

FOCUS: THE IM OBERSTEG COLLECTION

ANTONI CLAVÉ AND JAMES COIGNARD

MAIN BUILDING, MEZZANINE LEVEL / FROM FEBRUARY 5, 2019 / CURATOR HENRIETTE MENTHA

Catalan native Antoni Clavé (Barcelona 1913-2005 Saint-Tropez) was considered one of the most important Spanish artists of the 20th century during the postwar era. Residing in France after 1939, his art was built on artisanal craftsmanship and a notable delight in experimentation with the application and combination of various techniques – including painting, drawing, collage and print graphics. During the 1950s his creations, which veered ever more towards the non-figurative, were highly esteemed in France. It was also during this time that Karl Im Obersteg developed a late love of the Spaniard's painting, which was strongly defined by color.

Antoni Clavé was born in Barcelona in 1913 and went on to train as a façade painter, thus coming into contact with the various technical processes of façade work, including fresco painting and script painting. Parallel to his day job as a craftsman, he attended evening classes at Barcelona Academy of Art. From 1930 he found his initial area of artistic activity in a marginal segment of art, namely the design of advertising and cinema posters, and by the mid-1950s he was also making a name for himself as a set designer. From 1934 the technique of collage found its way into his creative work, giving it an experimental, avant-garde character partly thanks to the unconventional materials he used.

The Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936, leaving a hole in Antoni Clavé's biography. He joined the Republican side, fighting as a soldier on the front in Aragon, and in 1939 was held in detention camps for a short time in southern France, first in Prats-de-Mollo and then in Les Haras near Perpignan. After his release he made it to Paris in April 1939. The few surviving works by Clavé from this time are bold assemblages with avant-garde potential and inventive spirit. The technique of assemblage was to characterize Clavé's mature work even years later and demonstrates the great influence his artisanal training had on his artistic development. During Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975) Clavé lived in Paris, and it was there in 1944 that a decisive and portentous encounter led to a friendship with his famous fellow countryman Pablo Picasso. Clavé's admiration for his fellow Catalan artist is unmistakable in his subsequent work. Previously, he had been guided by the light-flooded painting of Bonnard and the sensuous works of Vuillard with their mosaic-like structures.

The main works in the Im Obersteg Collection date from 1954 to 1966. *Cristo de Alma de Tormes* was the first painting to be added to the collection and was created by Clavé upon his first visit to his homeland after many years in exile. The sparse color accents disappear in the bleak atmosphere of the bare niche that provides a final, oppressive resting place for the boney body of Christ, reminiscent of Rouault's tragic figures.

This was followed by monumental figure paintings – the series of meek kings, queens and warriors – which build on the tradition of Spanish painting and also pick up on the motif of Spanish playing cards. Here

Clavé's works are based on the lithographic depictions that the artist created in 1950 for François Rabelais' (1494-1553) novel *Gargantua*. The Im Obersteg Collection includes two monumental representations of these kings. The figures, which are impressively rendered frontally using geometric forms, combine the expressive, graphic skill of Picasso with mosaic-like elements that slot together to form a colorful suit of armor. This reveals Clavé's preference for ornamentation and his keen sense for color combinations. While the head of the *Roi de carte* (1955) is given a strong presence by the graphic-expressive aspect, in *Roi rouge* (1957) this gives way to an almost naïve-seeming formal language, which is bound up with the predominant expressiveness of the color red. The illusionistic rendering yields to the foray into the archaic-seeming dissolution of the object. The subject matter of the artwork is of ever less significance: "Le sujet ne compte pas, qu'il soit intéressant, c'est essentiel," he said in an interview with "Le Monde" on March 28, 1952, meaning that the subject of the image had to be interesting in both color and form.

The still lifes developed at the same time are astonishingly large image formats. The subjects are rendered by means of intense brushwork and various instances of overpainting in fragmented form, enriched with colorful, mosaic-like sections that link the various levels of the image (*Still Life with Fish and Fruit*). The conglomeration of painting, collage and graphic elements also incorporates chance as a creative tool. *La feuille noire*, prior to 1966, builds on multiple ochre-brown surfaces. At the center of the composition is a Japanese-style leaf-like form against a light background. Here, Clavé undoubtedly gained important impulses from the painting of Tachism and from American abstract expressionism, which had been gaining ground in Europe since 1959. Similarly to his fellow countryman Antoni Tàpies, Clavé now found inspiration in wall structures, moving away completely from figuration. He increasingly made use of the technique of collage, for which he sometimes used unconventional materials, played with textures, or applied the stylistic device of *trompe-l'oeil*. The incorporation of tapestry, with its signs of usage, adds the dimension of time or the past to the image and thus represents a kind of time-focused collage in the figurative sense.

From 1960 onwards Clavé also worked in sculpture: *Roi e reine* (1960) follows on from the abovementioned depictions of kings and queens in terms of its motif, but now in a playful small format that seems to ironically question the powerful position of the figures represented. Clavé's sculptural oeuvre reveals further facets to this versatile artist, incorporating humor, fantasy to the point of surreal playfulness, and subtlety.

In 1965 Clavé moved to southern France, settling near Saint-Tropez, and he continued working there for some years. Internationally, he is a celebrated artist, who exhibited at the documenta in Kassel in 1959 and 1964 and provided works for the Spanish Pavilion at the 1984 Venice Biennale.

Painter, graphic artist, ceramic artist and sculptor James Coignard (Tours 1925–2008 Antibes) is considered to be a master of carborundum etching and earned a considerable reputation as a graphic artist. Initially, Coignard pursued a conventional career in the financial administration of Tours. After moving to the Côte d'Azur (1948) he discovered the beauty of the southern landscape and felt motivated to enroll in evening courses at the École des Arts Décoratifs in Nice, while working as a civil servant in the daytime. Painter Marchand des Raux gave him the necessary artistic grounding and as early as 1953 Coignard presented his first works at the Salon d'Automne in Paris, where he had opened a ceramic workshop the previous year. In 1956 he felt drawn to the Mediterranean again and moved close to Nice. He was deeply moved by the Mediterranean light, an experience that shaped his perception of color. During this early period Coignard was still very committed to painting and color and was a great admirer of artists Matisse, Braque and Chagall. To his mind, a work of art that still focused on specific objects should be a feast of colors, which is especially evident in the early, highly colorful still lifes from the 1950s in the Im Obersteg Collection. These lyrical, expressionist compositions feature various motifs such as a kerosene lamp, a clay vessel with three feet, a pear, leaves, grapes, berries and lobster, which are presented as two-dimensional objects in the center of the respective composition and seem to be lavishly piled up in front of a red or green background. In the late 1950s his contact to a number of Spanish artists, for example Antoni Clavé, who would also become his friend, influenced Coignard's own art, as can be seen by a comparison with Clavé's still lifes from the same period.

Coignard's colorful early work differs considerably from the artist's later monochrome paintings executed in earthy tones, and whose graffiti-like markings and inscriptions seem to convey secret messages. Reminiscences emerge of the prehistoric cave paintings discovered in the 1950s in Lascaux, France, which Coignard also visited (*Danses guerrières*). The artist was moreover influenced when creating these works by the impressions he gained during trips to archeological sites in the United States and Mexico. These pieces represent the transition to a work phase characterized by abstraction, simplification and contrasts. Random patches of color, clearly defined squares and rectangles, structuring lines, typographical symbols, and archaic heads over painted backgrounds with a wall-like structure combine to form abstract compositions and can be said to be located between Art Informel and Art Brut. The Im Obersteg Collection includes examples from this work phase, purchases made by the son of the collector, Jürg Im Obersteg, and his wife Doris Im Obersteg-Lerch.

In 1968 Coignard was instructed in the carborundum etching technique by Henri Goetz. He employed it with keen enthusiasm and would go on to become, alongside Antoni Clavé, one of the most important proponents of this challenging printmaking technique.

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.

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 260 works today, can be credited to the activities and passion of Karl Im Obersteg: he purchased major works by Marc Chagall, Alexej 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 overpainted is unknown. The black overpainting 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, surrealist 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. The belorussian Chaïm Soutine was also working in Paris, and seven paintings by this "*peintre maudit*" – still lifes and portraits characterized 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.