

Estates in a museum collection : a plea for the acquisition of artists' estates

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ESTATES IN A MUSEUM COLLECTION

A plea for the acquisition of artists' estates

Markus Landert The Kunstmuseum Thurgau serves as the repository for the estates of the artists Adolf Dietrich (1877-1957), Carl Roesch (1884-1979) and Hans Krüsi (1920 - 1995). The decision to incorporate these artists' estates into the existing art collection was critical in shaping the direction and identity of the collection. Each estate consisted of thousands of artworks of varying degrees of quality. These additions suddenly burdened the collection with a number of works that were, if not exactly irrelevant, then not necessarily outstanding. In addition, the estates of the artists also contain a multitude of sketches, photographs, correspondence and other documents that needed to be professionally indexed and archived. The decision to acquire the three artists' estates thus meant backing away from a collection policy that sought to represent important artistic positions by obtaining outstanding masterpieces. The concept of the museum as a treasury of important individual works was abandoned in favor of the idea of the museum as a comprehensive center of expertise on certain thematic areas and artistic positions.

The estate of Adolf Dietrich was the first to be added to the museum's collection. The holdings are owned by the Thurgauische Kunstgesellschaft, the regional art society that entrusted the paintings to the museum as a permanent loan soon after the museum took up provisional operations in 1972. This solution served the interests of both the museum and the art society. The museum's own works by Dietrich were supplemented by around three dozen important works from the estate, suddenly allowing the relatively young

institution to show a representative group of works by Thurgau's most important artist. The art society, in turn, was relieved of the responsibility of ensuring proper maintenance of the valuable paintings. Later in 1994, the museum took on the remainder of the estate consisting of sketchbooks, drawings, photographs, negatives and a multitude of other documents.

The Dietrich Estate is entrusted to the museum as a long-term loan, benefiting the institution in a number of ways. It enjoys practically unlimited access to a significant body of works and has gained an important partner in the Thurgauische Kunstgesellschaft, which played a vital role in financing the scholarly appraisal of the holdings. Working in partnership, two projects have been realized to date: the first consisting of inventorying the works and ordering the correspondence, the second dealing with the review and evaluation of the photographs. Both projects led to exhibitions and publications showing the artist in a new and differentiated light. These scholarly projects generated investments and wage payments of several hundred thousand francs each that would not have gone to the museum had it not accepted the estate.

The model of partnership-based estate processing and assessment was so successful that it was also employed in handling the estate of Carl Roesch. At the suggestion of the museum, the Roesch family established a foundation not only encompassing the artistic estate but also backed by significant financial resources. With the foundation as a partner and additional contributions from the lottery fund, the

museum subsequently inventoried the Roesch Estate and presented the results to the public in a 2006 retrospective accompanied by a comprehensive publication. Further activities exploring and assessing the material in more detail are in the works.

It was a different story with the acquisition of the estate of Hans Krüsi. When Hans Krüsi died in the winter of 1995, the Kunstmuseum Thurgau was named in the last will and testament as the principal heir. The estate of Hans Krüsi added a new focal point to the museum's collection of Outsider Art. With the bequest of the artworks, the museum came into possession of the usage rights for the images, which entails additional responsibility and administrative expenses as well as creative possibilities and revenues.

In contrast to the Dietrich Estate that had already been carefully sorted through, museum staff were presented with a completely disorganized, almost incomprehensible body of materials in the case of Krüsi. Despite this challenge, the museum managed to put together an initial overview of the estate just some five years after the artist's death with the exhibition "Auch ein nichts kann etwas werden" (Even a nothing can become something). Since then, a highly acclaimed film about the artist was produced with the museum's support and a further presentation of Krüsi's works with three radio plays is set to come out in spring 2008 in collaboration with Michael Stauffer. Select donations of works to other institutions, such as the collection d'art brut in Lausanne, and targeted sales are helping to further disseminate Hans Krüsi's oeuvre.

The work with the estates has allowed the museum to pursue substantive research projects that, in addition to exhibitions and publications, have also expanded the museum's areas of expertise. Thanks in large part to its work with the various estates, the Kunstmuseum Thurgau has had a modern digital inventory system and state-of-the-art storage and archive facilities in place since the mid-1990s. Despite these success stories, the acquisition of estates must remain the exception. Such involvements can only be contemplated when they represent outstanding artistic positions that correspond precisely to the museum's collecting strategy. And even then, estates can only be acquired once the storage capacities have been clarified and the financing for the inventorying and processing has been secured. In most cases, offers to donate bequests therefore have to be graciously yet resolutely declined.

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