

## Armin Kunz

I started work at C. G. Boerner at the beginning of 1997, after studying for far too long in Germany and England, and having held a fellowship in the print department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York where I had the privilege of being taught most of what I know about prints by Suzanne Boorsch. F. Carlo Schmid, an old friend from student years in Berlin, who had written his thesis on Johann Christian Reinhart and his printmaking enterprise, joined in 1999. Shortly before our arrival, the firm had been acquired in 1995 by Artemis Fine Arts on the initiative of Adrian Eeles. Not surprisingly, joining a 175-year-old dealership in the late 1990s, I found myself caught up in the midst of multiple changes.

When I arrived in Düsseldorf, I found that computers had been installed, but Ruth-Maria Muthmann, the previous owner of the firm who had agreed to stay on to ease the transition, adamantly ignored them. She insisted that her letters be written on a typewriter, albeit an electric one. The obsolete fax machine was fighting to survive, and it was a few years before the screech of the dial-up modem was replaced by the ‘ping’ from the inbox of one’s email account, now linked to the electronic ether by a DSL connection. International phone calls were still considered an extravagance. When, after the end of one such conversation across the big pond, it became clear that I had forgotten to mention something deemed to be important, this caused some not-so-mild annoyance since making another call was considered to be completely out of the question. Carlo and I were glad, therefore, to have Marianne Küffner as a good-natured and supportive mentor. She had been with the firm since the late 1960s and was able to provide us youngsters with the much needed institutional memory. Even more important was her warmth and a youthful attitude that belied her age.

The 1980s had been a buoyant market for old master prints. Many of the price records set at the time, as, for example, at the sale of the collection of the Swiss collector Albert Blum at Sotheby’s in New York in February 1988, were not broken for decades to come. But in the middle of 1990 a worldwide financial crisis arrived and left the art market reeling. As a colleague once put it, in May we witnessed the sale of Rembrandt’s *Three Crosses* at Doyle Galleries in New York for an astounding US\$990,000 and thought we could all leave early for summer, but when

we returned in the fall the market had practically disappeared. (The dealer who had acquired this impression of Rembrandt’s masterpiece had to wait for over two decades before he was finally able to sell it.) The situation was worsened by the fact that, particularly at the top level, the market was driven by a mere handful of collectors. When some of them were no longer able to participate due to the global crisis, prices dropped precipitously.

Artemis was a firm with solid financial backing and a network of collectors that reached from Southern California to Australia and Japan, and the acquisition of the venerable dealership of C. G. Boerner made a lot of sense. The simplest way of putting it was that Artemis thereby acquired one of the sources from which it had been buying some of their finest prints during the previous decade. But there was another reason that made this partnership desirable. For all her conservatism, Frau Muthmann had the admirable foresight to establish a branch in New York in 1984, and this provided a base for Artemis’s own (albeit short-lived) expansion into America. (After Artemis’s demise, C. G. Boerner became an independent company again in 2005.) The founding director of C. G. Boerner Inc. was Nancy Bialler, and her small office on Manhattan’s Upper East Side played a significant role in deepening Boerner’s many existing institutional contacts, and enabled it to build new ones, especially among private collectors.

The success of Boerner’s overseas venture can be seen as a reflection or perhaps even a symptom of a far-reaching change in the art world, which had started in the 1970s. In Europe, museums had fewer and fewer discretionary funds and were, as a result, increasingly restricted in their access to the market. Granted, many European holdings (and here I take the liberty to continue to include the UK as part of the Europe that I am talking about) are larger and their histories far older than those in America. But not so many of them can get away with what a Viennese curator friend once declared with hardly a trace of irony, that the Albertina sees itself as ‘a complete collection’. How different the situation is in the New World! As a European dealer travelling through the American heartland, I am constantly amazed to see how even small colleges and university museums still regard themselves as continuing to grow their collections.

The drying-up of public funds in Europe meant that it became more and more difficult to sell lower- and middle-priced prints. Ironically, significant acquisitions can still take place, even if rarely. They require in each case the initiative of the curator, the support of her or his director, and the availability of federal funding and third-party donations. In Germany, major support has come from the Kulturstiftung der Länder since 1988. A quick look at *Patrimonia*, a series of publications that accompany outstanding acquisitions, shows that these are by no means limited to the larger museums. The same is true in the Netherlands, whereas in more centralized countries, such as France and Spain, major purchases are usually reserved for the national treasure houses, whether the Louvre in Paris or the Prado in Madrid.

One of the things that Frau Muthmann insisted on was that the *Geschäftsführer* (director) of the Düsseldorf office should sit in the front room and greet all the visitors. After a while I began to wonder if this was really necessary since pretty much the only person who came by on a regular basis was the mail man. I thought that working in the *Chef Zimmer* in the back (which came with its own toilet) would be a much better idea, and would be far more conducive to writing the factsheets used in the annual catalogues that were given the understated title *Neue Lagerliste*. Only later, when I came across the visitor books from the 1970s, did I understand whence this idea of *Anwesenheitspflicht* (attendance duty) in the front room derived. Leafing through those old diaries I could see how back then visits from clients on a daily basis had been very much the rule.

So, again, a change had taken place, this one driven by a variety of factors. What affects a highly specialized dealership in old master prints and drawings, perhaps more than anything, is the fickle nature of taste. The art world has become increasingly dominated by modern and contemporary art. A gallery fostering a scholarly interest in earlier works, a place which resembles a print study room more than a white box studio, has become decidedly old-fashioned. Ever since the late eighteenth century, one of the driving forces for the expansion of the print market was the development of prints of a much larger size meant to be framed and hung on the wall rather than pasted into albums. This general trend continued in later years despite such counter-movements as the etching revival and the print portfolio of the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries. Today, contemporary printmaking tends to be large, bold, and colourful. Earlier prints, on the other hand, have

little of the 'wall power' that seems to be so coveted today. They originated in the world of books and libraries where they provided visual encyclopedias to complement the written and printed word. To get to know prints requires patience, and the willingness to study and learn about forgotten iconographies and quality of impression. Such a commitment of time has become rare among today's art public.

Another marked change over the last four decades has been in the role played by the auction houses. It is probably fair to say that until the 1970s auctions were very much the domain of the specialist, and hence primarily of the dealers. Buying a print at auction was not very different from acquiring it privately from an old collection since auction prices were not widely available. Even when *Gordon's Print Price Annual* began to appear in 1978, to be followed by the *Almanach der Graphikpreise* eight years later in 1986, these annual reviews were hardly geared to private collectors. Being a print dealer (and I assume that the same was true with dealers in other areas of the art market) was very much like being a member of a private club. While it remained closed to outsiders, it was astonishingly transparent to those inside, and the auction houses even printed the names of the buyers on the results lists that were mailed out to the subscribers who bought their catalogues (a practice that ended in the mid-1970s). Today, auction prices are widely available for anyone (which is almost everyone) who owns a smart phone. Every dealer has an anecdote about the collector who admires a work at a fair, goes away to 'think about it over a cup of coffee', only to return having found the record of its sale in Pforzheim, South Cerney, or Troyes, where the dealer had thought that he had made an inconspicuous and attractively cheap purchase.

In the latest twist in the development of this omnipresent market, pretty much everyone will not only know about those provincial sales but probably also compete in them. The auction houses' drive to sell directly to the final buyer was started by the global houses back in the 1970s, and has by now caught on even with small provincial salerooms, being made possible by the reach afforded through the internet. Today a dealer bidding at auction is likely to be already competing against her or his potential client. In the print world, this was first noticeable with modern and contemporary works rather than with earlier prints, where the subtleties of an engraving by Albrecht Dürer or Lucas van Leyden still set limits to the possibility of forming a judgement based purely on remote information. In the modern



1. C. G. Boerner's gallery in Kasernenstr. 13, Düsseldorf, 1954 (Archive C. G. Boerner, Düsseldorf).

and contemporary field, auction houses have become the principal market from the moment a publisher's edition has sold out. This is especially true for works by artists deemed to be 'hot' and the taste of the moment. It is only when the supply is meagre and the buying timid that the auctioneer will sadly reminisce about the good old days when 'all those nice dealers' were filling the sale room and competing for lots.

There is, however, one section of the market in old master prints where auctions are rarely involved: that is for truly exceptional and rare prints. Granted, there were notable exceptions such as the sale of prints from Chatsworth (Christie's, London, 1985) or the two-part sale of prints 'from a German Family of Title' (Christie's, London, 1991–92). All of them were full of treasures, although the timing of the latter sale during the recession after 1990 was rather unfortunate. Yet, by and large, truly superb impressions can usually be found privately and not at auction. N. G. Stogdon was

arguably the outstanding dealer for the quality and rarity of the prints he offered as well as for his learned presentation (it is said that the editors of *Print Quarterly* were more than once tempted to acknowledge this with a review in this magazine – which would have been a first for a dealer's catalogue [but see p. ## in this issue – note from the Editor]).

Needless to say, this was an advantageous position for dealers. Yet it also had a counterproductive effect that only became apparent in retrospect: namely, a decades-long stagnation of values. By the 1980s, the price of a superb and scarce old master print had reached the half-million-dollar range, and the occasional, more expensive outlier merely confirmed this rule. And this was very much the level at which top prices remained well into the twenty-first century. When looking at the catalogue of the above-mentioned Blum sale of 1988 today, one is repeatedly astonished how high some of the prices were. Repeating the

same exercise with any major old master drawing sale from the same period, one's reaction would be quite different. To realize what amazing drawings could be had back then for prices that from today's perspective appear to be extremely modest, might even induce a mild depression! The main reason for this widening discrepancy between the value of prints and drawings is the simple fact that far more good drawings have appeared at auction, resulting in a steady increase of prices which, in turn, continued to bring more material to the market.

Drawings also received more support than prints from a crop of young private dealers entering a field that, among other things, promised a certain level of commercial excitement. This ultimately affected museums and private collectors alike. Looking briefly at Germany again, two things are apparent: curators (and their directors) are likely to prefer the acquisition of a significant drawing over that of a print in the same way as many of the *Fördervereine* (support groups) affiliated with the *Kupferstichkabinette* (print rooms) have their hearts set more on drawings than on prints. None the less the founding and expansion of these groups have in recent years been an important and welcome response to the diminishing of public funding. They are modelled on a long-established US practice where collectors have always sought advice and been given it by curators. In return, these collectors support acquisitions and donate works to those museums. Establishing such a tradition in Europe is also leading to closer relationships between dealers and museums. I vividly remember how very guarded this relationship was, perhaps more so in Germany than elsewhere, as recently as twenty years ago. It was only when transferring to Boerner's New York office that I realized how fundamentally different the American approach was. A market-savvy curator like Andrew Robison could become as much a mentor to me as the 'new kid on the block' as Adrian Eeles and Marianne Küffner had been within our own firm when I started out.

To write at a time when the market is still suffering greatly under the impact of the covid-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to reflect on past and present methods of selling. The print market attracts people who take pleasure in handling objects. There is a visual as much as a haptic aspect to holding these works, and old-fashioned printed catalogues are still among the most important tools to advertise one's wares. Yet it has by now also become essential to have an online presence both on one's own website as well as on aggregate platforms, be it a dealers' organization

such as the IFPDA and, more recently, ONPAPER, ART, or commercial sites such as Artnet, Artsy, or 1stdibs. A younger generation of collectors as well as of curators is increasingly making use of these. However, given the overabundance of information made available on the web, one's presence there alone is hardly sufficient to attract attention. Reaching out via email has taken over the role of postcard mailings, and recently social media platforms such as Instagram have become something that is being noted by the younger generation of collectors and curators.

The calm waters of the print market were never sucked into the whirlpool of the increasing number of fairs that needed to be attended worldwide (the print branches of the big contemporary galleries as well as the major print publishers are the exception here). In the 1970s, Art Basel or the Kölner Kunstmarkt were the fairs that no contemporary dealer could miss. The IFPDA's New York Print Fair (now called the Fine Art Print Fair) has maintained such an all-encompassing importance for the print trade ever since it was founded in 1991, following on the success of its predecessor, the New York Fine Print Fair, that had already started in 1984. By now, it has even encouraged such spin offs as the New York Satellite Print Fair (mostly attended by smaller secondary market dealers) and the E/AB Fair that is reserved for contemporary publishers. European fairs have unfortunately lost their importance. For many years, the Stuttgarter Antiquariatsmesse (founded in 1962) had, despite its book-related origins, been an important showcase for old master print dealers. Some (Kistner, List, Schwing) are no longer active, while others (Fach, Rumbler) decided that it was no longer worth their while to attend; today Laube and Boerner seem to be the last to hold out. Despite France's continuing importance as a source market, the Salon de l'Estampe in Paris never really lived up to its original promise, and at the still prospering London Original Print Fair, which began in 1985, the focus has shifted more or less completely to the modern and contemporary sector. Over the last decade, the loss of prominent showcases for earlier prints in Europe has been somewhat compensated by the addition in 2010 of a dedicated section of works on paper to TEFAF Maastricht, the juggernaut among the old master fairs.

It is still too early to tell when some sort of post-pandemic normality will resume and what it will look like. How soon are people going to be ready again to attend crowded fairs? The pandemic has forced an enormous traffic online, and many of the digital means implemented or further perfected over the past



2. C. G. Boerner's stand at the Burlington Fine Art Fair, Royal Academy, London, 1977 (Archive C. G. Boerner, Düsseldorf).

year can be expected to stay. The ongoing challenge faced by dealers is to find ways to attract attention in what is increasingly becoming an overload that threatens to drown out everyone and everything in some kind of informational white noise. Who knows, but one strategy might be to step back and adapt the time-tested sales method used by one of the greatest of the old timers. Rumour has it that Richard Zinser, who was the source for some of

the most important old master print acquisitions of American museums during the first decades after World War II, used to travel around with his treasures wrapped in brown packing paper. Perhaps we could update to a somewhat fancier portfolio. Still, to judge from my own experience, one thing is certain: there is absolutely no method, be it analogue, digital or virtual, that can beat the personal presentation of an original work of art.

