

Curt Glaser Report: III. Summary of the Historical Facts

Curt Glaser (1879–1943) was born in Leipzig, the son of a Jewish family. In 1903 he began his studies of art history in Berlin and received his doctorate there in 1907. Most likely in 1903 as well, he married Elsa Kolker (1878-1932). Starting around 1910, with the support and in part at the behest of Glaser's father-in-law, Hugo Kolker, the couple began to build a significant art collection that encompassed, among others, the works of Edvard Munch, Vincent van Gogh, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Hans Purrmann.

In 1902, Glaser began to be active as an art critic and became one of the most important critics and commentators in Berlin. Starting in 1909, Glaser worked at the Königliches Kupferstichkabinett, where by 1912 at the latest he was significantly expanding the collection of modern and contemporary art and promoting it through numerous exhibitions. During the course of his tenure at the Kupferstichkabinett, Glaser authored his most important scholarly publications: *Zwei Jahrhunderte deutscher Malerei [Two Hundred Years of German Painting]* (1916), *Die Graphik der Neuzeit [Contemporary Graphics]* (1922), and monographs on Lucas Cranach the Elder (1921) and Hans Holbein the Younger (1924). In October 1924, Glaser became the director of the Kunstbibliothek in Berlin. Among his chief tasks, in particular, was to redefine the Kunstbibliothek as an art historical research library. In July 1925, the Glasers moved into a civil service apartment unattached to the director's post, in which their art collection was also exhibited. The Glasers now belonged to Berlin's intellectual elite and throughout the late 1920s held important art salons in their apartment.

In parallel to his professional acquisitions on behalf of the Kupferstichkabinett, Glaser undertakes private purchases and builds up a valuable collection of prints by artists like Honoré Daumier and Adolph von Menzel, but above all by contemporary artists such as Max Liebermann, Lovis Corinth, Erich Heckel, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. A significant emphasis is placed on the work of Edvard Munch, a lifelong friend whom Glaser supports. Glaser also collects Flemish and Dutch old master paintings and Japanese prints, which are his specialty. No inventory of his collection has survived, as far as is currently known. In 1932, Glaser's wife Elsa dies after a serious illness at the age of just 54. To commemorate her life as wife, collector, and patron of Munch's work, Glaser donates Munch's painting *Music on Karl Johan Street* (1889) to the Nationalgalerie in Berlin. The gift is an expression of Glaser's commitment to the presence of Munch's work in public collections and an example of the way his collection was continually undergoing transformation through gifts, purchases, and exchange transactions.

Following the seizure of power by the National Socialists in January 1933, the "Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service" is enacted in April 1933, which makes it possible to remove Jews from the civil service and is thus directed as a discriminatory tool against Germany's Jewish population and opponents of the new power. On April 9, 1933, a large number of personnel changes is made public – for art historians, primarily among progressive museum directors. In April 1933, the *Deutsche Zeitung* published a defamatory report about Glaser's suspension, which was also mentioned by the *Basler Nachrichten* and the *Neue Züricher Zeitung* between April and June 1933. The exact date of Glaser's suspension is not known, since several weeks might have passed between this and its publication. Glaser mentions

the loss of his post and his apartment in a letter to Munch of May 19, 1933. The loss of the apartment might have already occurred prior to the loss of Glaser's job due to the confiscation of the entire building complex by the Gestapo in April/May 1933. On June 29, 1933, Hermann Schmitz succeeds Glaser as director of the Kunstbibliothek. On September 27, 1933, Glaser is permanently dismissed from the civil service. Beginning in January 1934, he is awarded a pension amounting to three quarters of what would be paid to an "Aryan" civil servant.

After the death of his first wife and the loss of his apartment and his position, Glaser decides to liquidate his art collection and leave Germany with his future second wife, Maria Milch (1901-1981). It is impossible to determine the exact point at which the decision to sell was made. It is however possible that this decision was not made until late in January 1933 or even early in April. The greater portion of Glaser's art collection and library, as well as his furnishings, is auctioned at the Internationales Kunst- und Auktions-Haus, at auction no. 156 on May 9, 1933 and at the Berlin Buch- und Kunst-Antiquariat Max Perl, at auction no. 180 on May 18-19, 1933. An auction was the option that offered the best price on the free market at this point at time. Contemporary commentary suggests that the appraisal values in the first Glaser auction turned out to be accurate and were exceeded in the case of only a few lots. The same has been found for the second auction of May 18-19, 1933.

Otto Fischer, curator of the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel since 1927, was aware of the catalog of the Max Perl auction in May 1933, whereby he would have also known from the reports in the *Basler Zeitung* and the *Weltkunst* during that same period that Glaser had been relieved of his post. The meeting minutes of the Kunstkommission of May 16, 1933 demonstrate that the Kommission approved of Fischer "seeking to make inexpensive purchases."¹ In addition to expanding the collection of old German masters, Fischer followed a purchasing strategy to establish new collection foci, such as modern art. The further development of the modern collection was bound by the principle of the optimal use of limited means. On June 8, 1933, Fischer gave a report to the Kommission about the auction—at which the prices were "not exactly rock-bottom" but nevertheless "remained at the level of the appraisal prices, which were in themselves low"—and about his acquisitions (among them, Lovis Corinth, Oskar Kokoschka, Henri Matisse). The Kunstkommission approved the "beautiful and inexpensive purchases" at the "Glaser auction in Berlin," thus ensuring the preservation of the largest lot from Glaser's collection, which was scattered all over the world.² The final sale amounts at the auction reflect the trend that important pieces attained high prices while less important works remained below expectations. The two prominent lithographs by Munch that were acquired for the Kunstmuseum Basel were bid up above the appraisal (by 29.2% and 8.3%), while the total price of all 200 works acquired for the museum amounted to 10.1% below the appraised value. Existing research, as well as the Glaser compensation proceeding of 1963, indicates that Glaser lost a considerable portion of his fortune in the auctions. It is difficult to deduce unequivocally what factors influenced these results—the outcomes of the Berlin auctions at the time were affected by the consequences of the world economic crisis, the National Socialists' seizure of

¹ Protokoll der Sitzung der Kunstkommission vom 16.05.1933 [Minutes of the meeting of the Kunstkommission of May 16, 1933], Kunstmuseum Basel, Archiv: B1/13-Protokolle der Kunstkommission, p. 51.

² Protokoll der Sitzung der Kunstkommission vom 08.06.1933 [Minutes of the meeting of the Kunstkommission of June 8, 1933], Kunstmuseum Basel, Archiv: B1/13-Protokolle der Kunstkommission, p. 58–59.

power, and an increasing number of auctions of entire collections belonging not only to fleeing Jews but recently impoverished owners as well. According to the research, pricing at public auctions at the time of the Glaser auctions was still based on regulation by supply and demand. The high quality works achieved high prices, as demonstrated by the prices of the Munch lithographs acquired by the Kunstmuseum Basel. While proceeds from auctions by Jewish consignors were already being transferred to blocked accounts during the first years of the Nazi regime, in Glaser's case the research assumes that he received the proceeds of the auctions. It cannot be ascertained whether and to what extent Glaser had access to his salary and bank accounts from abroad in 1933 due to the foreign currency legislation of 1931. Glaser's pension was transferred abroad. After November 1, 1936, however, the Reich Flight Tax introduced by the Nazis was deducted.

Glaser's exposed position at the time of the Nazi assumption of power in 1933 made him a target of the injustice regime. However, it is impossible to determine when he decided to undertake his further emigration. After a stay in Paris in June/July 1933, he wrote in August 1933 from Ascona, Switzerland – where he was temporarily staying with his wife – to give notice that he was giving up his role as an art critic in Berlin. As reasons for his decision, he cites a "constant serious conflict of conscience" as well as "other difficulties" that could "make his activity as a Berlin art critic impossible."³ In the latter half of 1933, Glaser had 14 crates of goods shipped to him at Ascona for relocation. These contained selected artworks and valuables that he had not auctioned off. Between 1936 and 1938/39, the Glasers stayed repeatedly in Florence with their daughter, who was born in 1936. In the summer of 1938, Glaser applied unsuccessfully for the directorship of the Kunstmuseum Basel. In December 1940, after the Kunsthaus Zürich approached him, Glaser offered to sell them *Music on Karl Johan Strasse* for CHF 15,000 (the painting had been removed from the National Galerie under its new directorship). Glaser expressed regret that he was not in a position to donate the picture to the museum. The painting was ultimately bought for CHF 12,000. In 1940, Glaser had his deposits of Munch paintings collected from the Kunsthaus Zürich and they were later sold. In 1941, the Glasers emigrated to New York without their daughter and moved in 1943 to Lake Placid. Glaser was never professionally active again in the USA either. He died on November 23, 1943 after a protracted illness. The two Munch paintings belonging to Glaser that still remained in Switzerland were deposited at the Kunstmuseum Basel in 1947 by his widow, and in subsequent years either sold by her or returned by the Kunstmuseum to the heirs.

³ Letter to Herbert Ihering, of the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, of August 24, 1933, in: Archiv der Akademie der Bildenden Künste Berlin, NL Herbert Ihering, aus 1336. Quoted in Wolfgang Benz und Angelika Königseder, Gutachten über die historischen Umstände des Verlustes der Kunstsammlung Prof. Dr. Curt Glaser im Jahr 1933 [Report on the historical circumstances of the loss of the art collection Prof. Dr. Curt Glaser in 1933], Zentrum für Antisemitismusforschung an der TU Berlin, May 31, 2010, p. 54.