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book review of

The Thannhauser Gallery: Marketing Van Gogh edited by Stefan Koldehoff and Chris Stolwijk

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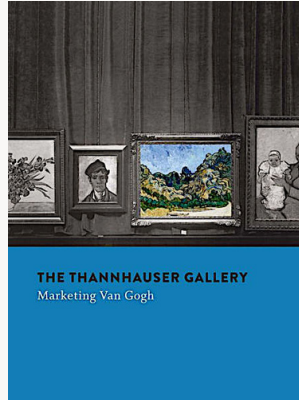
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Stefan Koldehoff and Chris Stolwijk, editors,
The Thannhauser Gallery: Marketing Van Gogh.
Brussels: Mercatorfonds and Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2017.
327 pp.; 147 color and 31 b&w illus.; chronology; list of clients; concordance; bibliography;
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In recent decades, the history of collecting has increasingly become the focus of art historical research, beginning with the study of the creation of private art collections as well as the history of museum collections. Although both of these research areas can be fraught with issues of confidentiality and security concerns, none are more so than the commercial history of art dealers and galleries. *The Thannhauser Gallery: Marketing Van Gogh* is a welcome first step to addressing that subject.

The opportunity to present this material would not have been possible without the donation of the Thannhauser Gallery archive to the Central Archive for German and International Art Market Research (ZADIK) Cologne in 2005.^[1] The news of this donation caught the attention of Stefan Koldehoff, a Cologne-based journalist and researcher who is also the art editor of Deutschlandfunk (German Public Radio). As the author of numerous books on art, including two on Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), Koldehoff was particularly curious about the van Gogh paintings that were handled by the Thannhauser Gallery in the first half of the twentieth century. After discussing ways to present the material with Günter Herzog, Head of Research at ZADIK, he proposed the idea of a book to the Van Gogh Museum. The result is a collection of scholarly essays, a catalogue of the van Gogh paintings that were once owned by the Thannhauser Gallery (and some that turned out not to be by van Gogh after all), and a chronology, client list, and concordance that provide essential tools for understanding the information from the Gallery's archive. In short, this is a working document for art historical research as well as a fascinating story of German art dealing during a time of historical upheaval and chaos.

The scope of the book is ambitious: the authors set out to examine the history of the Thannhauser Gallery, focusing on its promotion of van Gogh's art, but they also hoped to present a fuller understanding of how art dealers conducted their business and how German

dealers worked collaboratively to establish a canon of modern art within a culture that was officially opposed to modernist ideas. The first chapter “An Invaluable Resource: Preliminary Notes on the Thannhauser Archive” introduces the reader to the background of the gallery and offers a glimpse of the topics that will be addressed in detail in later chapters. Authors Koldehoff and Chris Stolwijk, General Director of the RKD-Netherlands Institute for Art History, set the stage with an overview of the practices that create a successful art gallery, noting that marketing must be “founded on trust between a company and its customers” (14). [2] This is fundamental in a business that depends on exclusivity and confidentiality, and often involves large sums of money. The ledgers, stock books, photographs, exhibition catalogues, and client files in the Thannhauser archive provide an unparalleled resource for studying exactly how the gallery functioned.

The authors examine the Thannhauser legacy from its beginnings in 1905 when Heinrich Thannhauser partnered with Franz Josef Brakl in opening an art gallery in Munich to the final years of the business in New York City in the 1960s. The story of the gallery is occasionally complicated, not least because of the ever expanding anti-Semitism in Germany, but Koldehoff and Stolwijk maintain a clear narrative thread so that readers can follow the development of the business as it unfolds in a very uncertain social and political environment. In 1909 Heinrich Thannhauser parted ways with Brakl in order to open the *Moderne Galerie Heinrich Thannhauser* at Theatinerstrasse 7. In 1912, his son Justin joined him as an assistant in the gallery, working there until 1914 when he reported for military service in Kaiser Wilhelm II’s army. When he returned from the war, he began his art historical education in earnest, traveling to Berlin, Florence, and Paris where he studied with some of the legendary pioneers in the field: art historians Heinrich Wölfflin and Adolph Goldschmidt and French philosopher Henri Bergson. In addition, he built on the relationships with the art dealers Paul Cassirer and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler that his father had already established.

Heinrich Thannhauser’s goal was to create a gallery space that “prioritized the study of great works of art” and that provided a venue for emerging modernist avant-garde artists (20). To that end, he hosted the first Munich exhibitions of *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider) in 1909 (and in 1911); and one of the first major shows of Pablo Picasso in Germany in 1913. In his own words, Heinrich Thannhauser’s philosophy was that: “The gallery will be ruled by artistic progress, the recognition of artistic individuality, and the promotion of aspiring individual artists. . . . The *Moderne Galerie* will draw into its sphere of interest all that is fresh, powerful, distinct, modern in the best sense, whether or not an illustrious ‘name’ stands behind it” (21). [3]

In 1917, Justin took on the responsibility for expanding the *Moderne Galerie*’s visibility among potential US clients, and also began to investigate the possibility of opening a branch gallery in Lucerne, Switzerland. He moved to Lucerne in 1919, running the gallery with his cousin Siegfried Rosengart until 1921 when his father’s failing health required his return to Munich. Rosengart would continue to manage the Lucerne gallery for years to come, serving clients such as the Cone sisters from Baltimore and Samuel Courtauld from London, to whom he sold Edouard Manet’s painting, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* in 1926 (22). Back in Munich, Justin and Heinrich continued to promote the work of Impressionists, post-Impressionists, and the next generation of contemporary artists, including Picasso. The

cultural freedom of the city, however, was diminishing in direct proportion to the rise of the Nazi party, along with the anti-Semitism of the citizenry. When the Thannhausers decided to close the gallery in Munich and move to the more sophisticated and tolerant city of Berlin, the public reaction was immediate: “This news strikes like a trumpet blast all those who know full well what Munich is losing with the departure of Thannhauser, this outstanding patron of the arts, and with the closing of his gallery, which is inextricably tied to Munich’s history and her artistic reputation” (22). So wrote the editor-in-chief of the *Münchner Sonntags-Anzeiger* in September 1928 when the news became public. At this point, Heinrich Thannhauser retired from the business and Rosengart became the sole proprietor of the gallery in Lucerne, changing the name to Galerie Rosengart in September 1928. The Moderne Galerie opened its doors in Berlin under the direction of Justin Thannhauser and his chief business manager, Paul Roemer. The relationship between the Berlin and Lucerne galleries remained extremely close, with routine consultations about potential clients and exhibitions as well as frequent transfers of paintings from one location to the other (23). In addition, Thannhauser and Rosengart shared joint ownership of artworks well into the late 1940s; this strategy, which began as a method of financing the purchase of expensive pieces, would also become a means of safeguarding ownership—to some degree—as the Nazis assumed power in Germany.

Like his father, Justin Thannhauser believed that a gallery should be designed to support the art on display, and fortunately for scholars today, there are numerous photographs of these spaces in the Thannhauser archive. The elegant façade of the Berlin gallery, at Bellevuestrasse 13, is especially worthy of note as an example of modernist design; a single pane of curved plate glass, resting on a low stone base, forms the street wall of the building, welcoming viewers to step inside and enjoy the exhibition (56–57). Although architectural design is not the subject of this book, the visual evidence provided by the abundant photographs suggests that Thannhauser was well aware of modernist developments at the Bauhaus in Dessau, and most likely, the work of French art déco designers as well.

During the 1930s, Thannhauser was very conscious of the volatile political situation that he faced from the ruling Nazi party; not only was he Jewish, but he was also promoting the so-called “degenerate” art that Adolf Hitler despised—and he was conducting business in the capital of the Third Reich. As a result, the art dealer kept a low profile and maintained a fluid movement of his artworks between Berlin and Lucerne; he also established collaborative relationships with George Petit Galerie in Paris and with Federico C. Müller’s gallery in Buenos Aires. Wisely, he began renting an apartment in Paris in May 1933 in preparation for emigration; in the spring of 1937, he and his family moved to Paris, dissolving the gallery in Berlin and transporting as much of the gallery archives as possible to his new home. In spite of his efforts, however, the Nazis “detained” thirteen crates of material and eleven paintings (25–28).

Justin Thannhauser began again in Paris, but it quickly became apparent that there would be little security there either. In 1938, he shipped a collection of Edgar Degas sculptures to the Leicester Gallery in London; and ninety artworks to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. He worked with many other art dealers in Paris to safeguard their holdings, sometimes sending works to museums such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York or locations in South America for safekeeping. Securing and protecting the artwork continued throughout

1938 and 1939 as the urgency of the situation increased. Then, in August of 1939, Thannhauser and his wife traveled to Geneva with one of his clients, the actor Edward G. Robinson and his wife, to see an exhibition of paintings from the Prado Museum; there, they were stranded as France and Great Britain declared war against Germany. None of them could return to Paris, and after the Nazis occupied the city in May 1940, Thannhauser decided to move to New York. He and his family arrived there on January 9, 1941. Everything that remained in their Paris home was destroyed or confiscated.

After settling in New York, Thannhauser decided to work exclusively as a private art dealer. His home at 12 East 67th Street became a destination for artists, musicians, actors, art historians, and scientists who enjoyed both the art on display and the conversations. It seemed an auspicious new beginning. Thannhauser's oldest son, Heinz, had graduated from Cambridge University in 1938 with a degree in art history and then received his masters degree from Harvard in 1941; shortly thereafter, he was offered a professorship at Tulane University in New Orleans. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Heinz enlisted in the US Army and died on August 15, 1944. The loss of his son seems to have been the motivating factor in Thannhauser's decision to sell 129 artworks in 1945 at Parke-Bernet. From this point forward, he focused his attention on trying to recover the artwork and archival materials that the Nazis had stolen from him, both in Berlin and Paris, but without much success. His work as an art dealer became more sporadic. A further tragedy occurred in 1952 when his second son, Michel, committed suicide; and again in 1960 when his wife Käthe died. Thannhauser married again in 1962, to Hilde Breitwisch from Cologne, and together they set up a bequest to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum that remains the core of the museum's modernist collection today. Thannhauser officially retired from art dealing in 1971, although he had fundamentally wrapped up his business dealings when he made the bequest to the Guggenheim in the 1960s. He and Hilde moved back to Switzerland where he died in 1976.

The history of the Thannhauser Gallery was unavoidably entrapped by the resurgence of fascism in Germany, which complicated the art historical context in which it operated. By explicating this situation clearly at the outset, however, Stolwijk and Koldehoff established the parameters within which German art dealers worked during the first half of the twentieth century. In subsequent chapters, they turn more specifically to the Thannhauser Gallery's role in the marketing of van Gogh's art. Stolwijk's essay "Trading van Gogh in a Changing World" explores how van Gogh's work came to be of interest to Thannhauser and how the gallery developed into one of the leading promoters of the artist. Van Gogh's art was first shown at Thannhauser's *Moderne Galerie* in Munich in 1908 where it was well received by the community of avant-garde artists then gathering in Bavaria. Heinrich Thannhauser saw van Gogh as part of an international development in the visual arts, and he was eager to promote the Dutch artist in the gallery, but he had no relationship with Jo van Gogh-Bonger, Vincent's sister-in-law and the owner of the vast majority of his work at the time. After some unsatisfactory forays into sending van Gogh paintings to large art shows in Munich, van Gogh-Bonger chose to work only with the Berlin art dealer Paul Cassirer in Germany (41). Thannhauser thus sought out the French art dealers Bernheim-Jeune and Ambrose Vollard to acquire works by van Gogh in the years before World War I. Following the war, he initiated contact with Cassirer, purchasing eight van Gogh paintings from him before 1920.

From the day that Moderne Galerie opened its doors, Thannhauser implemented a series of marketing strategies that remain the standard for many art galleries even now. He produced well designed and well written exhibition catalogues, and solicited reviews from local, national, and international art critics and art historians. The gallery spaces were uncluttered and spacious; no visually overwhelming ‘salon hangs’ were permitted. Perhaps more unusual was Thannhauser’s willingness to open his gallery space to artist’s societies for meetings, among them Die Blaue Reiter. But the heart of Thannhauser’s strategy was the *kundenkartei*, a system of index cards detailing not only client information about sales and purchases, but expert reports, photographs, and research on potential buyers. In short, it was an early type of database. Thannhauser allowed only his most trusted colleagues to have access to the *kundenkartei*, and even fewer to actually write notes on the cards. Significantly for those trying to track lost artworks today, the *kundenkartei* frequently contained proof of ownership, something that might not be available anywhere else because of the destruction during World War II (57).

Although twenty van Gogh paintings were sold through the Moderne Galerie before 1920, it was during the next decade that prices for the artist’s work would skyrocket. In part, this was because of the positive reviews that appeared in newspapers and art journals; and there was a spate of new books about the artist by respected critics such as Julius Meier-Graefe, who noted that prices for van Gogh’s paintings had risen “400–600 fold” since his death in 1890 (65). The publication of Jacob-Baart de la Faille’s catalogue raisonné in 1928 generated even greater excitement. The anomaly for Thannhauser was that prices on van Gogh’s artwork were dropping in Munich, largely because of the rejection of modernism by the Nazis. When the Berlin gallery opened in 1928, there were eleven paintings by van Gogh in stock—only six of them sold. However, the market in Paris and New York was much stronger, and Thannhauser sold forty paintings between 1937 and the 1960s, most of them after the end of World War II (52–53).

The third chapter, “Marketing Modernism: The Thannhauser Gallery and its Clients” discusses some of the political, economic, and social concerns that the gallery faced as a promoter of modernism in Germany. During the opening decades of the twentieth century, Kaiser Wilhelm II opposed modernism in general, describing the new developments in the French avant-garde as “squalid art from Paris” (64). The German public was not demonstrably more supportive. Art dealers banded together to counteract this attitude, working to create a market for modernist art among private collectors as much as possible. One example of this networking among dealers occurred in the late 1920s when six small paintings by van Gogh appeared suddenly on the market. Jacob-Baart de la Faille announced their arrival shortly before the publication of his catalogue raisonné in an article for *Der Cicerone*, a popular art periodical. He authenticated the pieces and included them in his catalogue. The art dealer who brought the paintings to de la Faille’s attention was Hans Bammann, of Galerie Hans Bammann in Düsseldorf. As Koldehoff notes in the essay “In his efforts to get the pictures sold, Bammann also turned to colleagues such as the gallery owner Johann Heinrich Sigmund Gildemeister in Hamburg and to museum directors such as Hans Posse of the Gemäldegalerie in Dresden, Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub of the Kunsthalle in Mannheim and Charles Aitken of the Tate Gallery in London” (70). All of this specific and detailed information came from the carefully written notes on Thannhauser’s *kundenkartei*.

The third chapter wraps up with a discussion of forgeries and the prevalence of an elusive anonymous private collector from Russia in the art trade. Forgeries of van Gogh's work were inevitable in the 1920s when the artist's paintings began to command high prices, and in the years before the catalogue raisonné, there was no reliable way to verify provenance. Scandal erupted in January 1928 just before the opening of an exhibition at Kunst Salon Paul Cassirer in Berlin when his staff identified four paintings as forgeries; all of them were on loan from the collector Otto Wacker. Ultimately, there were thirty forgeries identified, embarrassing the experts who had authenticated them and the galleries who sold them; and resulting in a police investigation of Wacker for fraud and forgery. In the aftermath of this very public forgery scandal, both art dealers and potential buyers were leery of "new" van Gogh paintings appearing on the market.

Authentication and clear provenance became essential to the sale of any van Gogh artwork, especially in the wake of Wacker's forgery trial in 1932. Many of Wacker's forgeries were said to come from an anonymous "private collector from Russia" who required confidentiality for fear of reprisals in his native country (76). It turned out that Wacker was not the only person who used this hermetic Russian collector to provide provenance; in fact, it seems to have been almost a code phrase meaning "I don't want to reveal the owner." In the case of Wacker, this was obvious deceit with the intention to defraud the public, but there were other cases that were not so clear cut. Hans Bammann, the dealer who had discovered the six early van Gogh paintings, for example, had accepted a provenance with a mysterious Russian named Bogdanoff listed as an owner. He went to great lengths to investigate the situation because of its similarity to Wacker's claims about an anonymous Russian collector, and eventually was able to establish that van Gogh had given the paintings to a poor French family that had sheltered him during a rough time in his life. The family was hiding behind a non-existent Russian because they were afraid of the taxman, but the paintings were not in the least bit fake.

The last essay in the book is "A Brief History of the Thannhasuer Archive" by Günter Herzog, the Head of Research at ZADIK. He details the transfer of the Thannhauser materials over time, and points out that there is almost nothing from the 1909–19 period in Munich left while the years between 1927 and 1940 are well documented and preserved. He presents examples of how the archival information can be used to develop an understanding of the art market, and of the role of art dealers and galleries in the growth of modernism in the twentieth century. The notations on the *kundenkartei* also fill the gaps in our knowledge about when, where, and how the work of modernist artists was presented in Germany. To support his discussion of the reconstruction of the archive, there are many images of client cards and stock books reproduced at a legible scale. Herzog acknowledges that there are still lacuna in the records, but that the Thannhauser archive nonetheless remains an extensive and valuable resource.

Following these essays is a catalogue of the 107 individual artworks by van Gogh—or presumed to be by van Gogh—that were handled by the Thannhauser galleries. There are both paintings and drawings, and some of them are now recognized as forgeries or simply copies. Each catalogue entry has a detailed provenance, a list of sources from the gallery archive, and a list of references in other publications. This is supplemented by a short essay

about the history of the artwork, always ending with a discussion of where it is located today if possible. The last section of the book is a comprehensive list of Thannhauser's clients and a concordance that correlates the artwork listed in J.-B. de la Faille's catalogue raisonné, de la Faille's later publication *Les faux Van Gogh* (Paris, 1930), and Jan Hulsker's 1996 work, *The New Complete van Gogh, Paintings, Drawings, Sketches*. For the van Gogh researcher, this is a prodigious resource.

The Thannhauser Gallery: Marketing Van Gogh represents a genuine commitment to in-depth and meticulous research, not only by its authors, but also by the Van Gogh Museum. It is rare to find this type of publication in an age of sound bytes and tweets. Kudos must also be given to ZADIK for its mission of making this kind of material accessible to the public and for collaborating on the research project. The Thannhauser archive not only sheds light on the practice of art dealing in the first half of the twentieth century, but also provides us with specific information about individual collectors and artists, as well as a variety of galleries and dealers—and even crooks. The kundenkartei are extraordinarily valuable as historical documents, as are the photographic records of art installations and gallery designs from this period. And as always, stock books, ledgers, and correspondence offer a detailed picture of how the business of art is conducted. For art historians and other scholars, this is a tool that will continue to enlighten and inform us for the indefinite future, and with any luck at all, it will become a model for other organizations to follow.

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Notes

- [1] ZADIK is the acronym for Zentralarchiv für deutsche und internationale Kunstmarktforschung. More information about this archive can be found at www.zadik.info.
- [2] When the Thannhauser publication was first proposed, Chris Stolwijk was the Head of Collections, Presentation and Research at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. Fortunately, he was able to continue his involvement in the project after his move to RKD.
- [3] Original published in Emily D. Bilski, *Die 'Moderne Galerie' von Heinrich Thannhasuer* (Munich: Jewish Museum, 2008), 19–20.