Alfred Bader fonds

Chemistry and Art
More Adventures of a Chemist Collector

Adventures II -
Sumowski

Sandowski

One of the most helpful and knowledgeable art historians I have ever known is Professor Werner Sumowski in Stuttgart.

In my autobiography I had written: "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, illustrates over 2000 examples and contains an enormous amount of information. 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."

Now, sadly, I have to revise one statement. "They would not be [afraid of him] if they knew him well."

During the last 25 years we had become good friends. I tried to help him with detailed information about Rembrandt School paintings in upcoming sales and with obtaining color transparencies for his books without cost. He sent many opinions about my acquisitions and illustrated some 60 of

my paintings in his six volume compendium. A formal "Herr Dr, Bader . . . Sie" 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 in the afternoon, spent two hours discussing paintings and then enjoying a simple supper. These hours were a highpoint of our European trip.

Ever since his retirement from teaching at the University of Stuttgart and the death of his beloved mother-by-adoption with whom he lived, we noticed his becoming lonelier and quieter and at our last parting in June 2003, he wondered whether we would see each other again.

I began calling him more often, 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."

And then, I made a horrible mistake, perhaps the worst I have ever made with a good friend.

At an auction in London in July 2003, I had met a German dealer, Hans Ellermann, who offered me a Rembrandt School painting that had once been attributed to Rembrandt. Several versions of the study of a bearded

man, Bredius 264 existed, and Mr. Ellermann's may well be the best version. He had shown it to Professor Sumowski who agreed, as had Professor Ernst van de Wetering, the remaining member of the Rembrandt Research Project. I told Mr. Ellermann that I did not think it good enough for my own collection, nor that I could resell it profitably. He spoke so highly of the Rembrandt Research Project, as if they could never make a mistake, and I pointed out that they had made some mistakes. In 1981 I had written a very strong letter to Ernst van de Wetering, about a painting I owned which the RRP had given a C number, C-22, not by Rembrandt. Since then the RRP has accepted it. I had sent Professor Sumowski a copy of my letter and he replied on April 23, 1981, "Your letter to Mr. van de Wetering deserves complete approval. I think that these people in Amsterdam should not be taken seriously, but unfortunately they are receiving from all sides the attention they desire. My prediction that we will long for the days of Gerson is being fulfilled. What I have heard so far of the results of the "team's research" seems grotesque. Mr. van de Wetering and Mr. Bruyn were at the Lievens Symposium in Braunschweig and there I saw how facts were twisted and misinterpreted and how carelessly paintings are written off. I feel like a fossil that does not fit the times with its fashionable ways."

I had thought of that letter often and found it so correct and historically important. But since then my opinion of Ernst van de Wetering has changed and we have become good friends. Professor Sumowski's opinion

of the RRP has changed radically also. But hearing Mr. Ellermann's opinion that the RRP is always flawless, I sent him Professor Sumowski's 1981 letter.

Professor Sumowski heard that I had sent one of his letters - he did not know which - to Mr. Ellermann and I replied that I had sent that historically important letter of 1981 and included a copy.

Professor Sumowski's reply showed how I had 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 still no 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."

Of course I was really 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."

Sadly, I cannot live my life over again.

Sotheby's EST. 1744

34-35 NEW BOND STREET LONDON W1A 2AA
+44 (0)20 7293 5000 F +44 (0)20 7293 5989 WWW.SOTHEBYS.COM

12th May 2004

Dr Alfred Bader
Alfred Bader Fine Arts
Astor Hotel Suite 622
924 East Juneau Avenue
Milwaukee
Wisconsin 53202
USA

Dear Alfred,

Many thanks for your fax received today. I am very pleased that you like the Rubens so much. I have been trying hard to find out why Rubens painted this seemingly subjectless picture, which he kept for himself all his life, and made the subject of one of only two prints that he himself etched. The legend on the print, which we know was of his own devising, not the publisher's, because he inscribed a proof state of the print in his own hand, suggest a Neo-Platonic meaning, perhaps to be read in religious terms, which is why I have asked two Jesuit scholars to help me read it. But I do not think that Rubens set out to paint the subject suggested by the legend; he may well have superimposed the interpretation between circa 1616-17, when he painted it, and circa 1622, the year of the print. It would have been typical of the man to have meditated at length upon the painting (he followed the meditative spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius), and to have arrived at a meaning for it.

My guess is that some terms on the Rubens will be available. I think it is a bit early at this stage to talk to the owner, but we are dealing with an individual here, not an *erbengemainschaft* (the picture does not come from Germany, but sometimes the German word is the easiest), so we not dealing with lawyers, executors, or any form of multiple ownership or through an intermediary, so we do not need to start the ball rolling months in advance.

Alfred, I have talked at length again to Dr. Wilhelm. He in turn talked at length to Werner Sumowski a few days ago, who alas said again that his mind was made up. Dr. Wilhelm, who is very experienced in dealing with people and a very diplomatic man whom Sumowski respects a lot, sensed that he really does mean this. I think he even said that he is too old to undo it all again now. He told Dr. Wilhelm that he had returned your letter (though Dr. Wilhelm knew this already from me). He did say that he very much likes and respects Frau Bader, with whom he has no quarrel. I will speak to Isabel about this at some point.

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I thanked Dr. Wilhelm ("herzlich") for his efforts, because I am sure that he has done his best. He asked that his name be omitted from all and any accounts of this sad affair (he did not tell Werner Sumowski that I had asked him to intercede), and I must ask you to respect this. If you are writing an account of it all, please limit any mention of him to the oblique – "a local friend of Sumowski", or if you bring me in to it, a "mutual friend" or something like that. I would like to be able to give Dr. Wilhelm my word that he will not be mentioned.

I had hoped to get to Stuttgart this Spring, and will try to go sometime soon if I can, and when I do, will visit both Werner Sumowski and Dr. Wilhelm. When I see Sumowski, I will raise this sad matter, but I think it would be counter-productive to do so other than in direct dialogue; so not, for example in a letter.

With all Best Wishes,

George

George Gordon
Old Master Paintings
Direct Line: 020 7293 5414
Direct Fax: 020 7293 5943
Email: george.gordon@sothebys.com

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April 8, 2004

Mr. Hans Ellermann
Hintern Stiegel 4
Babenhausen 64832 Hessen
GERMANY

Dear Mr. Ellermann,

You may recall that we corresponded last summer about quite a good Rembrandt school painting of about 1650, related to Bredius 264.

In our telephone conversation and in my letter to you of August 27, 2003 I explained why I would not make an offer for this painting.

You spoke very highly of the Rembrandt Research Project and I agreed that indeed they have done a tremendous amount of valuable work, although some of their decisions have been seriously questioned. As you probably know, the RRP, including Professor Ernst van de Wetering, has changed its opinion about some of these attributions since the publication of the first volume.

I told you that I had written strongly some 30 years ago to Professor van de Wetering about C-22 and C-18, two paintings in my collection, and that in 1981 Professor Werner Sumowski had sent me a very strong letter about the mistakes made by the RRP. As support for my feeling that you relied too heavily and without question on the opinion of the RRP, I sent you a copy of that letter.

At the time I sent it to you, I did not realize that Professor Sumowski intended it as confidential to me and I failed to ask his permission to share it with you. He learned that I had sent you a copy of one of his letters and was most annoyed when I told him which letter I had sent. He is very angry and disappointed at my lack of judgment. Of course he has a much better opinion of the work of the RRP now, as many others, including myself, have also.

Understandably, I am extremely sorry that I shared his letter with you and would very much like to ask you to return it to me and not to pass any copies to anyone else.

With many thanks for your help and understanding I remain

Yours sincerely,

Alfred Bader
AB/az

By Appointment Only
ASTOR HOTEL SUITE 622
924 EAST JUNEAU AVENUE
MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN USA 53202

414 277-0730 ✆ 414 277-0709
E-mail: alfred@alfredbader.com