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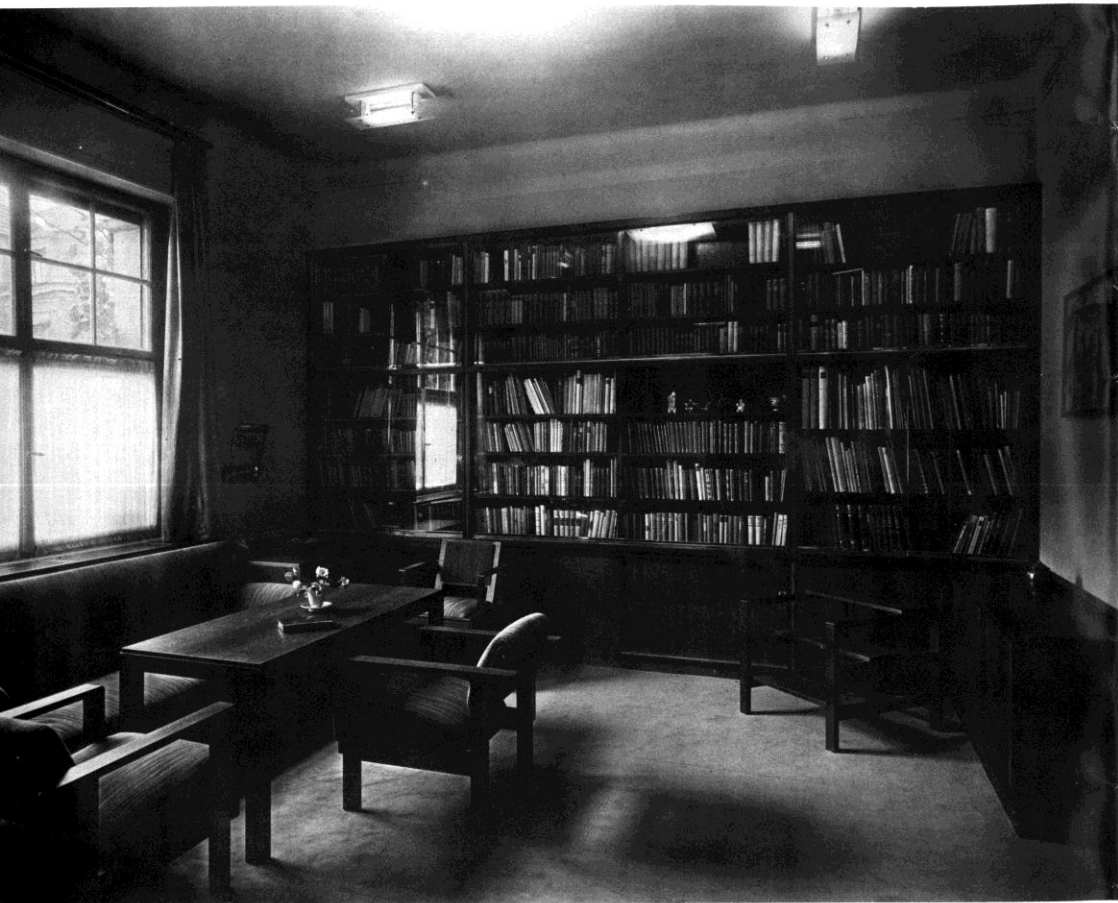
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Claude P. Bamberger

ART

Tenafly, N.J./April 1989



ART

A Biographical Essay

By

Claude P. Bamberger

The "Bauhaus Stil" Library in the House OTTO BAMBERGER,
created by Architect ERICH DIECKMANN.
The Library formerly contained the BAMBERGER Art Collection.
Photograph from 1938.

Front cover:
Etching "Lili" from "Circus Series" by OTTO DIX, 1926.

Back cover:
Invitation to the Exhibition, dedicated to the Memory
of OTTO & HENRIETTA BAMBERGER.
The Invitation was illustrated with the Etching "Lili".

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by
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IN MEMORY OF MY PARENTS
Otto and Henrietta Bamberger

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Mother & Child
Käthe Kollwitz, 1910

Germany 1938

It was just before midnight when there was a loud knock at the back door of our home in Lichtenfels, a small town located in South Germany near the Czech border. The time was late October 1938 when the Nazi movement was in its ascendancy. A nocturnal knock on doors of Jewish homes during this period was sufficient cause to frighten its residents.

Kunni, our loyal cook who has been with us for 25 years, furtively opened the door a crack to inquire as to the identity of the intruder. It turned out to be our neighbor, Mr. Aumer, whose son and I had been classmates in elementary school.

Mr. Aumer, who was an official in the Lichtenfels city administration, looked disconcerted and uncomfortable, as Kunni let him in.

"I must see Mrs. Bamberger," he said nervously. "You understand I had to come at this hour as I do not want to be seen."

Kunni led him into the foyer and asked him to wait a moment until she called my mother.

"Ah, Mr. Aumer," my mother said, as she hastily tightened the belt of her housecoat, "what brings you here at this hour?"

Mr. Aumer, who was working in the Department of Records at the town hall said:

"Mrs. Bamberger, we have known each other for a very long time. You know what is happening in this town and all over Germany. I don't really agree, but I have a job and a family to feed."

He hesitated a moment, and shifted his weight from one leg to the other.

"I hope you understand that I cannot be seen to communicate with you in an official capacity. I came to tell you that orders have come from Berlin today, that within the next two weeks we will have to confiscate the passports of all Jewish families living in our district. I know you still have a valid passport and

I urge you to leave as quickly as possible.”

“How much time do I have?”, my mother asked, obviously shaken by this sudden news.

“I can hold up the order on my desk for two or three days, not longer”, Mr. Aumer replied, “it would, therefore, be best that you do not delay your departure longer than a day after tomorrow.”

Mr. Aumer looked miserable. “Perhaps, you can visit some relatives in another part of the country, but it would be best if you could leave the country altogether”, he added in an effort to be of further help.

“What am I going to do with all our things?” my mother who was then a forty year old widow, exclaimed with a sweeping motion of her arm.

She was distraught! My father who had suffered a fatal heart attack in 1933 when he was arrested by the newly elected government of the Nationalist Socialist Party of Germany and taken into ‘protective custody’ ostensibly to ‘protect him from the wrath of the German people’, was already dead for five long years.

In her wisdom my mother had managed to send me, aged 18, out of the country to the USA, and my sister was living at that time with a family in England also waiting for her American visa. Little did she realize that neither of us would ever return to live in our native town.

My mother had not made any plans for herself to leave the country. After my father’s death she had become active in our family business which supplied wicker and raffia materials to European manufacturers of baskets and wicker furniture. Considering our villa with its lovingly tended gardens, the huge library with its custom made furniture designed by my father and an architect friend, she thought it would be best for her to stay put and weather the Nazi storm. No reasonable person living in Germany at the time thought that this maniac Hitler and his ‘Thousand Year Reich’ could last for more than a couple of years.

The thought of giving all this up, and of leaving without saying goodbye to her friends of a lifetime, as in those days one never knew who your friends really were, was appalling.

Then there was our huge, invaluable art collection. My father had always been interested in modern art and indeed had collected hundreds of graphics, paintings, sculptures and miscellaneous ‘objects d’art.’ The best hung on the walls of our many rooms. The rest were carefully stored in our library in especially constructed cabinets equipped with extra wide sliding drawers to hold the overflow of his collection.

Mr. Aumer looked distressed as well. “I understand, Mrs. Bamberger,” he said, “please realize that it is not easy for me to come here and ask you to simply abandon what must be very dear to you.” He coughed a little as if to suppress some emotion:

“However, I can do no more than tell you that it would be best for your safety as no doubt after the passport confiscation, further orders might be coming which even could endanger your life.” After a pause, he continued: “Perhaps, you can return at a later date after things settle down a bit”. Then he said: “I better go now and please forgive me for intruding at such a late hour.” With these words, he opened the back door and disappeared into the dark.

My mother sat stunned for awhile. She was alone. Kunni, the faithful cook, had retired to her own room after admitting Mr. Aumer, and in any event, was not the sort of person with whom my mother cared to share the events of the

preceding half hour. She first had to sort out by herself the impact of the news Mr. Aumer had brought.

She was a practical person, and quickly recognized both the immense favor Mr. Aumer had done her at great personal risk, and the urgent need to act quickly.



The Knock at Midnight

At breakfast time the next morning she told Kunni:

“Mr. Aumer came late last night and suggested that I leave town for a short while because of some new crazy laws which just came out. I will be visiting my mother in Stuttgart and hope you will take care of things as usual. I will call you from Stuttgart and let you know my plans.”

German people have a strange mixture of both sentimentality and practicality, which in times of stress takes the most unexpected turns.

Almost as an afterthought on the hunch that she would never return and that Kunni would want to have some kind of family memento to remember us by, she said:

“By the way, you can take that oil painting of Ruth over the mantelpiece as a souvenir.”

When my sister Ruth later heard about this, she never could quite forgive my mother for this statement. As time went by, it was quite clear that this picture was not a mere souvenir, but a psychological slip of my mother’s tongue to the effect that my sister was quite expendable, in contrast to her precious son whom she so much admired.

Kunni, not a lady of many words, absorbed this news in silence. She was used to taking care of our house during long absences of her employers, as my father and my mother frequently were away on extended trips, and both Klaus, as that was my German name at the time, and Ruth were living abroad.

Now the moment of my mother's own departure had arrived. She packed a few of her belongings into a small suitcase and left for Stuttgart to visit her mother. Once in Stuttgart, she went to the American Consulate and arranged for a visitor's visa to the USA to 'visit her son.'

Since she had a valid passport, there was no reason for the officials at the consulate to deny a visa, and a travel agent subsequently booked passage on one of the steamers of the America Line, which had weekly service between Hamburg and New York.

Once that was accomplished, she asked her two maiden sisters, who lived in Stuttgart, to go to Lichtenfels to pack up all the art works and movable possessions in our house, and make arrangements to have them shipped to New York.

Shortly before leaving, she called Kunni and told her that she had decided to visit me in the USA and that she would not know when she could come back home. She also mentioned that it might be best to have all our art works and personal possessions packed and shipped to a warehouse. "My sisters will come to Lichtenfels within the next few weeks and make all the arrangements," she told her.

There was no need to urge Kunni to secrecy, as Kunni in her earthy way, understood completely what was at stake.

Some weeks later, when my mother was already on the high seas, bound for America, my two maiden aunts traveled to Lichtenfels in order to sort out and pack our belongings.

The date happened to be November 9, 1938, the same date that the young Jewish refugee Herschel Grynszpan assassinated Ernst von Rath, a secretary at the German Embassy in Paris.

Dr. Herman Goebbels, propaganda chief of the German government, used this occasion to organize and execute a 'spontaneous demonstration of the German people' by means of an inflammatory speech which in effect gave free license to Nazi party members to loot, destroy and burn Jewish homes, synagogues and stores. A date known to historians and survivors as the 'Kristallnacht'.

The small town of Lichtenfels, harboring little more than a dozen Jewish families, did not escape unscathed. The synagogue housed in an ordinary looking small frame house was broken into and gutted by fire. The store of a Jewish widow, who eked out her living by selling groceries, was entered and all the contents thrown helter skelter into the street doused with gasoline and burned.

Some homes of business owners, similar to ours, were broken into, the inhabitants forced out and paraded around the streets among cheering crowds as if THEY personally had committed the murder in Paris, of which they and the population of Lichtenfels knew next to nothing. Some of the more prominent Jews in Lichtenfels committed suicide. Some women were raped.

Curiously enough, the twisted laws of those times made it quite permissible to murder a Jewish citizen, but imposed a heavy penalty for rape of Jewish women, as sexual intercourse between Gentiles and Jews was strictly illegal.

While our villa on the outskirts of the town did not remain untouched during this fateful night, which officially opened the way to the famous 'Final Solution'

i.e. the mechanical genocide of an entire Jewish population, the damage done was relatively small.

When Kunni, who occupied a small room in the attic of the house heard noises emanating from our library and living room in the middle of the night, she swept down like an avenging angel and succeeded in chasing the group of brown shirted hoodlums out of the house.

This was only possible because break-ins and violence against citizens and their property had as yet not reached official, legal sanction and in a small town like Lichtenfels, everyone knew everybody. Thus when Kunni, who had known these brazen young people since they were kids, screamed at them and threatened to tell their parents, they left somewhat intimidated, after smashing an old dutch tile oven and throwing a couple hundred books out of the windows into the street.

It is always incongruous that notwithstanding disaster and violence the daily life of the general population goes on in its normal way.

Previous to November 9, my aunts had made arrangements for a moving company to come to our house and to pack up the belongings of their absent sister.

Thus the moving company and my aunts arrived at the house on the morning of November 10, 1938 and not surprisingly an uninvited official Nazi delegation in full uniform regalia, beribboned and bemedaled, appeared as well.

"This is Jewish property" their leader declared, explaining that they must make sure that no degenerate art 'the Jewish collector Bamberger' had the habit of buying, would leave Germany and contaminate the world elsewhere. They also wanted to make sure that no jewelry, silverware, and other items normally considered as valuable would be packed illegally. Thus an exact inventory of what was to be shipped and what was to be left behind had to be made.

Moreover, everything which was to be shipped was assessed at a very high value and carried an even higher 'export tax.' Clearly in late 1938 those Jews who managed somehow to obtain an emigration visa were allowed to leave, as long as they left all of their belongings and assets behind.

If a Jew managed to 'sell' his villa, store or company to some wealthy Germans, and there was no dirt of them, at a price resembling ten percent of its true value, the government assessed a sales tax on Jewish property which essentially was the same as the sales price of the object. Thus whether one sold one's property or just abandoned it, the end result was the same.

Looking over the contents of the house owned by the Jewish widow of Mr. Otto Bamberger, the Nazi delegation carefully classified our entire art collection as 'degenerate' and officially declared it confiscated. The leader then instructed my aunts not to touch anything until a truck would come that afternoon to cart it all away.

"Of course," the leader said pompously "you will get a receipt for all we are taking", satisfied that everything done was 'strictly legal and correct' always a matter of German pride.

My aunts knew that there is little they could do about this situation and that the symbolic 'receipt' for a collection worth many thousands of marks was not worth the paper it was written on.

The few belongings which were packed by the end of that day never reached the United States. They were shipped to a warehouse in Nuremberg, pending export approval and payment of taxes.

After a delay of almost a year, on September 1, 1939 Hitler marched into Poland and the second World War had begun. Lines of communication between the USA and Germany were broken. Ultimately, the warehouse in which our crates were stored was destroyed by a direct hit during an American bombing raid in 1943.



Wilhelm Lehmbruck's Kneeling Woman was deemed not "German" enough. A similar sculpture, signature cast in stone, confiscated by Nazi officials, Villa Bamberger, Lichtenfels, Germany, 1938.

USA Beginnings

My mother still 'visiting' the United States at the time, was staying with a distant cousin in Louisville, Kentucky. The cousin, recently widowed, had small children and was in desperate need of an inexpensive housekeeper to take care of his household. My mother fit the bill perfectly, being at that time an impoverished distant relative, who would do the work free in exchange for room and board.

I myself had landed a job as a delivery boy in a drug store in Cleveland, Ohio, where I was paid 25 cents an hour, which came to \$8.00 a week for a 48 hour work week. Overtime at that time was not paid at all and my work week really was more like 52 or 55 hours. I lived with a German Jewish refugee family at the time who furnished room, board and laundry for \$1.00 a day or a total of \$7.00 a week. I was able to save one dollar a week and thus started what became later the first capital investment in my company.

Although this may sound like an incredible hardship to the ordinary American, I was not particularly unhappy at the time. I felt myself fortunate to have work and a place to stay. In fact, seen through the eyes of a well educated young man with a good family background, I regarded my situation as temporary and considered it more like a big adventure rather than an ordeal. At 18 years of age, one does not worry what the future may hold.

As I was a legitimate immigrant, my mother could stay on through the good graces of the State Department as a 'visitor' who temporarily could not return to her homeland because the United States had broken diplomatic relations with Germany. The war went on for six long years, my mother stayed on as housekeeper in Louisville and had her visitor's visa extended periodically.

In the course of the next two years I had a checkered career as a polisher in a steel factory, a floor boy in a hat factory, and a part time job as a door to door salesman, peddling window cleaners, wood cleaners, raspberry syrup and shampoo, in a futile attempt to augment my meager livelihood in the drug store

where my hours were from 6 to midnight and week-ends. So all in all, I must have worked about 90 hours a week off and on during that period.

Early in 1942, I had volunteered to serve in the United States ski troops and was accepted. Hurt during maneuvers, I was discharged within a year. Upon my return to civilian life, I finally landed a job which I thought might have a future. It was with my uncle, who had started a plastics business in Brooklyn. The job not only paid a very decent wage, but had the potential of a career in business.

Meanwhile, my mother, too had left her nonpaying job with her cousin and drifted through various and sundry menial positions, paying small salaries, until finally in 1944 both of us ended up in a small frame house in Bellerose, Long Island.

This property costing \$11,000, an enormous sum in those times, was purchased by means of a veteran's mortgage, a privilege I had acquired during my short sojourn in the United States Army. No down payment was required and the carrying charges for the low interest loan were financed by means of boarders my mother took in. The grandiose villa, gardens and art collection from the old country were all but forgotten.

In 1945, the United States Army was sweeping through the western part of Germany while the Russians were closing in from the east. It now was apparent that Germany was bound to lose the war.

Among the victorious troops was a division of the U.S. Eighth Army where my cousin served in the G4 intelligence section. It had the duty to search for war criminals by way of interrogating the various town officials as to their role under the Nazi regime.

The Army's G units usually occupied towns and cities immediately after the fighting troops had cleared out enemy pockets and, thus, were confronted with a partially relieved and partially frightened residual population.

In one of these sweeps, this cousin landed in Lichtenfels. The town was well known to him as our villa had always been the seat of annual family reunions 'in the country'. Presently our villa was occupied by some officers of the General Staff of the American Army with the intervening 'owners' having fled.

Interrogations of prominent citizens of the town as well as town officials appropriately took place in the City Hall, with my cousin presiding.

While taking inventory of City Hall records, my cousin stumbled across a half a dozen dusty mildewed crates on which the lettering 'Bamberger-Jewish Property', could be deciphered. Closer investigation proved that these cases contained a residual remnant of my father's vast art collection. Acting as an American officer and within his rights, my cousin confiscated this 'Jewish Property' and promptly sent it off to his aunt in Bellerose.

One day in late 1945 three very beat-up boxes containing 'art works' arrived at our house, and though delighted to have something of my father's collection returned, my mother immediately became aware that most of the major works by Beckmann, Modersohn, Lehbruck, Lieberman, Chagall and many other great artists who produced so-called 'degenerate art' were missing.

Apparently, the Nazis who had come to confiscate our art collection seven years before, were not as degenerate as the pieces of art which they claimed, and had kept the most valuable and best pieces for themselves. Only several hundred graphics, wood cuts, linoleum prints, including several dozen original pencil and

charcoal drawings, had been recovered.

As our small three bedroom house hardly had any wall space to accommodate even a fraction of this collection, quite aside from the fact that we had no money to have pieces framed, this art collection presented more of a headache to us than an asset.

The only place where we could store this treasure was under my mother's bed in the master bedroom. For the next ten years it was buried there, once again forgotten, very much as had been the case in the City Hall of Lichtenfels.

Occasionally, my mother would say: "Klaus, we really should do something with your father's art collection". I, more interested in girls at that age, than in the weird looking, strange graphics my father had collected, had no opinion. I merely shrugged my shoulder and replied: "What do you mean by 'do'? Who would be interested in that stuff?"

"But, some of these works are by well-known artists" my mother said. "Maybe we could sell some of them rather than have them lying under my bed?"



Art Exhibition — No Evidence of Red Dots

"How would you go about it?" I inquired. "You have already called some art galleries in New York and no one ever heard of these artists, let alone expressed an interest in exhibiting them".

"I know a professor at the University of Louisville," my mother said. "He is an expert on the Expressionist art as produced by a group of German artists following World War I. Maybe, he would know what should be done."

I agreed that she should write to this professor in Louisville. Subsequently, the professor came to see us in Bellerose, looked at the collection and expressed a keen interest in finding somebody to mount an exhibition.

It was in 1956 that we found a gallery on Madison Avenue, which specialized in promoting the sale of European graphics of the post World War I period. They knew some of the artists in our collection, and agreed to exhibit and sell the works of Alfred Kubin, because we had a substantial number of his works.

Arrangements were made to have this artist's work put into presentable mats and to schedule a show which was to last for two weeks. At the opening of the exhibit, a gathering of European art lovers, ex-immigrants, and bearded Bohemian looking people appeared. They partook liberally of the cheese and wine, the conventional fare for minor openings, and mostly talked to each other rather than look at the art surrounding them.

I, seeing my father's collection for the first time presented in a proper way, was also unimpressed. Prehistoric monsters rising out of swamps, wild horses, dilapidated farms from the Bohemian forest, all done in charcoal or fine pen ink drawings, lined the wall in bewildering profusion.

No red dots — the sign of a sale — were in evidence. In the catalog, prices for the numbered pieces ranged from \$35.00 to \$150.00 for originals. At the end of the two weeks show, not one of the art pieces had been sold.

My mother, disappointed, said: "I knew this stuff had no value". When the collection finally came back from the gallery, it went once more under my mother's bed.

Immigrants Achieve Middle Class

Time went by. In 1965, we sold our \$11,000 home for \$25,000, and my mother moved to a small apartment in Washington Heights, New York. I, having married in the meantime, lived in New Jersey. Due to a lack of space in my mother's apartment, the art works were transferred from under my mother's bed, to rest under our bed in our master bedroom.

In the mid-70's my mother, now in her 80's, decided she would like to live with my sister who had settled in the early 40's in Louisville, where she had a duplex frame house. Arrangements were made for my mother to move into the apartment upstairs while the art collection came to rest under my sister's bed downstairs.

A few more years went by and in 1978 my mother passed away at the age of 87. My sister, who was about to retire, was anxious to rent the apartment my mother had occupied. Soon after my mother's death, she called me and asked me to help her clean out my mother's belongings.

I travelled to Louisville and helped her in that endeavor. When the question of what to do with the art works arose, my sister said "I really don't know what to do with this junk, why don't you take it?"

Since this art represented part of our inheritance, I suggested that my sister go through the collection and pick out the pieces she liked best. I agreed to have the remainder shipped to our New Jersey residence.

Then my sister passed away in 1985, and it was once again my sad task to clean up the belongings of a dear deceased one.

Upon my arrival in Louisville I had to sort through an incredible heap of possessions, which my sister had gathered over a period of almost 30 years. As is so frequently the case, when one has to clean up what someone treasured or simply thought worth saving, to the ordinary onlooker it only appears as a heap of junk belonging to another person.

There were LIFE and TIME magazine issues by the ton. Textbooks and term

papers my sister had used when she went to college, twenty three suitcases in various sizes and shapes, prints and cutouts from art magazines and art calendars. Hundreds of photographs in shoe boxes — well, anyone aged 60 who has had to go through this exercise more than once, will sympathize with me. This is one task no one can envy.

The art works on my sister's wall were a curious mixture of worthless prints and here and there a graphic from my father's collection.

By now I had matured sufficiently to know a little bit about art. Names like Chagall, Beckmann, Kollwitz etc. had begun to sound familiar. Thus I was able to ferret out a couple of Chagall lithographs, an original Kollwitz drawing and some others, from the pile of papers destined for the dump. For the moment, these were added to the original art collection under the bed in our new home in New Jersey.

This house had been built in 1961. It was larger than any of my previous houses and logically also had considerable more wall space which needed decorating. My wife and I had gone over my mother's art collection in the course of the years, and had picked out some of the pieces which appealed to us and which did not look too 'degenerate.'

With this new influx of art from Louisville, more pictures were selected and put on our walls. I realized by now that some of these pictures, consisting mostly of black and white signed and numbered lithographs, as well as a dozen or more original charcoal and pen and ink drawings, were works by some well known artists. But most of all, I longed to own some more colorful oil paintings and watercolors, similar to those which had graced the walls of my parental home.

All we had, by way of color were some large prints of well known masters, purchased from the Metropolitan Museum and the National Art Gallery in Washington. What we really would have liked, but could not readily afford, were some originals of recognized artists.

Up to that point in my life I had been busy building a career and raising a family, but with these things out of the way. I had remarried some time ago and now had some leisure 'to do the many things I always wanted to do.' Everyone has these phantom thoughts which resemble more fantasy than reality. Notwithstanding considerable procrastination, I managed indeed to set aside some time for at least some of those things. One aspect of this decision was to get 'my house in order,' consolidate things and look into various aspects of my life hitherto neglected. On this occasion, the art collection under the bed, resurfaced once again.

It was my insurance broker, who in reviewing my various policies, suggested that I get the various art works whose value I always had told him were negligible and amply covered by our policy, officially appraised.

"Until you have a true appraisal, you do not know what assets you have," he said. "It is best to have an evaluation done by an official appraisal firm, recognized by the insurance companies, so there is no dispute as to the value of something in case of loss."

One could not argue with this approach, and in due time an appointment was made. One sunny morning in October 1985 the doorbell rang. A trim looking young woman in a blue serge business suit, a briefcase professionally clamped under her right arm, stood at the front door.

"I am from the Consolidated Appraisal," she said, "I believe we have an

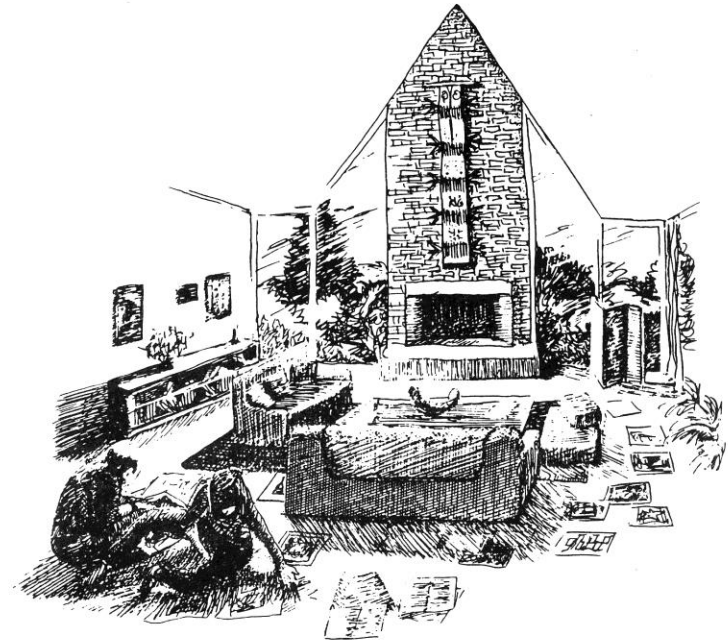
appointment this morning?" "Come in, come in", I said delighted with the appearance of this appraiser whom I had expected to be a corpulent man in his mid-50's with a vast knowledge of art and other material things.

"Would you like to have a cup of coffee?" I queried. "No thank you" said the young lady, glancing wildly about her. "You have a pretty big home here and I think it will take me several days to do this appraisal." I wondered what would take so long, as I had thought that the job would only take a couple of hours.

I also wondered how this person could possibly properly appraise the multiple heirlooms and bric-a-brac items I had gathered, inherited and collected over a lifetime. Jewelry, heirlooms and more common objects usually associated with values are non-existent in our home as are sophisticated electronic systems, which I am told are very costly and very often coveted by burglars.

During the ensuing two days Anita, which was her name, went from room to room meticulously listing everything in sight. Scrutinizing the pictures which were on the walls, she commented: "Those are weird things" and proceeded to write down the subject matter and tried to decipher the name of the artist, frequently enlisting my help.

After the survey was completed, I went to the guest room and from under the bed pulled out several frayed, huge heavy linen portfolios containing the art collection. Anita was nonplused. She said, "Oh, this will take another day



Anita spread the art collection on the living room floor.

to classify. Can we take these somewhere where I can spread them out for proper classification?"

We carried them down to the living room where Anita spread everything out on the floor.

This done, she then spent many hours during the next couple of days peering at these treasures, often asking me to translate the German titles or spell the name of the artist which she could not decipher. Finally her work was completed. She left, saying that we would hear from her company and get the appraisal report within the next four to six weeks.

I was quite intrigued and a bit skeptical, as I could not believe how a young person like this could come up with an appropriate appraisal of things created long before she was born and which most of the world had forgotten by now.

In due time, a very impressive report arrived by express mail. It was bound in navy blue hard cover bearing the legend "Estate of Claude and Moli Bamberger" in gold lettering as a title. An appropriate bill covering the cost of this elaborate appraisal was enclosed as well. Nothing comes free in this world! Scrutinizing the pages of this report I found it amazingly accurate.

The value of the more recent acquisitions in furniture, rugs, lamps, silverware, etc. was fairly accurately evaluated.

There were also some surprises. For instance, when Moli left her home in Malaysia she took a tiny little incense burner as a memento of her parents. It was a plain cast iron fixture about four inches high and two inches wide and stood somewhere in our bedroom, quite unnoticed by us or anyone else.

Here in this report it took up almost a page. Following a very detailed description I read to my amazement: "Bronze-Archaic-Form Incense Burner supported by elephant trunks. 18th century, probably Ch'ing Dynasty, value \$750.00."

The numerous folk art articles we had collected here and there in farmers' markets in Pennsylvania were also listed with more or less accurate dating and value.

There were other items that were outright astonishing: 'Guest room south wall, Beckman Man in Black Hat, etching, value \$20,000.00. DeCreeft Green Marble Statue, Mother and Child \$12,000.00.'

The most incredulous item in the entire appraisal was the art collection under the bed in the guest room, listed as 'Miscellaneous graphics, etchings and lithographs post World War I vintage, value \$250,000.00.'

I was speechless, — a millionaire overnight! Best may be to have a fire, quick! While the appraisal as a whole was quite satisfactory, the evaluation of the art works seemed absolutely wild. I simply did not believe this evaluation. Thus I sat down and wrote Consolidated Appraisal Co. a letter requesting some corroboration on exactly how they arrived at this value. When I received no reply, I wrote again and this time enclosed a check for the appraisal of all items deducting, however, the amount attributable to the appraisal of the art collection, stating that I would pay the balance as soon as the requested verification on the collection was received.

I never received a reply to the second letter as well. With my curiosity aroused, I became rather anxious to find out the true value of my European heritage.

The first step was to try to get some order into the collection. Once again the art works were spread out on the living room floor. My wife and I began to weed out such things as Daumier cartoon prints from newspapers, photographs



Max Beckmann

"The Man in the Black Hat"

from the Piti Palace in Florence, as well as worthless reproductions from commercial art calendars, all of which were mixed helter skelter with the real art works.

At one point, my wife came across a sheet apparently torn from a note book with a faint hardly visible pencil sketch portraying three children playing with a rabbit. She said: "I don't know how this old drawing from 'Claudette' (my daughter) got in here among this stuff. Let's throw it out." I looked at it closer and said: "No, no, that is not Claudette's, this looks to me like it might be a Paula Modersohn." This — in fact as it turned out later — was one of the more valuable assets in the entire art collection.

Once the material was catalogued and organized, I set about finding art 'experts' specializing in art from various artists whose names I could recognize. There were many graphics and some originals by the artist Alfred Kubin, mentioned before, who had been a personal friend of my father. I remembered vaguely the artist's visit to our home in the first ten years of my life.

Ferretting out an art gallery in New York, specializing in Kubins, I made an appointment with the owner to see whether he would be interested in looking at my collection. Madison Avenue art dealers are very busy people. Thinking that a collection of Alfred Kubin's work would be a rarity in New York, I thought that this dealer would drop everything and rush out to our home in New Jersey and gaze rapturously at this rare invaluable collection.

I could not have been more wrong! Not only was he not interested in looking at the Kubins, but he told me brusquely that "we are only interested in Kubin period 1901 to 1910. His later works don't interest us." Asking him how I would recognize works created during that period, he said that the subject matter was usually allegorical — sea monsters rising out of swamps, phantoms chasing virgin maidens and such. Sadly I had to confess that I had only one or two pieces from that period, and that most of the works I had were post World War I, in which he had no interest.

During that period the New York Times ran an ad that a gallery on Madison Avenue was having a posthumous exhibition of DeCreeft sculptures. Naturally, I went to see it and eventually met the widow of DeCreeft whom I had previously met at a party of some friends.

All the pieces in the collection were priced anywhere from \$30,000.00 up, which once again confirmed my suspicion that the appraisers had done a poor job as far as the art collection was concerned.

Little by little, I gathered pieces of information here and there as to the true value of what I had. This came about in the oddest coincidences.

One day I had to see a scrap dealer in Bristol, Tennessee, some 100 miles east of Knoxville. I had never met this gentleman, whose name was R..... He had picked me up at the nearest airport, and on our way to his warehouse we made small talk as is natural on such an occasion. In response to my question whether he had ever been to New York, he told me that he had a sister living there.

"She is crazy" he added, "she is into all kinds of Indian stuff, lived in India for some time and gives all her money to a crook, a guru or something like that. This guy lives in some kind community — I think it is called Ashram — on Long Island. A real crook" he added in disgust. "My sister gives all her money to him and he has a Rolls Royce and a Mercedes. If that's not materialistic! My sister is all ga ga over him and says 'it's all so spiritual!'"

"Oh, there's lots of that going on up our way" I exclaimed, thinking that it might be interesting to meet that sister one of these days.

"Right now she is taking care of an old woman" the man said. "That woman is the widow of some famous German artist and must have millions." My ears picked up.

"Would you know the name of this woman?" I ventured.

"I don't know, it's a name something like Beck - Breck - Becker....Blacher...."

"It wouldn't be Beckmann, by any chance," I said.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "that's it, yes, now I remember. Beckmann that's the name."

"Oh, I would like to meet your sister very much. Could you give me her address and telephone number? You see, I think I have some pictures from this Beckmann in my collection, and maybe your sister could help me to determine what they are worth."

Once back in New York I called the number which Mr. R..... had given to me.

"May I speak to Mrs. Beckmann?" I told Miss R..... after I had introduced myself.

"Mrs. Beckmann is not well and can no longer see or speak to people" Miss R..... explained, "however, I can refer you to someone who specializes in Beckmann art, and who might be of assistance." She then gave me the name and phone number of a Madison Ave. gallery specializing in Beckmanns.

Not long after this conversation Mrs. Beckmann died. It was big news in the New York Times as Miss R..... was accused of manipulating Mrs. Beckmann's will consisting of an estate of many millions. She was sued by Mrs. Beckmann's sister who was the legal heir, living in Germany, and who had not seen Mrs. Beckmann in many years.

Not an uncommon story in the history of mankind. Too often people leave their fortunes to some legal heir with whom they had no relationship at best, sometimes worse, forgetting all the caring people who had surrounded them during the last difficult years of their lives.

It seems that Mrs. Beckmann had 'remembered' our friend's sister in some token way, but even that minor inheritance was disputed through the greed of the legal heirs.

Quite in contrast to my previous experience with the Kubin gallery, Mrs. Friedman, who was the owner of the gallery suggested by Miss R....., was keenly interested in ANYTHING I might have of Beckmann. As I had a number of pictures, I selected the one mentioned in the appraisal and said:

"Right now I am looking at an etching entitled 'Man In A Black Hat.' It is hanging on the wall across from me here in my study." There was a pause, then Mrs. Friedman said: "Is it exposed to a lot of light?" I could discern some excitement. When I answered in the affirmative she said: "The Man In The Black Hat' is a rare specimen of Beckmann art. There are only a few copies of this particular graphic left and it is very valuable. It would be best to put it in a closet as too much light might damage it."

"Could you tell me what 'very valuable' means," I answered, thinking perhaps the appraisers were right after all. "It all depends, of course, on the condition of the work, but without seeing it I think it could be as high as \$5,000.00".

Taking into consideration that I was talking to a gallery which would want to acquire works of art at the lowest possible price, I decided that the appraisers

weren't too far off in this instance, since they appraised everything based on replacement value.

I thanked the lady for the information, by saying that I would get my various art works of Beckmann together, and make an appointment to see her at some future date.

Going around to the various galleries we were appalled at the prices which were being asked for the type of painting we wanted. While we had learned in the meantime that some of the works in my collection might be worth anywhere from \$1000 to \$5000, oil paintings — even by artists whose names we did not know — would start in the mid-five figures and easily go from medium to high six figures for commercially recognized painters. This was definitely out of our league.

With time we found the gallery of a Mrs. Fredrick Serger called 'La Boetie' located on East 81 Street near the Metropolitan Museum. This gallery specialized in expressionist art of the early twenties, precisely the kind of art in my father's collection. She also had a large collection of oils painted by her late husband Fredrick Serger, some of which were for sale. The style of the Serger paintings reminded me of similar paintings which we had in Lichtenfels and which had disappeared. In fact, they were more or less the kind of art we wished to purchase for our home.

Fredrick Serger, in his lifetime, had had several exhibitions in well known galleries and museums in Europe and the USA, some of which had acquired his works for their permanent collection.

Supplemented by prices which Mrs. Serger could obtain for some of the works in our collection, prices quoted for the Serger paintings were in line with what we could afford.

We had especially fallen in love with a particular painting which hung in Mrs. Serger's office. A portrait of Mrs. Serger in her youth sitting on a couch next to an obviously admiring scotch terrier. It was a very large painting framed in a crumbling 18th Century wood and plaster frame.

Although Mrs. Serger showed us many wonderful paintings of her husband, all of which she would gladly sell, she refused to part with the one which we liked most of all.

"It has been promised to the New York Metropolitan Museum" she told us, "it is really not for sale. Now look at this one, the dog is so much better" she continued, pointing to another portrait of her and the dog. But it was another painting, and to us it was nothing like it at all.

Over the next couple of years we went to visit Mrs. Serger off and on, always looking at more Serger paintings and always coming back to the one in her study as THAT ONE AND NO OTHER would do.

In time, we purchased one or two smaller paintings with which we were delighted: Yet, like the apple which tempted Adam and Eve in Paradise, our heart was set on the one which was 'not for sale'. Mankind has not changed in a millennium.

At one point, I told Mrs. Serger: "What is the Metropolitan going to do with this painting? It will end up in one of their store rooms and never see daylight, whereas we would LIVE WITH IT every day, and think of you".

Who could resist such logic. When Mrs. Serger said that her 'heirs' might object to the sale, I responded: "Your heirs probably would sell it as soon as they get

hold of it, but to us it would be THE MAJOR ART WORK in our living room."

Mrs. Serger promised she would talk to her heirs and see what they had to say. In the end, she acquiesced, and reluctantly declared her willingness to let us have it. We promised her that anytime she is 'homesick' for the painting she could come and visit us and see it. We assured her that to us it was not just 'another' painting, but something we really would enjoy on a daily basis.

So the sale was finally agreed upon and I made arrangements with a friend who was a decorator and who had a small pick-up truck. The day he delivered the painting he said: "What is it with this painting? The lady cried when we came to pick it up."

Another year passed. My search for some of the lost paintings in my father's collection continued. On one occasion I visited an art dealer in Zurich, Switzerland. He could not help me much, but in our discussion I mentioned proudly that I recently had acquired a 'Fredrick Serger.'

"Fredrick Sergers are worthless" he said deprecatingly. He, after all was dealing only with Noldes, Modersons, Kollwitz' etc. I was delighted. I thought this was good news. If an art dealer in Zurich 'knew' Serger that was much better than if he had said that he never heard of this artist. Serger, like thousands of other painters, is as good as any of the better known painters whose pictures fetch prices a hundred times more — only he is not in demand because there is no one of fame who has purchased his works, there is no publicity agent, there are no news releases and thus he is 'worthless'. That's the way it is with the arts. It's not that paintings of famous painters have greater value or are painted with more skill than their contemporaries, it is their good fortune that THEIR WORKS have come to the attention of the 'right' people.

Art is big business and like anything else its value is in direct relation to its publicity. If tomorrow the Getty Museum would stage a 'Serger' exhibit and Mr. Gorbachev would buy a painting for the Leningrad collection, with the accompanying news coverage, Serger paintings would become priceless overnight.

Many years ago, during my reckless Bohemian days in Greenwich Village, I had an artist friend by the name of Jan Mueller. A refugee like myself, he had a lot of trouble making a living. But his passion was painting. He took any kind of job — worked until he had enough money accumulated — only to quit after a couple of months and paint.

He lived on the top floor of an eight story tenement building on St. Marks Place — now called the 'East Village.' He lived mostly on bread and cheese which he generously shared with three or four alley cats which also led a rather marginal existence.

Jan had a lot of friends, and there was many a night we spent at his apartment, singing, drinking wine, eating cheese, arguing Marxism and the merits of art until the wee hours of the morning.

On these occasions, knowing the dire circumstances in which Jan lived, everyone brought more food than could be consumed, giving Jan the chance to paint a few days longer until money ran out and he had to find a job.

Jan himself was equally generous. Anyone who fancied one of his paintings could have it for the asking. He was glad if anyone actually wanted to hang and display some of his works.

There was many a time when after a complimentary remark on something Jan did, he would say: "Please take it" and hand it to me. The truth of the

matter is that I did not like the stuff Jan painted. It was all mythology with ghost-like figures — at least that's what I made them out to be — very much like when you ask a child of five years old to draw houses, trees, horses etc. So I was never keen in accepting these paintings as I wouldn't have known what to do with them.

Like so many impoverished artists throughout history Jan died due to malnutrition and a rheumatic heart. He was only 36 years old.

About a year before his death, he met and befriended a wealthy industrialist who had a factory in Carolina. This man was interested in art and in fact had started a museum not unlike the oil magnate Getty.

This man took a liking to Jan, and possibly he even fancied Jan's paintings. In any event, he purchased some of them for his museum. An article to this effect was published in TIME magazine, not only featuring some of Jan's paintings, but giving a lot of 'background' information on the artist.

Soon the Museum of Modern Art in New York called on Jan and either asked him to produce some large canvases or purchased some existing ones. Now 'Mueller' was a name. The paintings which were purchased were no different than those Jan couldn't give away, let alone 'sell' during his life.

Although he did get paid a fairly substantial amount for what was acquired by these museums, Jan never really benefited from the sale. "Recognition" which was the goal he had tried all his life to achieve, namely HIS statement for posterity came too late.

He died, poverty stricken, but literally with a fortune in paintings which he was unable to sell during his lifetime.

Some years after his death, the Guggenheim Museum of New York posthumously sponsored a one man retrospective show, devoting their entire exhibition space to Jan Mueller alone.

His wife, and companion of some years prior to his death, is the sole beneficiary of all his struggles and sufferings.

Recently I travelled to Germany to visit some friends in Lichtenfels. During a conversation the subject of Kunni and the portrait of Ruth, arose.

Kunni, now dead for more than 10 years, spent the last years of her life in Lichtenfels, living with her niece in a home high above the Main Valley. When we last visited her, she graciously entertained us on her terrace and tea was served by her niece. Taking in the magnificent view of the river, and the meticulously groomed countryside spreading out below us, I could not help musing about the vagaries of life. Here is Kunni, our former cook, entertaining us in grand style, the lady of the manor, while my mother in Louisville, Kentucky, was living in the upstairs apartment of a rather crumbling duplex house, in one of the less fashionable sections of Louisville. Her view was a weedy backyard rimmed by garbage cans, carpports and moldy fire escapes of the houses across the street.

As we were leaving, Kunni pointed at a picture over the mantelpiece in the living room and said: "There is Ruth — that's the picture your mother gave me when she left." We admired the painting, a little girl with bobbed hair adorned with a huge bow, holding a doll. At the time I was preoccupied with other things and never gave this painting another thought.

When I told my German friends, that I was writing something about my father's art collection, it came to mind that it would be nice if the painting of Ruth could

be recovered. I reasoned that with Kunni deceased, the painting had little meaning or value to its present owners and perhaps I could purchase it from them.

Lisa, my friend Hermann's wife volunteered: "Oh, I see Mrs. Schoepf, Kunni's niece, quite often when I go shopping. Next time I see her I will ask about the painting."

Soon after returning home, I received the first news from Lichtenfels, and over the succeeding weeks the following exchange regarding the painting of Ruth took place:

Hermann: "Lieber Klaus: As per our discussion I met today with Mrs. Schoepf, Kunni's niece. She knows nothing about a painting of Ruth. I told her that it is the painting which you saw, hanging over her fireplace. She told me that over her fireplace is a painting of a monk, holding a jug. That painting has been hanging there for years."

"She said 'I don't think that Kunni ever had a painting like that. I remember that Kunni did not live in the Bamberger house during the Kristallnacht. In all likelihood the painting was destroyed at the time. Even Kunni's own room in the house was plundered by those Nazi hoodlums. If my aunt did have the painting, it no doubt was destroyed at that time.' This is a mystery, perhaps you remembered something wrong. Viele Gruesse, Dein Hermann."

Claude: "Lieber Hermann: Thank you for your letter regarding Ruth's painting. What Frau Schoepf tells you is a contradiction of the truth. After all, my wife and I actually SAW the painting over the fireplace in her living room just a few years ago."

"There is only one explanation to this 'mystery' as you call it. Perhaps Mrs. Schoepf has a bad conscience and denies the existence of this painting for fear of a lawsuit or of having to return it — all of which is not applicable as it was indeed a gift of my mother. Perhaps Mrs. Schoepf is the wrong niece as Kunni had many nieces. Maybe the lady in whose house we saw the painting does not live in the Koburger Strasse and is, therefore, the wrong person. Viele Gruesse Dein Klaus."

Hermann: "Lieber Klaus: In reply to your letter, I must tell you that there is no mix-up in the identity of Kunni's niece. Mrs. Schoepf lives in the Koburger Strasse, is Kunni's niece and Kunni did live with her during the last years of her life. Since Mrs. Schoepf and her husband built their house on the Koburger Strasse the painting of the monk, holding a jug has been hanging over their fireplace."

"Before Kunni moved in with her, she lived in a little house on the Burgberg. There was no fireplace in that house but maybe you saw the picture of Ruth there. Mrs. Schoepf, however, never saw a painting anywhere. This is indeed a mystery. Dein Hermann."

Claude: "Dear Hermann: Thanks for all the trouble you are taking about Ruth's painting. My wife and I have all our mental capabilities. Only ten years ago, just before Kunni died we visited Kunni in her niece's home and that is where we SAW the picture. The matter is not at all a mystery. Frankly, your Mrs. Schoepf is a liar. Like so many others in your country, she seems to have amnesia when it comes to remembering what exactly happened in Germany from 1939 to 1946."

"My wife, with her Asian wisdom, claims we handled the matter all wrong. Instead of going with you for pleasant walks in the environs of Lichtenfels during my recent visit, I should have gone straight to Frau Schoepf to pay her a visit

— then 'discover' Ruth's painting with surprise and then make overtures to perhaps acquire it. By now no doubt, the painting has REALLY disappeared. Ah well, we can't win them all, just let's forget about it. Viele Gruesse Dein Klaus."



Max Obermayr, 1866

Portrait of "Ruth", 1918

A few weeks elapsed and for me the matter was finished. Then surprisingly came another letter from Hermann:

Hermann: "Lieber Klaus: Thanks for your letter. Of course Moli was right, we did bungle the matter. But not all is lost, I have good news today. Ruth's painting has now suddenly reappeared. My wife Lisa met Frau Schoepf in the market and Frau Schoepf told her that she 'found' the painting. She said that she spoke to her sister in Mistelfeld (a nearby village) and there was a big misunderstanding. The picture of 'The Monk and the Jug' is indeed hanging over her fireplace, but Ruth's painting hangs over the couch in her living room. She only has a fireplace in her kitchen."

"She told Lisa that she would never dream of parting with this painting. It has a great sentimental value to her as something she inherited from her aunt. However, Hermann would be welcome to look at it or even take a photo of it in case Klaus was interested. Dein Hermann."

Claude: "Lieber Hermann: Well — I am happy to receive your news in regard to the painting of Ruth. Indeed my assessment of Mrs. Schoepf was correct. She is a liar. But now we have 'her number' and one of these days — and let's not bungle the matter a second time — the immense 'sentimental value' of Mrs. Schoepf can be removed when dollars are involved. It's just a matter of time. Meanwhile, please take at least a photo of the painting. Dein Klaus."

Hermann: "Lieber Klaus: Yesterday I persuaded Frau Schoepf, who does not wish to part with Ruth's painting even for a minute, to go together with me to a studio to have a professional photograph made. When I arrived at her house I can testify that the picture was indeed not hanging over the fireplace which is in the kitchen, but rather prominently displayed over her couch in the living room."

"I was fascinated and deeply moved not to say 'hypnotized' by the simple beauty of the painting. It is a masterpiece — the naked soul of a very young child, — innocently holding a doll, looking out into the world with questioning wonder. I could not move for several minutes. Of all this I did not say a word to Frau Schoepf. She has no inkling of the unqualified beauty and the first class quality of this painting. There is no question that it BELONGS WITH YOUR COLLECTION. But since this is not to be for the moment, there is a positive side to this. I am so happy that at least a relic of the Bamberger family remains with us here, your origin. The place where the Bamberger family lived for several generations and contributed so much to the culture and lifestyle of our little town."

"As for the rest of Mrs. Schoepf's belongings, the portrait of the beer drinking monk included, it is only good for the town dump once Mrs. Schoepf goes to her Maker. The only thing of any value in the entire household is the painting of Ruth. Dein Hermann."

EPILOGUE

Over the past eight years, I continued to talk to various art galleries specializing in post World War I expressionistic art. In due time, I found the Gallerie St. Etienne on West 57th Street, which was interested in giving an exhibition of my collection in the memory of its collectors Otto and Jetta Bamberger of Lichtenfels, Germany. The idea was to sell some of the etchings and lithographs of my father's collection and purchase some original oil paintings with the proceeds. I hoped in some way to actually reconstruct the original collection and to replace some of the present works with the genre of art lost over the years.

This time the exhibition proved to be more successful than the previous one. A number of works were sold. With the proceeds we were able to purchase some of the Serger paintings and hopefully, with patience, we hope to acquire the portrait of Ruth as well.

Frederick Serger
"Artist's Wife and Dog"
1942



Frederick Serger
"Poppies" 1960



Alfred Kubin

"Bohemian Peddler Woman"



Alfred Kubin

"King Neptune"



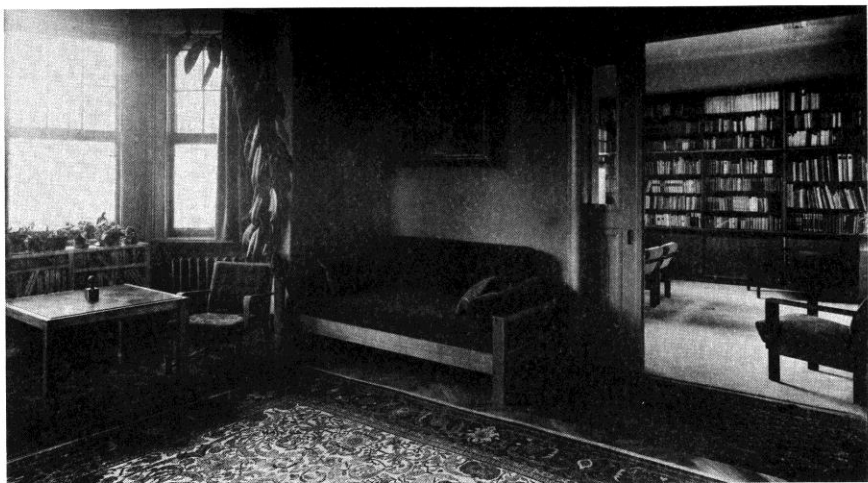
Henrietta Bamberger, 1931
Age 33



Otto Bamberger, 1931
Age 43

Klaus and Kunni, 1976
on terrace of
her niece's home
Lichtenfels,
Germany.





Living Room — Villa Bamberger, 1938



D. Bamberger, Lichtenfels, 1935
Family business dealers in
wicker and raffia materials.



Kunni the Cook, 1936
Kitchen - Villa Bamberger.



Lichtenfels, 1938



Villa BAMBERGER
with garden