

Infectious enthusiasm

The art collection of the Hilti Art Foundation today comprises around 250 internationally acclaimed paintings, sculptures and objects. 33 of them are on display in the current exhibition *Epidermis – Conditio humana – Cosmos* through October 11, 2020 in their own building, which is affiliated to Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein. Michael Hilti, President of the Foundation, and his wife Caroline reveal how they gain access to modern art, what criteria apply when buying new works, and how they incorporate art in their everyday lives.

Mr. Hilti, how is your interest in visual arts expressed?

MH: Growing up, art has always been a part of my life, even in childhood. The same is true for my wife. So we live with art and gripple with it. Art always expresses and mirrors the culture at the point of time of its origination. Thus it's also a testament of history.

Mrs. Hilti, by now the fifth exhibition is about to open its doors. Is that particular moment still exciting for you?

CH: Yes, that is always exciting, because each exhibition is different, shows works in a different context and thus with a different perception and impact. There is a special charm to it to show already familiar works in a totally different environment with new works.

In particular, modern and contemporary art does not open up to the viewer straightaway. How do you develop a connection to the works?

MH: That is a challenge that every viewer of modern art faces. And there are many works I do not develop any connection with. But that is not bad because, of course, everyone has their own preferences. I want to live with art. Consequently, I prefer artworks that inspire me and put me in a good mood. Moreover, one develops a connection over time and throughout the experiences made as a collector. In connection with this, I purchase works today that I would never have bought 20 years ago. The eye of the collector is capable of learning.

Could you make friends with persons who can not relate to art whatsoever?

CH: Yes, of course. There are other topics and hobbies that can shape friendships. But we can hardly conceal our enthusiasm for art, so it certainly has an infectious effect on our environment. I could not think of a friend right off the bat who had no access or connection to art.

Imagine, you could – for whatever reason – save only three pieces of your collection: which one would that be?

MH: You kind of caught me off guard here, because I really like them all. So it would depend on the circumstances: Is the financial value the deciding factor, does the selection depend on size or transportability, or is there a special story tied to the work? But I would have a particularly hard time to part ways with objects of artists, with whom I enjoy a personal relationship, be it Gotthard Graubner, Max Bill, Gottfried Honegger – we even founded a museum for children in France together – Sean Scully, Imi Knoebel, Heinz Mack, Keith Sonnier, Georg Malin, Hanna Roedle or Thomas Struth, just to name a few.

Should art be allowed to do virtually everything?

CH: Art should not become kind of a vacuum in which all our values are thrown overboard. Among other things, art has the task of sensitizing us to the problems of our world and society. But using art for purely sensational purposes would clearly be crossing a line. Here the question of whether this is still art at all would be valid. Or if the term art is misused to sanctify being naughty.

Who decides which art works should be acquired for the Hilti Art Foundation collection?

MH: Actually, three collections are united within the scope of the Hilti Art Foundation: the collection of the family, the collection of my recently deceased sister Ursula, and the collection of me and my wife.

As far as the collection of the Hilti family is concerned, there is a clear strategy for determining what is of interest for the collection with regard to what type of art, from which time period it is, and by which artists created it. Naturally, the quality of the works plays a particularly important role and this also entails works that we can identify with – works that we want to live with. In the end, the decision is made by our art advisory board that is composed of experts. And if no agreement can be made, then a work is also not purchased.

Noone is a stranger to "screwing up" a purchase of shoes or clothing. Have things like that ever happened to you at buying art – whether it was for yourself or the Hilti Art Foundation?

CH: No, thanks to our expert advisory board, that has not happened yet. We've also never resold a work from our own collection. The same applies to the collection of the family trust. The danger of falling prey to forgery is ultimately bigger than making a really bad decision that you will live to rue.

There is a studio in the new exhibition building that is intended to convey art to all age groups. Why should children and young people occupy themselves with visual art?

MH: Art is always a testimony of the culture in which we are living. However, it is also a direct expression of our society. Therefore, it is particularly important for young people to occupy themselves with visual art.

And what is the feedback as of yet?

CH: It is very important to us to promote creativity and interest of people in art. We are very happy that this offer is well received and that the exhibitions and the studio are regularly visited by kindergartens, school kids and groups of all ages – up to seniors.

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