

The Collector

Heidi Goëss-Horten

in Conversation with Agnes Husslein-Arco



FIG. 1 HEIDI GOËSS-HORTEN
IN FRONT OF FRANCIS BACON'S
*STUDY FOR A PORTRAIT OF JOHN
EDWARDS*, 1985, 2018

Agnes Husslein-Arco: Esteemed, dear Heidi, it's a well-known fact that you prefer to avoid the spotlight, but of course many people are interested in learning more about you—until now, you've shared very few details of your life with the public. You have a collection of first-rate international art that you put your heart and soul into building for years, but wider audiences had no idea until the hit exhibition *WOW!* opened at the Leopold Museum in 2018. Do you remember what sparked your passion for collecting?



FIG. 2 HEIDI GOËSS-HORTEN'S RESIDENCE

Heidi Goëss-Horten: It's true that I lead a fairly secluded life. When you've experienced as much as I have, you become more selective about public appearances. I've created a wonderful refuge in my private home where I can live with my art and my family and closest friends and not be disturbed by outsiders. Generally, I would describe myself as someone who values her privacy. That was also the approach I pursued in building my art collection; when making acquisitions, for example, I stressed the importance of remaining anonymous. But I had to learn that the press always finds a way, there are invariably "leaks," and so my first major acquisitions at auctions in the early 1990s did not remain unnoticed for long. It started with wild speculations and often ended with my identity being revealed. Now I take a somewhat

FIG. 3 ALOIS JELINEK, *PORTRAIT OF HEIDI GOËSS-HORTEN*, CA. 1950



more relaxed attitude when my name is mentioned in connection with loans from my collection in exhibitions, as long as the media stick to professional standards. After all, by first exhibiting the collection and now founding the museum, I've chosen to step into the public spotlight.

My passion for collecting was something I discovered when, after the death of my first husband, I needed to find myself again. Art has been an important part of my life since I was a child—my father, a technical draftsman and engraver, made several portraits of me, and I've rediscovered painting for myself after an extended hiatus. Collecting art was an interest that grew stronger in the early 1990s—I first followed my own impulses in making purchases but soon realized that a trained eye is invaluable when acquiring good art. That's how you and I met back then—you were at Sotheby's and working with private clients. I very much appreciate it when I'm presented with proposals whose quality is unassailable so I can rely entirely on my own intuition. Of course, there were



FIG. 4 VIEW OF THE EXHIBITION
*WOW! THE HEIDI HORTEN
 COLLECTION*, LEOPOLD MUSEUM,
 2018

also instances when I made purchases based on an inspiration of the moment—I recall visits to George Condo’s studio in New York in the 1990s where I bought fifteen paintings in one fell swoop; he wouldn’t establish himself on the art market until much later.

AHA: Your collection has by now grown into a compendium of modern and contemporary art, gathering outstanding positions in the art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and surveying various styles and eras in more recent art history. In its first public presentation in 2018, which was held in a major Austrian collector’s museum, your collection drew many positive responses, including public plaudits—I’d go so far as to say that you’ve steadily improved the collection over those roughly thirty years; looking back, I think the foundation you laid with Helmut has evolved into something magnificent. Was the recognition you received a key motivation for your wish and decision to set up your own museum?

HGH: Collecting art has been and still is a passion that has enriched my life for several decades. That the acquisitions I made, often based on a gut feeling, would coalesce into such an extensive collection, with interesting cross-connections between artists, tendencies, and eras, was not something I imagined when I started out. I would say of myself that I’m a “visual person”—when I see a work of art, I know right away whether it might be a match for my collection, there’s no particular strategy behind it. What always animated me as I collected was the desire to live with the art, to be surrounded by it not only within the confines of my home but outside, too. In addition to paintings, my collection includes many sculptures, by Les Lalanne, Not Vital, Sylvie Fleury, Erwin Wurm, Miquel Barceló, Antony Gormley, or Bernar Venet, to name just a few. They’re installed in my garden, where they give me pleasure



FIG. 5 SCULPTURE PARK AT THE HEIDI GOËSS-HORTEN RESIDENCE WITH THE SCULPTURE *ARCHITETTURA*, 2005, BY MIMMO PALADINO

every day. Art has been and remains an important part of my life—and after many years of anonymity I decided to share my collection with the public. When I first needed to part with many of my works for over half a year for the exhibition in 2018, that was obviously not an easy decision, but the overwhelmingly positive feedback and the strong interest in the show from wide audiences persuaded me that it was the right choice. Over time, I came to feel that I wanted to preserve my collection for future generations and make it accessible to the public, and so I resolved to establish my own museum.

AHA: That brings me to a question I've been meaning to ask: you decided to open your museum in a historic office building formerly owned by Archduke Frederick. The location is in the heart of Vienna, around the corner from the State Opera, the Albertina, and the venerable Hotel Sacher. What made you choose Vienna, and why this office wing?

HGH: I'm a native daughter of Vienna, and the city has always meant a great deal to me—I've traveled a lot in my life and lived in various places all over the world, in London, in New York, in the Bahamas, but returning to Vienna has always felt like coming home. What I especially treasure is the cornucopia of culture that the city offers. That's why Vienna made obvious sense to me as the place for my future museum. In choosing the building, I sought

to combine the historic with the modern. Of course, we also needed a central location, which narrowed down the search considerably.

I'm convinced that the decision to convert Archduke Frederick's former office wing into a modern and forward-looking museum building was spot-on. Even just researching the location's history and writing it down in a first book about the building was a most interesting process in which I learned a great deal that I hadn't known about the history of the Habsburgs who formerly owned it. There were altogether four of them, all field marshals as well as some of the wealthiest men of the Austria of their time, but they couldn't have been more different: Duke Albert, the founder of today's Albertina; Archduke Charles, the commander of the Austrian army whose victory in the Battle of Aspern-Essling earned him the honorific "Lion of Aspern"; his son, Archduke Albrecht, whose equestrian state gazes toward the opera from the Albertina's terrace; and finally, the last and perhaps less well-known owner, Archduke Frederick, who had the building in its present form erected and used it for administrative purposes.

I, for one, am enormously pleased with the superb result of the conversion into a museum—observing the construction process, in which the edifice was essentially gutted, was fascinating; the timetable was tight, and I'm quite proud that this project that's so dear to my heart was realized in such short time and that my art has now found a worthy home where it will be preserved for the future.

AHA: Your private initiative to establish your own museum adds a major new asset to Vienna's cultural scene and is almost unparalleled in Austria. Collectors are often described as the guardians of their treasures—you now throw open the door to your treasure for all art lovers, moving the collection from your private home to a public venue. Where do you see your museum, what's your vision for the future?

HGH: It's true, there aren't many art collectors in Austria who found their own museums; the reasons for this reticence are obviously individual—as for me, I knew after the first public presentation of my collection that I wanted to preserve the works for posterity and share a treasure with people that has been with me in my private life for many years and given me such happiness. That's why I see my museum as a place of discovery, of sensuous experience, of the joy of art—because that's what art has been and still is for me: a vital source of joy! As regards the programming, I obviously have confidence in my staff, but I'm sure we will also share what makes the collection special with the people who will come from near and far to visit the Heidi Horten Collection, finding engaging ways to tell the stories behind the works of art, which were often what led me to buy a particular piece in the first place, and bring the themes and cross-connections that have emerged organically in over three decades of collection-building into focus and to life. It's my heartfelt wish that the museum will be a prominent beacon and tell its own unique story. That's also why I want the museum to be state of the art in every respect—to “pull out all the stops,” as you once called it in conversation (smiles). Needless to say, looking to the future will mean bringing the young Viennese and Austrian arts scene on board, too, and giving the next generation opportunities to ex-



FIG. 6 THE NEXT ENTERPRISE ARCHITECTS' PRESENTATION FOR THE ARCHITECTURE COMPETITION, 2019

change ideas. I, for one, am definitely looking forward to exciting art experiences at Palais Goëss-Horten!

AHA: The architectural design of an exhibition space is one key factor in facilitating a “sensuous experience of art,” as you’ve put it. What was your determinative criterion in selecting the architects for the project?

HGH: As I mentioned earlier, it was important to me to realize a well-made combination of the historic and the modern, so that the museum’s design would reflect my personal taste and my preferences. The three architecture firms we invited to draw up proposals all presented exciting visions for the building. I was ultimately won over by the design proposed by the next ENTERprise architects because they found a way to treat Archduke Frederick’s 1914 office building with respect, retaining its original character on the outside while creating a spacious and modern interior, with staggered exhibition floors and floating stairs that could be sculptures in their own right. The open quality of the ground-floor area, which invites visitors to take a break and contemplate the art in the sculpture garden out front, strikes me as another highlight of the plans that persuaded me that this was the right choice for the design of my museum.

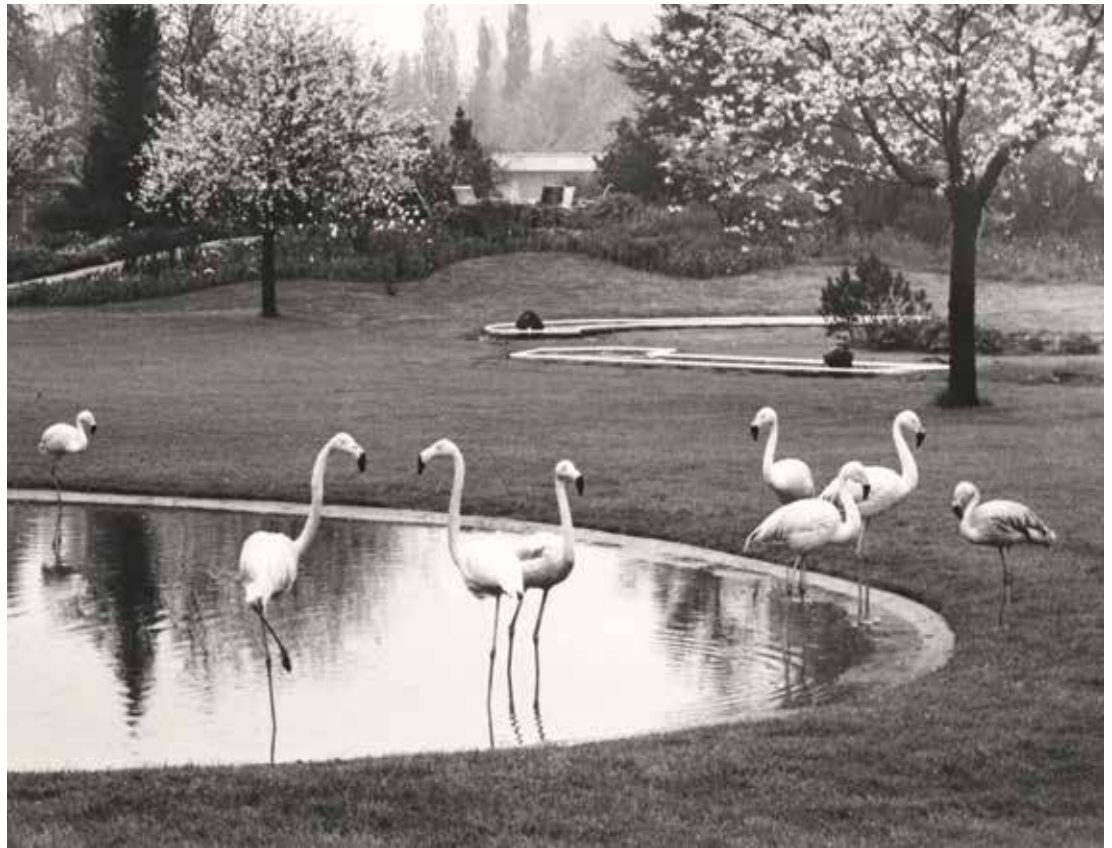
AHA: We’ve heard quite a bit about your love of art and collecting. Would you also like to reveal something about your other passions? I know, for example, that you’ve always been very athletic and have a gift for music, too—what’s that about?



FIG. 7 HEIDI GOËSS-HORTEN AND HER BOXER FRITZI, 1960S

HGH: Exactly, sports were an important part of my life when I was a girl, but later on, too—for instance, my father encouraged me to try figure skating; when I was four, he took me to the Wiener Eislaufverein’s rink right in central Vienna, between the Konzerthaus and the Stadtpark. We’d only done a few laps on the ice when he let go of my hand, saying, “you can do it ...”. I was very talented and quite ambitious, took lessons with Helmut Seibt, the reigning European figure skating champion, and spent many an hour at the Eislaufverein’s beautiful rink. I even received an offer to be in an ice show, but then my father was concerned that I might be taken advantage of—I was a pretty girl—and that was the end of my ice-skating career. Meanwhile, at the rink, I’d had the opportunity to watch the ice hockey team when they had practice, and I was smitten right away. The ardent passion for sports I conceived back then has never left me—nowadays I support the Klagenfurter AC, a professional ice hockey team, as president and always get a huge kick when I’ve helped motivate the athletes to play at the top of their game!

You also asked about what music means to me. I recall going to the opera with my parents, I must have been four—a performance of Carl Millöcker’s *Beggar Student*, and I was so enraptured that I tried to clamber up on the stage and join the performers in the production (laughs). A little later, I started taking piano lessons and got enormous joy out of playing the instrument—I was a very quick learner and later supplemented my pocket money by giving lessons to children. I even had the option to study at the conservatory. In today’s perspective, it’s regrettable that I decided not to pursue that—a decision I still ponder, wondering what would’ve been if ...



FIGS. 8-10 GARDEN AT THE VILLA
IN DÜSSELDORF, 1960S

AHA: Animals and animal welfare are another matter that's close to your heart. Is that also a concern that's been with you for many years?

HGH: Yes, it has! Animals have been part of my life for as long as I can remember. Even when I was a child, we always had a dog; I recall my very first dog, a boxer named Fritz. My first husband and I had dogs, too, French bulldogs. Then I took up riding in my mid-twenties and had two gorgeous dark thoroughbreds, My Lady and Donata. I immensely enjoyed riding, I had a gift for it, which my fellow riders didn't fail to notice. So people more or less openly envied my talent (chuckles).



FIG. 11 HEIDI GOËSS-HORTEN DONATING PAINTINGS TO TiKo (ANIMAL WELFARE COMPETENCE CENTER), WITH AGNES HUSSLEIN-ARCO, KLAGENFURT, 2019

Our house in Düsseldorf had a splendid garden with many animals, including flamingos and penguins, which we housed in species-appropriate shelters so that they were comfortable. We also had parrots, trumpet chickens, donkeys, and even peafowl—quite the menagerie ... (chuckles).

My husband's and my interest in animals and especially in more exotic species led to an unusually close relationship with the zoo in Duisburg—we endowed a so-called dolphinarium, and I enjoyed the privilege of swimming with a dolphin once a week, a truly singular experience.

Mentioning the Duisburg zoo brings a charming episode to my mind: the zoo had just bought two rhinoceroses, which were on their way by ship from Africa to Germany. Then, suddenly, the original sponsor was unable to pay the purchase price, and my husband stepped in to secure the two animals for Duisburg. They enjoyed very long lives at the zoo.

AHA: But you're also a committed supporter of animal welfare in your own community—is there a project that you were especially fond of?

HGH: That's right—I was a leading champion of the creation of the TiKo (*TierschutzKompetenzzentrum*, Animal Welfare Competence Center, *the ed.*) in Klagenfurt in 2013 and insisted that the city and the state contribute funds as well; we couldn't have set truly new international standards in animal welfare and build one of the most modern animal welfare centers in Europe without them. For quality assurance purposes, we brought in Agora and the planner Alex Darvill, whose input was really state of the art in terms of putting the necessary technical disease control equipment in place and organizing the TierschutzKompetenzzentrum's operations. The Austrian architect (Architektur Krainer) worked under the direction of the project management to implement all technical specifications that were feasible and practicable in Austria.

I was deeply moved when the executive board told me that they would name their ceremoni-



FIG. 12 VIEW OF THE EXHIBITION *WOW! THE HEIDI HORTEN COLLECTION*, LEOPOLD MUSEUM, 2018

al hall in my honor—a genuinely magnanimous gesture ...

In any case, what matters to me is that my charitable giving contributes to sustained improvements in animal welfare. That's why I initially set up an annual and a project-based donation—and it's also important to me to support the nationwide animal rescue services that the TiKo organizes. It lets the police or emergency responders pick up animals that were injured in traffic or otherwise, or that are in danger, and bring them to the TiKo, where they are nursed back to health. And I take in dogs from the local shelter whenever I can—it makes me happy that I can offer them a better life.

AHA: To come back to your collection one more time—there's also quite a number of representations of animals among your works; as sculptures or in paintings, animals are all over the collection.

HGH: That's true, I could put together a virtual zoo with my works (laughs). Not only do animal representations appear in the paintings, my sculpture collection also largely revolves around animals. Just think of Lalanne's orangutan in the exhibition *WOW!*—every single visitor, including many famous artists, wanted to take a picture with it (smiles).

It's surely not a coincidence that there are so many animal representations in my collection—I don't see my various passions as separate from each other, there is that proverbial common thread that runs through everything, and that's true of my art, too. It's an expression of my personality, and I'm very proud and happy that I'm now able to share this aspect of my life with many art lovers.

AHA: You mentioned earlier that you also paint—how do you find your motifs, what inspires you?

HGH: An interesting question—on the one hand, I of course find inspiration in my immediate environment. I paint on a regular basis and am fond of painting birds and parrots; my favorite motifs are my two beloved twenty-five-year-old gray parrots Tito and Caruso. I attentively study their behavior and try to incorporate my observations into my paintings as well. Beyond birds, the splendid colors of flowers are also a wonderful source of inspiration for my paintings. That's where it all comes together—I love bold and luminous colors, which can be found not only in the paintings in my collection but in my own art as well. Painting is my perfect creative outlet and a way to work through deeper emotions. It simply makes me happy.

AHA: Thank you very much, dear Heidi, for the insightful conversation—we all look forward to the museum, which will reflect your personality not only through its architecture, but also through the very special presentation of your art collection.



FIG. 13 HEIDI GOËSS-HORTEN,
PARROTS, 2019