

ARISTIDE MAILLOL, *BÜSTE DER VENUS MIT FRANSEN*24.02. 17.11.2024

Woher kommst du? Wie Kunst in die Sammlung gelangt

Aristide Maillol, *Büste der Venus mit Fransen*, 1920
Bronze, Kunstmuseum Luzern, Entry 1946, Donation

In February 2023, the Kunstmuseum Luzern received a letter from a lawyer requesting the restitution of a bust by Aristide Maillol. The work, *Büste der Venus mit Fransen*, originally came from the collection of the art dealer Alfred Flechtheim (1878–1937) and entered the collection of the Kunstmuseum Luzern in 1946 as a donation by the German-Swiss banker and art collector Eduard von der Heydt (1882–1963). The case is currently in the process of being reassessed. The presentation of the bust is taking place on the basis of an agreement with Alfred Flechtheim's heirs.

Alfred Flechtheim – Gallery Owner and Collector of Avant-garde Art

"There's something crazy about art ... art has taken hold of me. ... For me, art is everything, for art, I'm nothing."

Alfred Flechtheim, Diary, 1913

Alfred Flechtheim (1878–1937) was a German gallery-owner and collector. He came from a Jewish family and initially worked in the family grain business. His love of art was awakened while on further training in that business in Paris in 1906. He immersed himself in the art world of the French capital, got to know the German artists' colony and made the acquaintance of Pablo Picasso and the Mannheim art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler. By virtue of his interest and his contacts, he became an art collector and art dealer. He was one of the first German collectors of contemporary French art. With the support of the Berlin gallery-owner Paul Cassirer, he opened the Galerie für alte und neue Kunst in Dusseldorf in 1913 and became one of the most influential art dealers in Germany, specialising in Classical Modernism. Thanks to Alfred Flechtheim, fauvist and cubist artists like Henri Matisse, Maurice Vlaminck, Georges Braque und Pablo Picasso became known in Germany.

Alfred Flechtheim was forced to auction off his collection and his gallery holdings due to the outbreak of the First World War. Two years later, he dared to start anew. In 1921 he opened branches in Berlin, Frankfurt, Cologne and Vienna. As the Berlin gallery gained in importance, he moved from Dusseldorf to the capital. Before the First World War, and above all in the 1920s, he worked hand in hand with the gallery-owner Kahnweiler in Paris and was the exclusive representative for French artists in Germany. He also championed Expressionism and Surrealism and promoted Otto Dix, Wilhelm Lehmbruck, Paul Klee, Max Ernst, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and many others. Alfred Flechtheim saw his profession as that of a communicator. He wrote numerous catalogue texts and visited collectors and museum directors regularly so as to familiarise them with the artists he represented, and help those artists to mount exhibitions all over Europe.

The National Socialist Era: despised and persecuted

As early as the end of the 1920s, Flechtheim's success with avant-garde art made him a target of the budding National Socialists, who disparaged the gallery owner as a member of a "Jewish-Bolshevist world conspiracy. The Nazi-vendetta became more intense as of 1932, driving Alfred Flechtheim, who was also having difficulties due to the world economic crisis, into debt.

On 30 January 1933, Adolf Hitler was appointed Reichskanzler. The NSDAP party assumed power in the German Reich and transformed the country into a dictatorship. In March 1933, an auction co-organised by Alfred Flechtheim was forcibly ended by the National Socialists. That same month, his former general manager, a member of the NSDAP, availed himself of the opportunity to secure the Dusseldorf gallery for himself. The branch in Berlin was also dissolved. Alfred Flechtheim left Berlin on 30.9.1933. His activities as a gallery-owner were decried in the German press. In a letter to the Swiss collector Oskar Reinhart in Winterthur dated 1.10.1933 he wrote: "My gallery there and in Dusseldorf are being closed. No room for me anymore. Had I not devoted myself to Hofer, Kolbe, Renée, Klee and the French, no one would pay any attention to me. Yes, it was hinted to me that if I renounced those artists I could continue as an art dealer!!! But better very poor in a foreign country than a traitor."

At first, Alfred Flechtheim travelled to Switzerland, then to London. He sold all his assets so as to meet his debts and support his wife Berthe Flechtheim, who was living in Berlin. In exile in London, he also had to sell his private collection below its market value in order to survive. Numerous letter to friends of his, artists, gallery-owners and potential sellers, testify to his despair (cf. letters). Finally, Alfred Flechtheim was able to gain a foothold in London and work in the art trade again. Just as he was about to establish himself as an advisor and exhibition organiser, however, he died unexpectedly in 1937 as a result of blood poisoning. Berthe Flechtheim took her life in Berlin in 1941, on hearing of her imminent deportation to Auschwitz.

Today, Alfred Flechtheim is regarded as an early victim of the collective anti-Semitic persecution in National Socialist Germany, and one of the most prominent. He was persecuted at the time for two reasons: because of his Jewish origins, and as a gallery-owner promoting Modernism, a kind of art which the National Socialists regarded as "degenerate". Furthermore, his face was instrumentalised for Nazi propaganda both during his lifetime and after his death. The cultural policy of the National Socialists considered him to be a typical representative of the despicable modern system that needed to be eliminated (cf. *Illustrierter Beobachter*, December 1932). The poster for the "Degenerate Art" exhibition held in twelve German cities between 1937 and 1941, shows a portrait resembling Alfred Flechtheim (cf. poster for that exhibition in Chemnitz, 1937).

The Collector Alfred Flechtheim and the Artist Aristide Maillol

Alfred Flechtheim represented the French sculptor Aristide Maillol (1861-1944) in his gallery in Germany. Maillol was considered to be the most famous French sculptor of his time and Flechtheim regarded even him as the most important sculptor of Modernism (letter by A. Flechtheim to O. Reinhart, 11.12.1931, Archive Oskar Reinhart, Winterthur). Aristide Maillol was represented by two works in Flechtheim's gallery exhibition of 1913. Over the following years, Flechtheim exhibited him regularly and dedicated himself to spreading information about him throughout the German-speaking region. Alfred Flechtheim was particularly enthusiastic about the *Büste der Venus mit Fransen*, usually referred to by him as the Venus Head. The plaster bust was finished around 1921 and in November 1928 the artist completed it by rendering the sketchily modelled hair more precise (ills.). In 1928, on the occasion of Maillol's solo exhibition in Berlin, Alfred Flechtheim published an oeuvre catalogue (cf. publication Maillol, Galerie Alfred Flechtheim, Berlin, 1928). Flechtheim sold the first bronze to the Institute of Arts in Detroit in 1929. That same year, he sold another to the Stuttgart collector Hugo Borst. In the catalogue to the exhibition "Kleinplastik" (1930) in Flechtheim's Dusseldorf gallery, the Venus

Head is listed as a work in Alfred Flechtheim's private collection (cf. ill. label E. 3995 on the bottom of the sculpture; E stands for Eigentum (property) Flechtheim). In 1932, Flechtheim, who was suffering due to the economic crisis, offered the bust to Oskar Reinhart in Winterthur, who for his part had repeatedly acquired works by Maillol, among others, from Alfred Flechtheim. The bust was not sold, and so Flechtheim offered it to the Kunstmuseum Basel in 1933, where it was to be found between 1933 and 1939 on loan from Alfred Flechtheim and, finally, from Eduard von der Heydt. In 1939, the *Büste der Venus mit Fransen* entered the collection of the Kunstmuseum Luzern initially as a deposit by Eduard von der Heydt.

Eduard von der Heydt – Patron and Businessman

Eduard von der Heydt (1882–1964) was a German banker, art collector and patron of the arts. He studied law and political science, and in 1903 joined his father's bank. Taking his father as a model, he began to build up an art collection of his own early on in his life. He wanted to create a so-called "World Art Collection" and therefore bought largely non-European art. In 1926, the banker acquired the Monte Verità estate in Ascona, where he then spent most of the time.

Eduard von der Heydt set up private banks in London, Amsterdam, Zandvoort and Berlin, which were managed partly with the involvement of the Thyssen brothers. Until 1943, he was on the supervisory board of the August Thyssen Bank AG, which did business with the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP). His connections with the National Socialist system were known. Between 1933 and 1939, he was a member of the NSDAP, whereby what was of importance to him were the idea of socially belonging and the associated business networking. Having gained Swiss nationality in April 1937, he became a member of the Swiss «Bund treuer Eidgenossen nationalsozialistischer Weltanschauung» (Association of staunch Confederates with a National-Socialist World View). At the same time, Eduard von der Heydt maintained contacts with business partners who were often Jewish.

In response to the National Socialist cultural policy, Eduard von der Heydt pursued a sophisticated lending policy with his almost 2,500 works of art. Those objects which did not correspond to the German taste being propagated at the time he removed from the German museums and stored them in about 70 institutions scattered throughout Europe until the end of the 1930s. After the Second World War, Eduard von der Heydt donated his collection of non-European art to the City of Zurich, the European art went to his hometown of Wuppertal. The donation was essential for the foundation of the Museum Rietberg in Zurich in 1952. Furthermore, he gave the Monte Verità estate in Ascona to the Canton of Ticino. Although to a certain degree Eduard von der Heydt did a lot for Jewish friends, his decisions were made primarily to foster his own business interests, profit and the expansion of his collection.

The Gallery Owner Alfred Flechtheim and the Collector Eduard von der Heydt

Eduard von der Heydt's father had already bought works from Alfred Flechtheim. What linked the gallery-owner Alfred Flechtheim and the collector Eduard von der Heydt was their common interest in non-European art. The two maintained a lively business relationship throughout their lives. Eduard von der Heydt bought works by, among others, Munch, Gris and Picasso from Alfred Flechtheim and at the same time acted as a lender for Flechtheim's gallery exhibitions.

How Maillol's Bust entered the collection of the Kunstmuseum Luzern

Countless letters testify to Alfred Flechtheim's financial distress as of 1933. Letters to Otto Fischer, director of the Kunstmuseum Basel, prove that Alfred Flechtheim wanted to sell the museum the *Büste der Venus mit Fransen*, which had been on loan to the collection since at least April 1933. In the letters, the gallery owner offered Maillol's bust for 2,500 Reichsmark. Earlier he had demanded 5,000 to 6,000 Reichsmark for similar items. Otto Fischer did not react to the offer. Of necessity, in September 1933 Alfred Flechtheim pledged the bust for a loan from the Von der Heydt Bank in Zandvoort. The precise conditions of this loan are unknown. On 26 January 1934, Eduard von der Heydt wrote to Otto Fischer: "The Maillol bronze about which we

corresponded a short time ago is definitely in the possession of the Von der Heydt Bank N.V. Zandvoort. Mr. Flechtheim has relinquished his claims. I will leave the bronze with you on loan for the moment.” So the bust, along with works by Paul Cézanne, Eduard Manet and Vincent van Gogh, among others, remained in the Kunstmuseum Basel on loan from Eduard von der Heydt until 1939.

During the war years, numerous works of art were also deposited in the Kunstmuseum Luzern, above all by private persons, for example, Eduard von der Heydt, Oskar Reinhart or Hedy and Arthur Hahnloser from Winterthur. As of 1939, Eduard von der Heydt stored his art collection, including the *Büste der Venus mit Fransen*, at the Kunstmuseum Luzern. In 1946 he donated it to the Kunstmuseum Luzern “as an expression of his gratitude for the careful maintenance of various valuable works of foreign art given on loan during the war years.”

Exchange with the Heirs of Alfred Flechtheim

Aristide Maillol’s *Büste der Venus mit Fransen* is actually a typical example of “Fluchtgut” (flight art): Alfred Flechtheim lived in exile as of 1933 because of persecution by the National Socialists. The sculpture was in Switzerland at least by April 1933, where it was safe from seizure by the National Socialists. However, Alfred Flechtheim suffered considerable property losses due to persecution: his galleries were wound up and he had to sell private property below the going market price. His economic existence was therefore precarious and he felt forced to transfer the bust to his creditors.

The Kunstmuseum Luzern no longer distinguishes between losses due to persecution (Raubkunst) in the German sphere of influence, and losses incurred in supposedly safe countries (Fluchtgut) as of 1933. Instead, it orientates itself in all cases around the guidelines of the Washington Principles. Each individual case is to be examined against this backdrop, and the question to be asked is what a possible “just and fair solution” with the heirs could look like in the case of a restitution claim. Furthermore, in the case of a change of owner, should there be any indication of loss or dispossession as a result of Nazi persecution, the Kunstmuseum Luzern should in future, within the scope of its possibilities, also actively seek out heirs.