

NICOLE STAVA:

ART BECOMES A VALID ALTERNATIVE INVESTMENT

Nicole Stava is one of the leading professionals in the field of international art trade. Her rich experience in European galleries and auction institutions, as well as caring for her family's collections, ranks her among erudite and trusted experts on the art market. For many years she worked purely in an international environment. The situation on the Czech market, the positive development of domestic buyers and collectors, and their growing interest in foreign acquisitions, led her to make her professional knowledge and practice visible in our country. She is also aware of the potential for the cooperation between the private sector and art projects in public space. As a co-owner of **PANSTVÍ BECHYNĚ**, she is developing the idea of establishing an art center in South Bohemia.

TEXT **LUCIE DRDOVÁ** / PHOTO **ONDŘEJ PRIDE**



"In the Czech Republic, I know collectors who buy world art at a high level, and primarily abroad. They even have their own curators who care on the expansion of these collections."

Nicole, when did you start dealing with art?

My first job right after the high school graduation was in a private gallery in Ascona. This was the first time I had the opportunity to look into the art business, and I soon found that I really enjoyed it. From the beginning, the interaction between the gallerist and the buyer as well as the artist filled me more than studying art history.

Ascona is a small town in the Italian part of Switzerland, which is not only a famous resort, but also famous for its Monte Verità, where important artists, writers or philosophers met. I worked in parallel for two galleries that belonged to a married couple who met here in the late 1970s. The owner was clearly an art dealer with a previous history of a successful financier and focused on art of the first half of the 20th century. His wife ran a gallery space devoted to contemporary artists. So I had the perfect opportunity to follow both specific ways of dealing with art. I tried to learn the business, especially from the owner, and this is where my affinity for classical modernism comes from.

How would you describe your position and present your professional and business activities for the Czech environment?

I did not study art history and I am not an expert in a specific area, I worked from the beginning as a so-called business getter and focused on business development either in the Czech Republic or in the world, or in representing Christie's auction house. I took care of business expansion, client search, networking and became an intermediary between the auction house and the client. Today I do the same with the difference that it is not just for one auction house and it is not exclusively at auction. In the meantime, trade has grown significantly into the mediation of sales between private entities. Occasionally, a gallery or the

collector's personal curator will enter. It's incredibly diverse, and since I've never focused on a single period, clients come to me with both old masters, 19th-century works, and the aforementioned classical modernism, and now mostly for the purpose of buying contemporary art.

What are the primary areas of your activity and how does an interaction with a client look like?

If a client turns to me that he wants to sell a work of art, I first examine the provenance and check the expertise, or I'll have it done. Based on this data, we then decide with the client whether we offer the work through auction or private sale. In the case of an auction sale, I will have the estimate processed by the relevant auction house according to its importance related to the work of art. The offers themselves are very different. This is due to what the houses focus on, both in the art itself and in the geographical area of operation. Otherwise, if the client wants to acquire art, the approach is of course different. I advise and consult experienced collectors or, conversely, beginners who need a more comprehensive advice. First I have to understand what he likes, so we travel to art fairs or visit exhibitions. Subsequently, I look for suitable works for him. Whether it is a private treaty or auction transaction, I always provide a complete service, including collecting advice, shipping or export permits.

How do you provide relevant expertise and with which experts and institutions do you cooperate?

If the work is offered to an international auction house, it is often sufficient to have the in-house experts' opinions. If this is not the case, I have to turn to world-renowned experts or institutions that manage the estates of important artists and issue certificates of authenticity. There is a system of very broad art experts in the Czech Republic, but I would never go to someone like that, because they are

not experts for a given period and they also cannot be. Such a system is not recognised in the world. It is necessary to find a given expert, and it is not always easy. Thanks to my time at Christie's, I am still in touch with colleagues. Some of them left and started their own companies or started working for galleries. The network of contacts is constantly evolving, which is why I manage to find relevant experts.

Are there unique private collections in the Czech Republic and how do you perceive the development of collecting in our country?

There are already interesting larger and smaller collections. Some even a few decades old. I am pleased with the development that is currently here. Obviously, art is becoming a valid alternative investment. In the Czech Republic, I know collectors who buy international art at a high level, and primarily abroad. They have their own curators who take care of expanding these collections. There are also very young collectors who are starting out, but they already have an international perspective and do not focus only on Czech artists. Recently, a group of several collectors have set up a second art investment fund, Artefin, which, unlike the first, deals exclusively with the purchase of contemporary art. I was invited to join the expert committee. My colleagues David Korecký and Jan Kudrna have a great overview. Contemporary art is experiencing a great hype and this will not change in at least the next two decades. Although old masters and modern art are still on the market, relatively few remain in private hands. The art of the second half of the 20th century and the 21st century is a clear trend. This was also seen at the Art Basel fair at the end of September. The ground floor has always been dedicated to classical modernism, which today makes up only a quarter of the space and the rest of it is contemporary art.

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Art Basel took place after more than two years, followed by Frieze in London and Fiac in Paris. How did you perceive the atmosphere of the fair and how did the gallery owners comment on the current situation on the international scene?

I talked to many gallerists and colleagues. The answers varied according to the importance and size of the gallery of course. Large and established galleries - as in the past - will sell out the offer basically before the fair even starts. Medium-sized galleries complained that they lacked the spontaneous purchases they primarily provide and are typical of American and Asian clients. Logically, compared to previous years, fewer people came. However, for me, business was a success. Personally, I prefer Basel in comparison to art fairs in large cities. In Basel, in the evening, you randomly meet gallery owners and clients for dinner, and business is conducted in an informal surrounding. Basel is small, its atmosphere is focused and yet casual.

Your parents were collecting art when you lived in Switzerland. In the mid-1990s, you bought castle Bechyně, in South Bohemia, which included other historical collections. What does your family collection look like and how do you work with it today?

Yes, there is a collection of old masters that has returned in restitution, and we are constantly expanding it. Then there is my parents' collection of Western art. Over time, it has expanded to include Czech contemporary artists, but it also includes the names of classical Czech modernism such as Toyen, Filla, Zrzavý, Špála or Lada. A collection of international modernism, including Picasso, Miró, Jawlenski, Arman and many others, remains in Zurich. Among other things, we also have a large collection of Picasso ceramics. We

are currently modernising our cataloging, checking inventories and having new expertises done. We simply institutionalise the collections, although I would call our purchases spontaneous.

The entire Bechyně estate has undergone significant changes and renovations in recent decades. What does it all include today?

For me and my sister Silvia, this means a huge opportunity and responsibility, but it is not a burden! We don't take it that way. I would call it a sustainable heritage, and one day we will either pass it on to the children or they will want to expand it with us. At present, we mainly deal with forestry and lumbering, hunting and tourism on the estate, including property management, rental of flats and hunting lodges, and the operation of a golf course. Not to mention the complete administration of the castle and the whole area. We want to change its concept, because the former castle brewery will fall into our laps (after 50 years, the original tenant of Aleš's South Bohemian Gallery is leaving). In the total number of exhibition spaces, including the castle tour halls, we are talking about more than 7,000 square meters. We also have a huge handling warehouse area near Bechyně, where we handle and process our own wood, where there is a huge potential for industrial development projects.

Are you planning to establish a museum or art center?

To make Bechyně an art center is one of the highest goals, toward which we slowly advance. We have a large collection and we organize exhibitions. Every summer we also exhibit sculptures in the castle park. The cooperation with a Berlin based gallery has already been agreed on for next year. The castle granary, castle tour halls and the castle brewery can be part of the future art hub.

As the initiator of many projects and at the same time an art expert, where do you perceive the potential for development for the Czech private environment and public space?

I have worked in many places around the world and I still like to travel a lot. At the same time, I live in southern Bohemia and do not suffer from pragocentrism. That is why I keep on being inspired by important art installations and projects abroad. In the Czech Republic, I lack conscious and continuous cooperations between investors, architects and art experts, which could bring professional input and interesting dynamics not only to public spaces. I have been approached several times to recommend works of art for emerging projects and public spaces, and I will be happy to assist with future projects of course.