

Alfred Roder Fonds

Chemistry and Art  
More Adventures of a Chemist Collector

Chapter 10 -  
Sumowski

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## Chapter 10

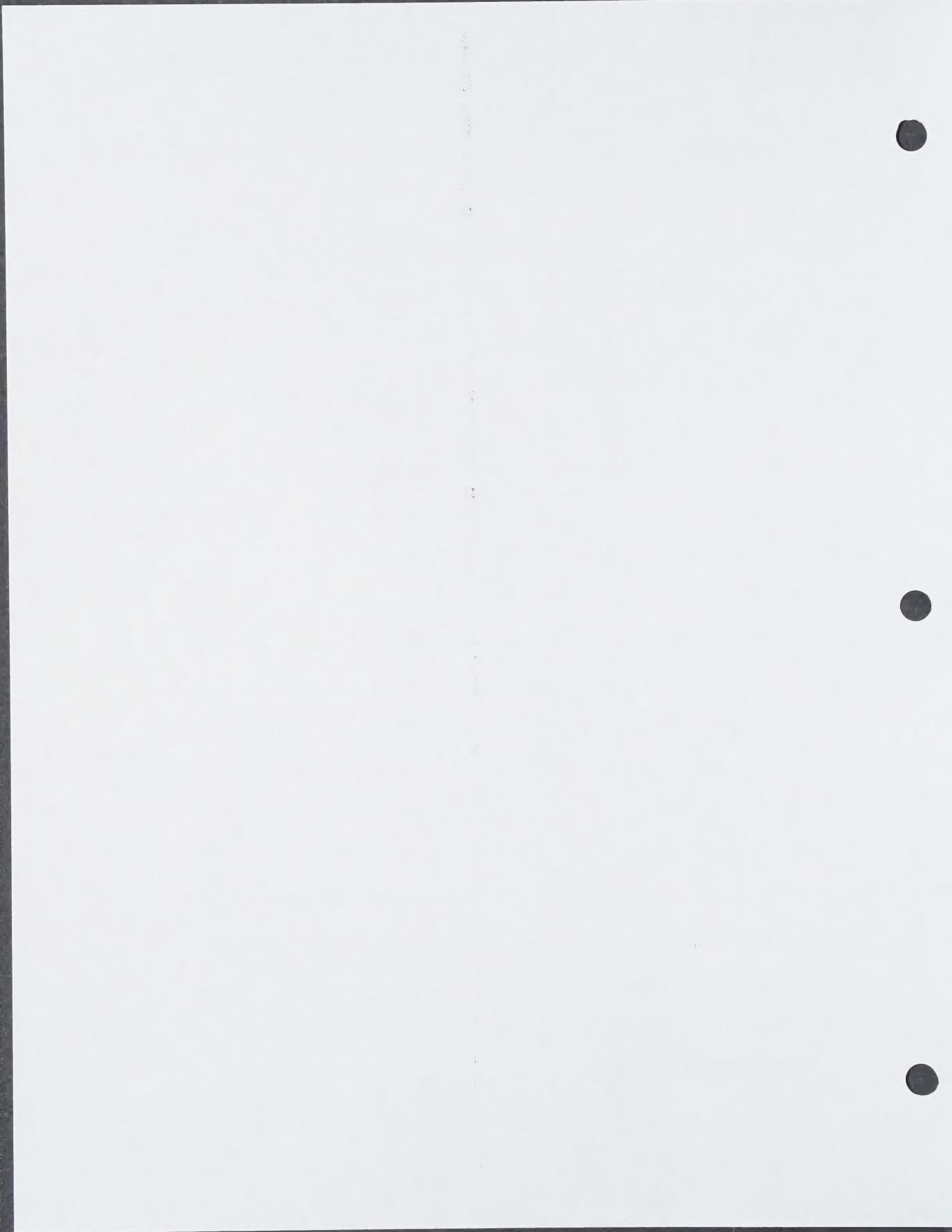
### Sumowski

One of the most helpful and knowledgeable art historians I have ever known is Professor Werner Sumowski <sup>(fig.)</sup> in Stuttgart. He is also the subject of a most unfortunate episode in my life.

In the first volume of my autobiography, I wrote,

I have heard that students, and even some mature adults, are afraid of Werner Sumowski, professor of art history in Stuttgart; they would not be if they knew him well. He looks so impressive, with his shock of white hair, and he speaks and writes very incisively. He has written two encyclopedic works on Rembrandt students, one on their drawings - ten volumes so far - and the other on their paintings, in six volumes. His work on the paintings alone, a Herculean undertaking, contains an enormous amount of information and over 2000 illustrations, many in full color. I have spent many an evening studying these volumes.

Werner does not travel much, preferring to work almost entirely from photographs, and, of course, as with almost every art historian who makes attributions, some of them have been questioned. Job's saying is applicable here: 'Shall we take the good from God and not the bad?' Werner has helped thousands like myself to understand Rembrandt students better.



During the last twenty-five years, we became good friends. I enjoyed sending him detailed information about Rembrandt School paintings in upcoming sales. We exchanged our thoughts about their quality; he gave his opinions about my acquisitions and suggested paintings that he had been shown that I might be interested to buy. We both enjoyed this give and take over many years, and the formal "Herr Dr, Bader ... Sie" of our correspondence moved to a friendly "Lieber Alfred ... Du" basis, unusual with German academics.

Every June, Isabel and I and two Stuttgart friends, Doris and Helge Herd, visited Werner during an afternoon, spent two hours discussing paintings, and then enjoyed a simple supper. For me, these hours were a high point of our European trip, as often the high point of my week's reading was to study his by-now-well-worn six volumes of Rembrandt school paintings, which illustrate over sixty of our paintings.

After his retirement as professor at the University of Stuttgart and the death of his beloved mother-by-adoption with whom he lived, it was clear that he was lonelier and quieter, and at our last parting in June 2003, he seemed so stressed that he mentioned wondering whether we would see each other again.

I began calling him a little more frequently, particularly during the hot summer of 2003, and often thought of one really moving sentence he had written: "Dass Du den alten müden Esel auf Trapp zu bringen versuchst, finde ich rührend. Leider ist die Aussicht auf Erfolg gering." ("I find it really touching that you are trying to move the old, tired donkey. But the chances for success are slight.")





At an auction in London in July 2003, I had met a German dealer, Hans Ellermann, who offered me a painting once attributed to Rembrandt. There are several versions of this study of a bearded man, Bredius 264, and I thought Ellermann's might well be the best version. He had already been given this opinion by Werner and Professor Ernst van de Wetering of the Rembrandt Research Project. Despite this, I did not think it good enough for my own collection and told Ellermann that I felt I could not resell it profitably.

During our discussion, he seemed to believe that the Rembrandt Research Project could never make a mistake. He spoke so highly of the RRP that I felt it appropriate to point out that in fact they had made some mistakes. I mentioned that in 1981, I had written a very strong letter to Ernst van de Wetering about a painting I owned that the RRP had numbered C-22, not by Rembrandt. I had sent Werner a copy of my letter at the time and he had replied, "Your letter to Mr. van de Wetering deserves complete approval." He was harshly critical of their methods in dismissing paintings from Rembrandt's oeuvre. When he had attended a Lievens symposium in Braunschweig, and had been very disappointed in Van de Wetering and Bruyn, he felt completely alienated as a scholar, even referring to himself as a "fossil". All this he expressed in his typically pungent style, not in the least suggesting that this was confidential.

So I sent Ellermann a copy of Werner's 1981 letter, hoping to make him to reconsider, because over the years I often thought of Werner's letter and found it correct and historically important. Since then, my opinion of Ernst van de Wetering has gradually changed, and we have become good friends; Werner's opinion of the RRP has changed radically also.



Sometime later, Werner wrote that he had heard that I had sent one of his letters - he did not know which - to Ellermann, and I replied that I had sent his letter of 1981, which I considered so historically important. His reply showed how I may have erred:

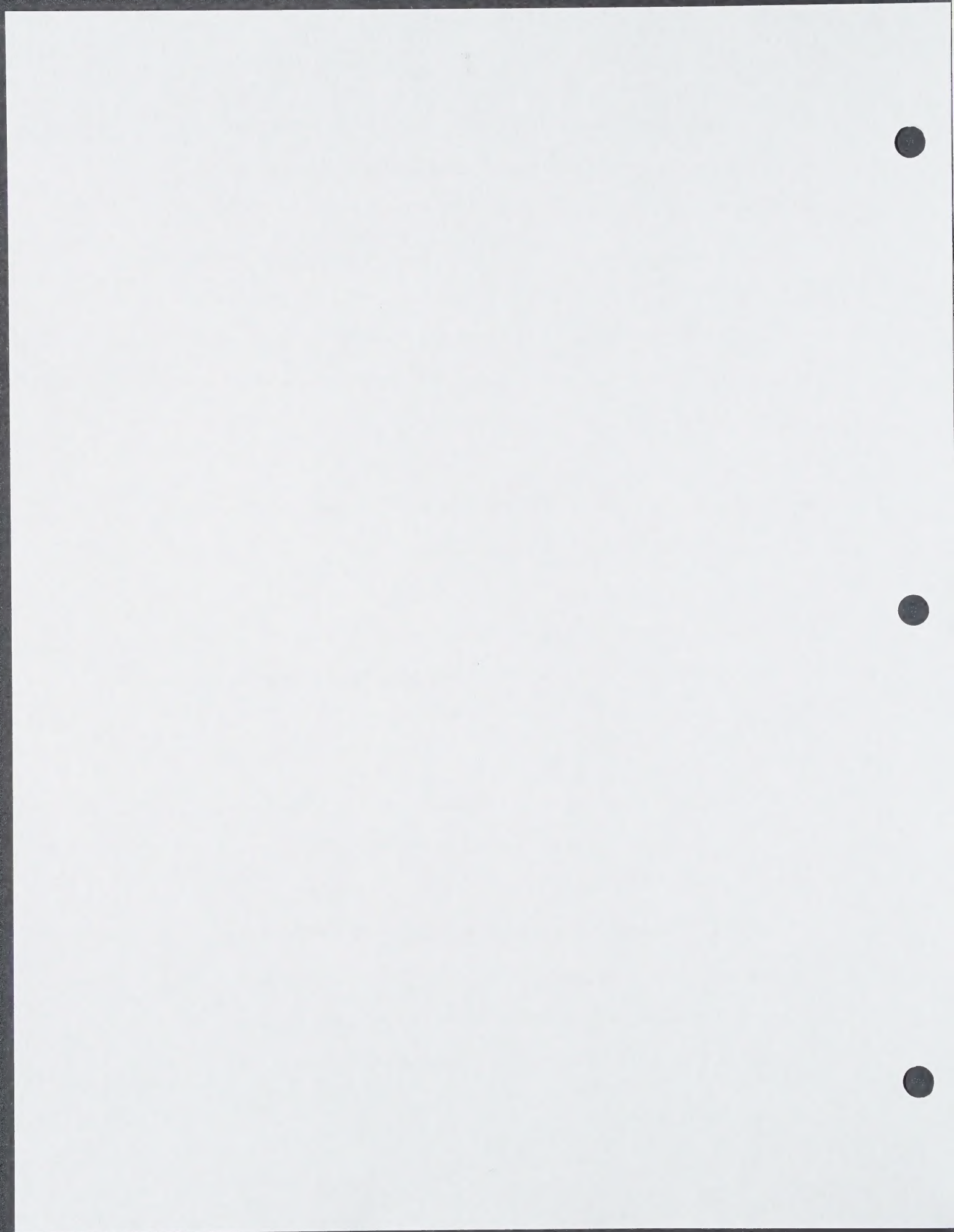
Your letter of 3 September upset me even more. It is true that you regret that what you have done has hurt me, but you do not admit in the slightest that it just is not right to send strangers private and confidential letters where the sender is counting on your discretion.

I just chanced to hear about Ellermann. How do I know that you have not been writing for years to every Tom, Dick, and Harry?

I simply do not understand why you sent this copy to Ellermann. If Ernst van de Wetering praises the painting and if Ellermann thinks the RRP important, there was not reason to send this.

It is absolutely *scandalous* that in 2003 you sent a statement of *April 1981* to someone where you don't know what he will do with it.

I know: he will peddle it around, and what I said about the Amsterdam Project 22 years ago—before the appearance of the first volume, because of negative impressions at the Lievens Symposium will be circulated as my judgment *to-day* about the Corpus. To-day, knowing the publication and being in touch with van de



Wetering, I think totally differently. I can make enemies all by myself; I do not need your indiscretion and your thoughtlessness.

You have deeply disappointed me. I have no confidence in you and really cannot work with you as before. Our association has ended irrevocably.

Best wishes for the future.

Had I known or had any reason to believe that Werner would react in such a manner, I would never have disclosed the contents of his letter.

I have been truly saddened and wrote several times trying to explain and apologize. But each letter was returned unopened. In my last note, I wrote, of course in German, "Both of us are close to the end of life and so I am particularly sorry about my stupidity. What can I say other than 'mea culpa' and my life is poorer without our friendship. Fond regards, your old and stupid friend." I truly regret that an innocent action on my part has so deeply stressed the man whom I so respect and consider my friend.

Sadly, I cannot live my life over again.

