

# C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

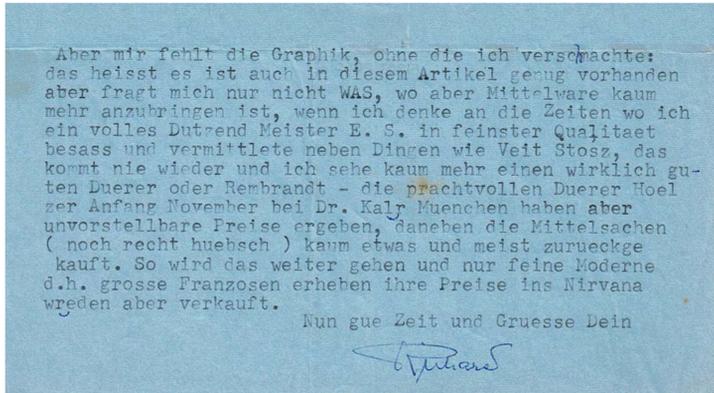
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from the archives: Richard Zinser, 1960

We have all heard those speeches given by educational specialists for teachers, or by commencement speakers for university professors and their students: They bemoan the declining state of the educational system, warn how the standards are slipping, blame pupils and students for no longer learning what earlier generations have learned, etc. With predictable regularity, such jeremiads then end with a punch line that reveals what had just been said was actually a quote from such and such and dates back to the 1950s, 1920s, 1880s, or sometimes even all the way back to the ancient Greeks and Romans—the tenor being that either things can’t really be so bad (because they always had been so) or that there is no way we will ever stop things going down the drain (because they had always been on that downward trajectory).

There is an equivalent to this in our small world of old master prints. It is best personified by the client who, whenever he or she stops by the gallery, tells us how they remember the time when there was not just a handful of prints by Dürer or Rembrandt in the drawers (such as the ones we had just proudly shown them) but STACKS of them—three *Mappen* (portfolios) alone by Dürer, in small, medium, and large sizes. I have to confess to only a limited enthusiasm for those conversations. But then, one has to concede that such comments are not entirely wrong. As early as the eighteenth century, collectors felt that there were no decent old master prints left in Italy—which was actually true: they had all been bought up by the English *milordi* on their Grand Tours to fill the portfolios at Chatsworth, Wilton House, and all the other country houses. Or consider what Arthur Driver once told my friend N.G. Stogdon: at the venerable London dealership of P. & D. Colnaghi & Co., where Driver was a director after World War II, one felt rather embarrassed not to be able to offer almost any Rembrandt a collector might want. How could they not? And in the unlikely event that we youngsters at C.G. Boerner ever feel an onset of enthusiasm about our business, leafing through the *Neue Lagerlisten* from, say, the 1960s or, better still, a catalogue from a C.G. Boerner auction in the 1920s will surely guarantee a bout of depression.

It was amusing, therefore, when we came across a letter in our Düsseldorf archive that the legendary print dealer Richard Zinser had written to an artist friend in 1960. It is a welcome reminder that any such nostalgic musings are perhaps nothing if not a constant of life—or it can at least help to put things in perspective.



Zinser (1884–1984) was a ducal and court jeweler in Stuttgart and from a young age an avid collector of old master prints. He continued in his trade until the late 1930s, when, after attending an important print sale in New York in 1940, he was not allowed to return to Germany. Zinser was not Jewish but had always been an ardent and outspoken critic of the Nazi Party. Fortunately, he had foresight enough to have already sent his wife (who was Belgian) and daughter to Brussels. Eventually, he was reunited with his family as well as with some crucial parts of his collection, including Rembrandt’s practically unobtainable portrait print of Arnold Tholinx, for which he had reputedly paid \$55,000 when it was sold in 1938. The telegram his wife sent him from Lisbon after crisscrossing Europe read: “Suzie [their daughter] and our little dog Tholy are safe.” Once he had settled in New York, Zinser became arguably one of the most important dealers in old master (and modern) prints of the postwar period, selling treasures from such esteemed collections as those of the princes of Liechtenstein (jointly with Colnaghi’s) and the princes of Waldburg-Wolfegg. Also worth mentioning is his acquisition of a substantial part of the Maltzan collection, which dated back to the late sixteenth century and was rescued in advance of the Russian army from the count’s estate in Militsch in Silesia. Many of Zinser’s best prints now grace the collections of such places as the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Cleveland Museum of Art.

In the letter we unearthed, Zinser writes: “But I do miss prints, I languish without them. Which means that plenty can be found but just don’t ask me WHAT KIND—at a time when mediocre works can hardly be sold any longer. When I think about the time when I owned and brokered a full dozen prints by the Master E.S. and such things as Veit Stosz—this will never happen again, and I hardly ever see a truly good Dürer or Rembrandt. But then, the brilliant woods [i.e., woodcuts] that Dr. Karl [of the auction house Karl+Faber in Munich] had at the beginning of November sold for unbelievable prices whereas the middling things (although quite nice) cost hardly anything and were mostly bought in. It will continue like that, and only fine modern things, i.e., great French artists, will reach nirvana with their prices and will sell.”

If we substitute the “fine modern things” with “contemporary art,” we have another of these universally applicable quotes to be used when complaining about the state of the arts and their market. In this case, however, we happen to know that Richard Zinser continued to sell prints for many more years and that, in addition, he had assembled an astonishing collection of prints both very old and “fine and modern.” Therefore, one can’t help but detect something for which the Germans have a wonderful (and not easy to translate) expression: *jammern auf hohem Niveau* (to whine at a high level)—a luxury indeed, if one can be in such a position.

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(I would like to thank N.G. Stogdon for providing this *Abwechslung* with some crucial touches of “colour”—and yes, he insisted on this spelling of the word.)

