspondence, the two men regularly exchanged personal and everyday experiences and discussed questions of art as well as practical problems to do with exhibitions and transport. In 1930/31, Amiet's retrospective exhibition held at the Munich Glass Palace from 15 May to 14 June 1931 became the centre of attention. For Amiet it was a great honour to represent Switzerland at the international exhibition in Munich. He entrusted Karl Im Obersteg's shipping company with the transportation of the works to Munich, and the collector made the painting *Fruit Harvest* from 1926 available on loan. In the night of 6 June 1931, Munich's emblem of modernity went up in flames, taking with it Amiet's entire exhibition (51 works). Karl Im Obersteg suffered the loss of his *Fruit Harvest* which he had bought from the artist only four years before. Since the fire not only destroyed Amiet's exhibits but a total of over 3,200 works of art from different collections including a first-rate exhibition on German romanticism, the conflagration became one of the largest insured events of the time. Fortunately, Amiet had insured all his works at his own expense, since no insurance coverage was provided by the organiser *Neue Secession* due to a lack of funds. Karl Im Obersteg led the negotiations between the insurance company and the lenders who had suffered losses. Cuno Amiet, who was not interested in financial matters, coped with the enormous loss remarkably well. A large proportion of the exhibition material came from his studio and was thus still in his possession. However, some paintings, especially major works from his early productive period in Brittany as well as his expressionistic *Yellow Girl* of 1905 and a *Fruit Harvest* from 1912 (Collection Max Wassmer, Bremgarten) were already publicly or privately owned. He created substitutes for several of these works which their former owners commissioned him to do. In remembrance of the fire, he marked his paintings with a stylised flame in the second half of the year.

By 1931, Cuno Amiet was, as a representative of contemporary modernism, highly regarded in Switzerland, Germany and Austria. Ever since a short but fruitful time in Pont-Aven in Brittany in 1892/93 as part of the circle of Gauguin followers Émile Bernard, Paul Sérusier and Roderic O'Conor he was seen as the bearer and advocate of the latest tendencies of French painting in Switzerland (*Breton Woman*, 1893). He soon concerned himself with the divisionist painting style of late impressionism (*Portrait of violinist Emil Wittwer-Gelpke*, 1905). Together with Ferdinand Hodler under whose influence he was for a few years (*Kneeling Nude on Yellow Ground*, 1913) and in his capacity as a member of the expressionistic group of artists "The Bridge", Amiet belonged to the European avant-garde from the turn of the century. He received commissions for sophisticated and oversized wall decorations such as the "Fountain of Youth Cycle" for Zurich Kunsthaus which is related to the painting *Bathers* of 1919 of the Kunstmuseum Basel. Nevertheless, the rural surroundings and his garden at Oschwand remained the most important point of reference for his creative work. It is here that he found most of his motifs, including that of fruit harvesting.

Cuno Amiet was personally acquainted with many artists both in Switzerland and abroad. On the occasion of the preparations for the exhibition "Cuno Amiet and Giovanni Giacometti" held at Galerie Neue Kunst Hans Goltz in Munich in 1913, he got to know Alexej von Jawlensky. The two men shared a profound admiration of van Gogh. Jawlensky even owned van Gogh's painting *La maison du Père Pilon*, although he was compelled to leave it behind in Munich when he hurriedly emigrated to Switzerland in August 1914 due to the outbreak of the war. Cuno Amiet retrieved the picture and brought it back to Switzerland for Jawlensky, and the contact between the two artists became more intensive during Jawlensky's Swiss years 1914-1921. In the winter of 1918/19, Amiet is said to have introduced Karl Im Obersteg and Alexej von Jawlensky to each other in Ascona, thereby facilitating the most important artistic contact for the Im Obersteg Collection. From the first encounter – both men were in Ticino recovering from the Spanish Influenza – a friendship developed instantly which was to last until Jawlensky's death (1941) and resulted in a unique group of over 30 works by the artist being assembled as part of the Im Obersteg Collection. Including some of Jawlensky's most significant major works, this collection is unique in Switzerland. Amiet's watercolour *Variation after Jawlensky* which he gifted to the collector in 1921 with the comment "I have made a Jawlensky for you too for a change", probably shows the view from the studio window at Oschwand but is turned into an abstract composition with the feel of a loose citation from Jawlensky's first series *Variations on a Scenic Theme*. Karl Im Obersteg owned the painting *Large Variation* from 1915 since that same first encounter with Jawlensky (1919). It was his first Jawlensky acquisition, later to be complemented by additional works of the series. This first series of artworks on a scenic theme which marked a turning point in the work of the Russian artist inspired Amiet to his evocative present.

*Bouquet of Carnations* from 1916 was the first painting ever bought by Karl Im Obersteg. He had chosen it on 29 December 1916 from four works that the painter had lent him so that he could make his selection at home. It is actually a non-pretentious floral piece which nevertheless gave direction to his further activities as a collector and already shows a predilection for painting with figurative roots but nevertheless heavily reliant on colour and brush strokes. The pictorial elements of this style attained a certain autonomy and were used more to create a visual effect rather than delineating objects.

## THE IM OBERSTEG COLLECTION IN THE KUNSTMUSEUM BASEL

A private collection gradually built up in Basel and Geneva ever since its inception in 1916, the Im Obersteg body of works was moved to the Kunstmuseum Basel in January 2004 when it became a permanent loan from the Im Obersteg Foundation. Works of the collection are included and shown in the permanent exhibition of the museum housed in the main building. The Im Obersteg Collection additionally has access to two exhibition rooms on the mezzanine floor. It is here that the Cuno Amiet showcase exhibition as well as a group of works by Alexej von Jawlensky are currently held.

Basel shipping agent and art connoisseur Karl Im Obersteg (1883–1969) and his son Jürg (1914–1983), a professor of Forensic Medicine, collected international 20th-century art for some seventy years. The preponderance of this important collection, comprising some 220 works today, can be credited to the activities and passion of Karl Im Obersteg: after acquiring his first painting – a floral still life by Cuno Amiet – in 1916, he went on to purchase major works by Marc Chagall, Alexej von Jawlensky, Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso and Chaïm Soutine, among others. He did not pursue a definable concept, making his acquisitions on the basis of friendships with artists and his predilection for expressive, figurative painting. And yet, apart from the powerful expressiveness of colour, there is an intense and often melancholy view of human existence running leitmotif-like through the collection. Chance encounters with Russian exile artists in Ascona in the winter of 1918/19 set off Karl Im Obersteg's indefatigable acquisition activity and culminated in lifelong friendships, particularly with Jawlensky. Today the Im Obersteg collection boasts more than 30 works from all periods of the Russian artist's career – Switzerland's most comprehensive and important group of the artist's works outside the Jawlensky family's own.

In the Twenties, Karl Im Obersteg's collecting activity became increasingly international in outlook. The first high point was his purchase of two seminal works by Pablo Picasso: *Arlequin*, 1923, which had to be sold after Im Obersteg's death (1969), and *Buveuse d'absinthe*, 1901, an early work from the artist's first independent stylistic phase, the Blue Period. Inspired by Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec, this half-length portrait shows a seated woman with the blank stare and dejected body language of a person living on the margins of bourgeois society. A further painting on the reverse, *Femme dans la loge*, pulsates with colour and gestural brushwork. When and why this scene from Pigalle's demi-monde, which must have been created shortly before the Absinth Drinker, was over-painted is unknown. The black over-painting has been only partially removed, with traces of it still visible today. In the collection's heterogeneous little group of Picassos, this double-sided canvas is complemented by a small, surrealistic nude from the Thirties and *La guenon et son petit* (1951), a bronze cast from an assemblage of toy cars, bits of pottery, metal and plaster.

The longer the more, Im Obersteg's fascination for Picasso, coupled with his Europe-wide shipping business, led the collector to turn his attention to Paris, where he acquired works by Paul Cézanne, André Derain, Aristide Maillol, Amedeo Modigliani, Maurice de Vlaminck, Georges Rouault and Auguste Rodin. Russian-born Chaïm Soutine was also working in Paris,

and seven paintings by this "*peintre maudit*" – still lifes and portraits characterised by vehement brush strokes – are among the highlights of the collection.

It was probably thanks to his personal friendship with Marc Chagall that, in 1936, Karl Im Obersteg was able to acquire a whimsically mask-like self-portrait of the young artist plus three powerful and already world-famous portraits of Jews dating from 1914. Through this purchase, Im Obersteg's exquisite and hitherto very personal collection inevitably gained a dimension and significance transcending the purely private. Oscillating between earthy realism, formal reduction and reverie, the unique early works of Chagall's Russian period had been much in demand since the artist's return to Paris in the Twenties. This had prompted him to begin painting replicas. However, the three portraits of Jews in the Im Obersteg collection are poignantly intense first versions.

Having spent years cultivating his preference for French and Russian representational Modernism, after the Second World War Karl Im Obersteg – now joined by his son Jürg – began taking an interest in new artistic tendencies. Among their acquisitions were works by younger exponents of the École de Paris, with special emphasis on the now somewhat critically viewed existentialism of Bernard Buffet. Colourist abstraction, as typified by Serge Poliakoff, became a theme, and works by Jean Dubuffet, discoverer of Art Brut, entered the collection, as did the wall-like material pictures of Antoni Tàpies and – on the initiative of Jürg Im Obersteg – the dramatic finger paintings of Louis Soutter. After Karl Im Obersteg's death, Jürg dedicated himself to both his father's business and the stewardship of the art collection. And like his father before him, he and his wife, Doris, lived their lives amid art and in intense dialogue with the works around them. Jürg Im Obersteg's additions to the collection include works by Lyonel Feininger, Emil Nolde, Kurt Seligmann and Marianne von Werefkin.

Apart from his love of French post-war art, Jürg Im Obersteg was fascinated by abstract art. The acquisition of works on paper by Alexander Rodtschenko and Theo van Doesburg opened up a whole new collecting field, which Doris Im Obersteg-Lerch (1931–2015) continued to expand on.

The Im Obersteg family had frequently loaned works to the museums of Basel and Berne. After her husband's death, Doris Im Obersteg-Lerch resolved to secure the future of the collection by establishing a foundation, which has now been transferred to Basel. After a several-year stop in Oberhofen on Lake Thun, the works have entered the holdings of the Kunstmuseum Basel as permanent loans: the collection has returned to its city of origin.

The Im Obersteg Foundation, Kunstmuseum Basel, Henriette Mentha, curator