

**Henri Rousseau, *La muse inspirant le poète / Apollinaire et sa muse* (1909)
Summary of historical findings**

According to the invoice, the Kunstmuseum Basel purchased Henri Rousseau's painting, *La muse inspirant le poète/Apollinaire et sa muse* (1909) on September 1, 1940, from its previous owner, Countess Charlotte von Wesdehlen (1877-1946), née Reichenheim, divorced from Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. The Countess was a German-Swiss woman of Jewish origin who was forced to leave her hometown of Berlin because of the National Socialist state's persecution of the Jews. Due to the financial difficulties she faced in exile in Switzerland, she offered to sell the painting to the Kunstmuseum Basel via the art dealer Christoph Bernoulli (1897-1987). The selling price was low. Georg Schmidt, then director of the Museum, himself called it "shamefully cheap."

Charlotte von Wesdehlen came from a very wealthy family. Both her parents, Margarete Oppenheim, née Eisner (1857-1935), and Dr. Georg Reichenheim (1842-1903), as well as she herself together with her first husband Paul von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1875-1935), had built up important art collections in Berlin. The Mendelssohn-Bartholdys had acquired a reputation extending beyond Germany's borders as collectors of Pablo Picasso's art, in particular. Additionally, they owned works by Vincent van Gogh, Edgar Degas, Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, André Derain and Henri Rousseau. In 1913, the couple acquired several Rousseau paintings from the Parisian art dealer Paul Rosenberg (1881-1959). These included the painting *Apollinaire et sa muse* – a work commissioned by the depicted poet, which he himself had put on the market. They paid 6000 FF for the painting. In 1927, Charlotte and Paul von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy divorced. They divided the art collection between them (the *Apollinaire* went to Charlotte), and thereafter Paul von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy paid his ex-wife annual support. Both remarried: Paul married Charlotte's former companion Elsa von Lavergne-Peguilhen (1899-1986), and Charlotte, the retired Swiss cavalry captain of the Prussian army, Georges Frédéric Petitpierre Count von Wesdehlen (1869-1959), a native of Neuchâtel/Neuenburg. This marriage gave her dual German-Swiss citizenship.

Due to increasing persecution by the Nazi government in Germany, Charlotte von Wesdehlen made plans to emigrate to Switzerland starting in 1938. She was in a position to take a significant number of highly valuable works of art with her and have them brought to her apartment at 4 Avenue de Champel in Geneva. Later, in 1940, she also brought over a large quantity of household goods (around 12,350 kg). Her second husband remained alone in Berlin and lived on his cavalry pension and the capital income from his wife's previous inheritance from the estate of Margarete Oppenheim.

Neither the estate nor the capital income could be transferred abroad due to restrictions on foreign exchange. In 1942, the Count gave a statement to the authorities that his wife had left Germany “because of the measures against the Jews” and was living “separately from him.” In connection with her departure, proceedings were initiated at the beginning of 1939 to assess the Reich Flight Tax. Demands for the discriminatory tax levies were made in several notices. Charlotte von Wesdehlen's entire personal fortune was used to pay the Jewish property tax and the Reich Flight Tax.

Soon after her arrival in Switzerland, Charlotte von Wesdehlen began to offer paintings from her art collection for sale to the Basel art dealer Christoph Bernoulli, to whom she had a connection through her first husband's family. The latter brought in Georg Schmidt (1896-1965), the director of the Kunstmuseum Basel, who was supposed to assist with obtaining the permits required for the import of objects and would thus earn a right of first refusal. Schmidt contacted the Countess and offered her his help, but it turned out to not be needed. Thanks to her Swiss citizenship, Charlotte von Wesdehlen had been able to import the works of art without any problems. Import duties would be due retroactively only if she put the objects into circulation on the commercial market. However, this requirement did not apply in case of sale to a national museum.

Schmidt soon expressed his interest in *Apollinaire et sa muse*. In the one-on-one exchanges between the Basel protagonists concerning the matter, the tone that comes across regarding the Countess is not particularly respectful and sometimes even derogatory. However, this could also be attributed to the casual form of expression that was common in the private correspondence between Schmidt and Bernoulli, who were friends. The Countess's asking price was not firm and was initially too high for the art museum's tight budget. Due to the aforementioned customs regulations, she favored a museum sale. Why it was so important to her to avoid these payments is inexplicable, as no more than CHF 130 would have been due and had she sold to a private individual, she would likely have earned higher proceeds. As she was in urgent need of money, she continued to lower her demands during the negotiations until, of the CHF 25,000 she had originally hoped for, only CHF 12,000 remained and was ultimately paid. Georg Schmidt had estimated the value of the work at CHF 20,000 and, in his opinion, it might have fetched CHF 30,000 to 40,000 on the open market. Some Zurich sources even expected CHF 60,000.

Other Rousseau paintings owned by Charlotte von Wesdehlen ended up at the Kunsthau Zürich via the dealer Max Dreyfus (Antiquariat Emile/Henri Dreyfus). Director Wilhelm Wartmann (1882–1970) acquired the portrait *Pierre Loti avec le chat* and a private collector purchased a still life with flowers, which was loaned to the Kunsthau. The two works were to be placed alongside the Rousseau work *Woman in a Red Dress*, which the museum had recently purchased from another source for CHF 30,000. With regard to

the pricing of the two works owned by Charlotte von Wesdehlen, however, Wartmann hoped it would be guided by the low price of the Basel transaction. But in this second negotiation, Charlotte von Wesdehlen defended her original asking price more stubbornly than in Basel. She went down from CHF 38,000 and CHF 40,000, respectively, to CHF 60,000 for both works together. When Wartmann explained that he could not raise more than CHF 45,000 in total, she finally accepted this sum. On October 30, 1940, Charlotte von Wesdehlen received a cheque for CHF 43,000 for the sale of both paintings, for which the commission for Max Dreyfus had been deducted by the museum in advance.

The reduced price did not deter the countess from offering further works to the Kunsthaus. In January 1942, the Rousseau sale was followed by Picasso's *Saltimbanque assise avec garçon* and a bouquet of flowers by Alfred Sisley. Here, too, she deviated from her original demands and ultimately sold the Picasso for CHF 11,000, after first unsuccessfully asking CHF 26,000 and then CHF 18,000. The negotiations over her *Peasant Woman* by Juan Gris, (CHF 8,000) and a river landscape by Sisley (CHF 15,000) in April of that year were unsuccessful.

The documents cited in the review of the historical findings show that Charlotte von Wesdehlen had expected to get more than CHF 12,000 from the Kunstmuseum Basel for the monumental painting *Apollinaire et sa muse*. Nevertheless, she agreed to the deal because she needed cash immediately and the Kunstmuseum was ready to pay her on short notice. In the sale negotiations with the Kunsthaus Zürich, she asked for higher sums even though the works were considerably smaller. The pressing desire to avoid any customs duties, coupled with her urgent need for money, ultimately forced her to accept the unfavorable lower offers. However, despite the low price she attained in Basel, Charlotte von Wesdehlen held fast to the idea of "Bernoulli, who is an old friend of mine" and invoked recommendations from Georg Schmidt with regard to customs duties. She also never expressed any reproaches in connection with the transaction. From today's perspective, however, the proceeds from the sale appear shockingly low in comparison with the sums paid internationally for other works by Rousseau in 1939/1940.

Charlotte von Wesdehlen died in Geneva on June 6, 1946. In 1951, Georges Petitpierre de Wesdehlen – as his wife's sole heir – applied to the German state for compensation for damages to property and assets caused by Nazi persecution. The authorities awarded compensation for the Jewish property tax and the Reich flight tax, but a portion of the Jewish property tax was deferred due to missing documentation. After Count von Wesdehlen's death in 1959, his brother, Heinrich Count von Wesdehlen (1886-1975), continued to pursue the claim with the Restitution Offices and received compensation for the seizure of securities and the loss of the inheritance that had belonged to his brother's

mother in law. The valuables and works of art left behind in the Berlin house and the "harm to life" suffered by Charlotte von Wesdehlen were not compensated.