



Fig. 1: Museum benefactress Heidi Horten (seated) with founding director Agnes Husslein-Arco

FOREWORD

Agnes Husslein-Arco

The collection is the heart and soul of a museum, shaping its character and giving it an identity and standing in a national and international context. But a collection should never stagnate; it must remain dynamic and engaging, which is what museums achieve through their changing exhibitions. Collecting and showcasing go hand in hand, driven by motivations and interests as diverse as the collectors themselves. The Heidi Horten Collection is the result of one woman's passion, steered by personal taste, to build an internationally recognized art collection. Heidi Horten's path to creating her collection was unique. In her childhood, art played an important role for her parents—especially her father, who worked as an engraver—which instilled in her a lifelong belief that art is an essential part of life. However, it was not until the 1990s that she began to collect with a purpose, which introduced new and exciting goals into her life as an art buyer. At that time, as a specialist in modern and contemporary art at Sotheby's, I had the privilege of advising and assisting her in building her collection from the ground up.

HISTORY OF THE COLLECTION—THE BEGINNINGS

In the early 1990s, Heidi Horten was focused on broadening the range of works by artists already in her core holdings, and thus acquired additional pieces by Marc Chagall, Emil Nolde, Raoul, Jean Dufy, and Moïse Kisling. Initially, there was no clear plan or strategy behind the acquisitions. The goal was to furnish newly designed living spaces, so personal taste and the collector's penchants were paramount in selecting works. At first, she focused on established artists, but as time went on, her approach changed and became more daring. At a London auction in 1996, some thirty modern and contemporary art masterpieces were purchased—anonimously—in one fell swoop, instantly elevating the character of the collection. This coup caused a sensation in the art world and generated widespread media attention. On June 30, 1996, in their summary of the London auction, the *New York Times* speculated that the "mystery buyer" would eventually open a museum or set up a foundation for art. That decision would come more than two decades later. As a result of the

FRIEDRICH VON AMERLING

1803 Vienna (AT) – 1887 Vienna (AT)

Der Brief

The Letter

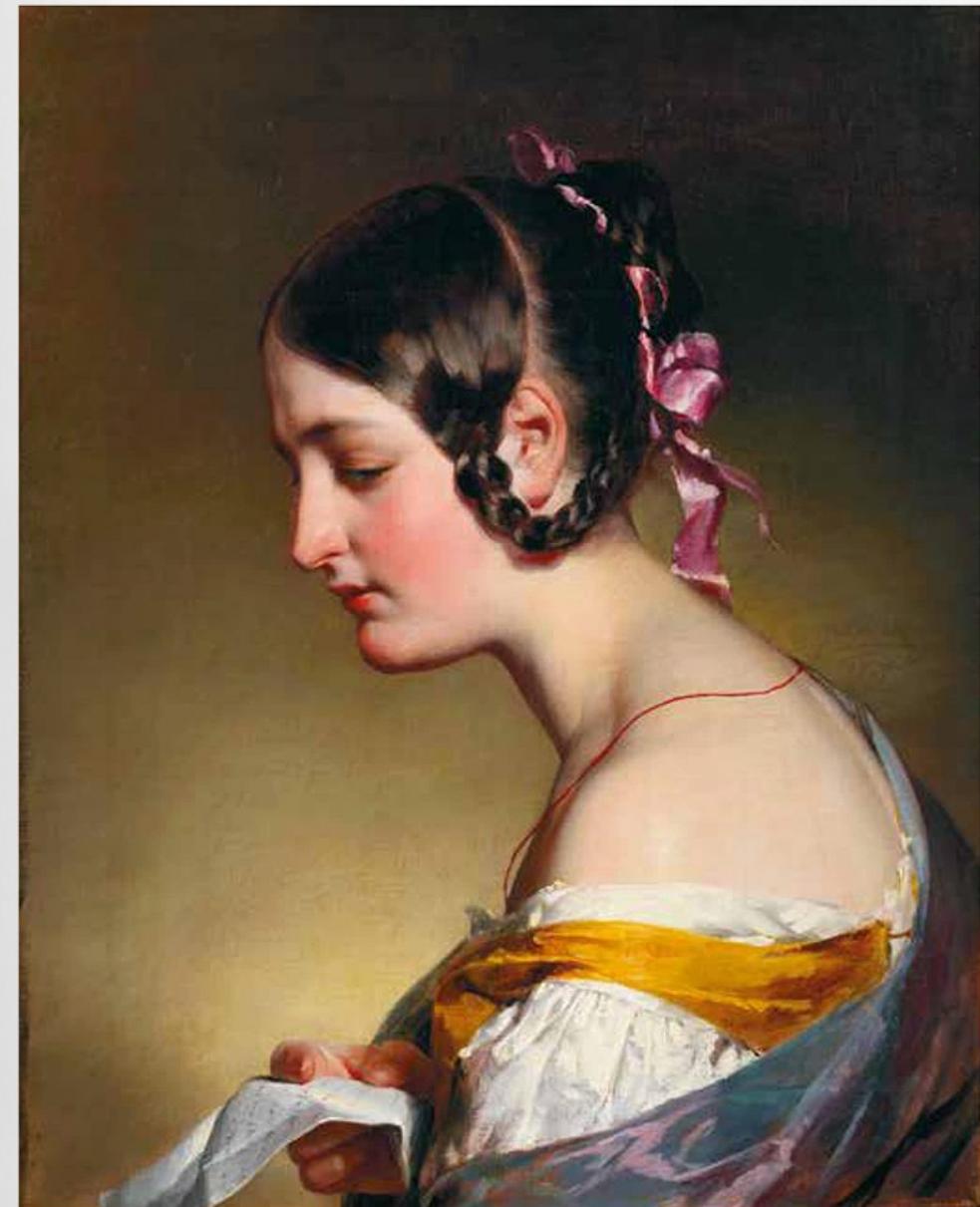
1837

Oil on canvas, 58 x 47 cm

Acquired 2021

A woman is seated, seemingly unaware of her surroundings. Her head is slightly tilted, and her eyes are cast downward. She holds a letter she must have just finished reading in her right hand. Her hair is parted in the middle and then parted again from one ear to the other, a style typical of the Biedermeier era. A braided pigtail runs from her temple to the back of her head, where it disappears into a chignon held in place by a silk ribbon tied into a bow. At first glance, her clothing seems a bit careless when compared to her hairstyle. The woman's blouse and dress are open at the back. Both garments have slipped off her shoulders, giving the picture an undeniably erotic component, subtly emphasized by the silk ribbon that lightly touches the woman's neck and a draped red cord drawing the eye to her décolleté: despite the innocuous appearance of the picture, Friedrich von Amerling left nothing to chance.

After studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Amerling spent some years in Prague before moving to London and Paris from 1827 to 1828, where he was greatly influenced artistically. During his stay in these cities, he had the opportunity to observe the works of Thomas Lawrence, a renowned portrait painter of his era. While in Paris Amerling also contacted Horace Vernet, a prominent history painter, who advised him to copy the old masters in the Louvre (an essential part of an artist's training at the time). Upon his return to Vienna, Amerling was commissioned to paint a larger-than-life portrait of Emperor Franz I in 1832. This portrait marked a turning point in Amerling's career and propelled him to the forefront of Vienna's portraitists. With the decline of Biedermeier modesty, the nobility and bourgeoisie, including pioneers of the Industrial Revolution, demanded portraits that accentuated their social standing, mirroring Lawrence's iconic portraits. However, it is unlikely that any woman of high social standing such as a noblewoman or a banker's wife would have consented to be depicted in the same manner as the girl holding the letter. The picture is not a portrait in the classical sense but rather an idealized image based on an anonymous young woman who posed for the painting. Here, Amerling is more interested in the woman's reaction to the letter's content. She seems lost in thought, perhaps thinking about her lover. RJ



MAURICE DENIS

1870 Granville (FR) – 1943 Paris (FR)

Saint-Sacrement à l'autel bleu

The Holy Sacrament at the Blue Altar

c. 1898/99

Oil on canvas, 37.5 x 31 cm

Acquired 1996

From an early age, Maurice Denis—devout Catholic, multitalented artist, theorist, and critic—had a strong desire to create religious paintings. Over the years, this calling became increasingly important to him, leading him to establish Ateliers d'art sacré in 1919.

The renowned Parisian art dealer Ambroise Vollard acquired *Saint-Sacrement à l'autel bleu* shortly after its completion. In his inventory of receipts, Vollard listed it as “Communantes” (Communion girls). This additional title, combined with the spring-like setting surrounding the altar, strongly suggests that the painting depicts the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament on Corpus Christi Day, the solemn conclusion of the Communion season. The altar boys can be seen on the bottom left, kneeling on the steps leading up to the altar and waving incense to draw the eye upward in a diagonally ascending line toward the priest. Dressed in a golden choir robe with a white humeral veil, the priest approaches the altar with a raised monstrance in his hand to place it there. The protagonist's size and central position dominate the composition, which is further amplified by the skillful use of line and the smooth transition from dark to light areas. A soaring effect is created that lends additional grandeur to the mystical act. The somewhat naive and indistinct rendering of the few figures—even the participating nuns and girls at the bottom of the picture are reduced to their veiled heads—is indebted still to the aesthetics of the Nabi period. The Nabis (a Hebrew term for “prophets”) were a group of artists that had existed since 1888/89, of which Denis was one of the founders. The surrounding vegetation in the painting, however, with its flowering shrubs, is painted in a Neo-Impressionist technique. The predominant colors—gold for the divine and heavenly and blue for contemplation, devotion, and the earthly connection with the supernatural—have a high symbolic value. This small devotional painting of a personal nature demonstrates Maurice Denis's love of church festivities, which he had noted at the age of fifteen. It expresses his deep religiosity, a driving force behind his art. AN



1 See Maurice Denis, *Journal. I: 1884–1904* (Paris, 1957), p. 35.