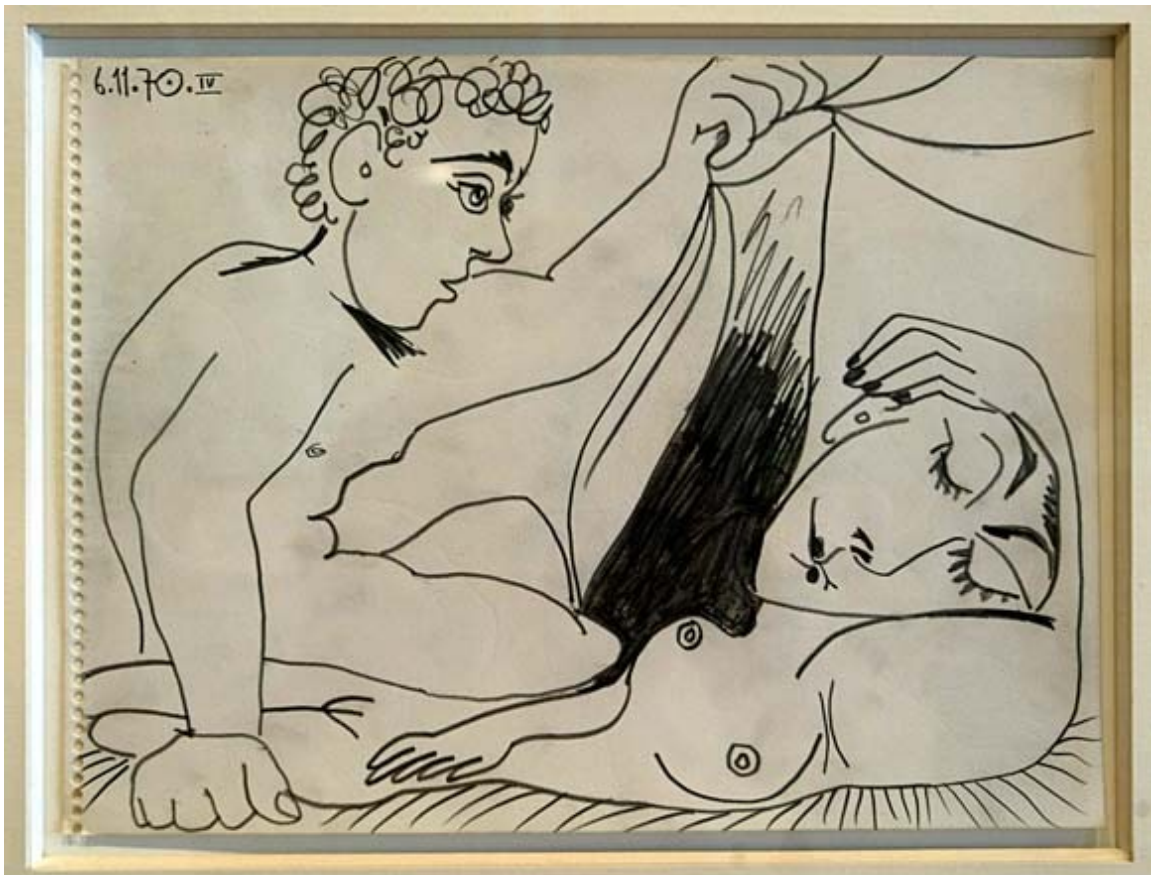


It took years for dealer John Berggruen to lay his hands on some Picasso sketches. His efforts have paid off in a new show.

Jesse Hamlin, Chronicle Staff Writer
Wednesday, March 17, 2004
©2004 San Francisco Chronicle



Chronicle / Deanne Fitzmaurice

In 1970, at the age of 89, Pablo Picasso made an exquisite series of 26 erotic drawings over an eight-day period at his home in Mougins, France. They brim with the master's undiminished skill, imagination and wit.

The sketchbook Picasso created from Nov. 5 to 13, 1970 -- two and a half years before his death -- is filled with delicate and lustful images of voluptuous nudes and dirty old men. It's an extended riff on voyeurism and exhibitionism, carnality

and art, by a passionate man who could no longer partake of the pleasures he was so potently picturing.

San Francisco art dealer John Berggruen first spotted these drawings four years ago in the Berlin apartment of his father, Heinz Berggruen, the famed European art dealer, collector and patron who was friends with Picasso and other major artists whose work he's given in large quantities to public museums in Germany and the United States.

"I looked at them and said, 'My god, these are wonderful,' " says John Berggruen, whose request to purchase the sketchbook was politely rebuffed by his elegant old man. He dropped the subject, but revisited it again over the years until his father finally agreed to sell the portfolio to him and a partner, New York's Mitchell-Innes & Nash gallery.

"He kept asking me and I gave in," says Heinz Berggruen, 90, on the phone from a Zurich hotel. "He's my boy, he's my son. I love John." The elder Berggruen is a shrewd businessman who paid handsomely for the sketchbook when he bought it from a friend of Picasso's a decade ago. But he is not profiting from this transaction, according to his son.

"I think I gave him a fair deal," says Heinz Berggruen, who lives with his wife, Bettina, above the Museum Berggruen in Berlin, which contains several hundred works by the masters of early modern art -- Picasso, Matisse, Klee and Giacometti among them -- that Berggruen has given, loaned or sold at a sizable discount to the German government.

These Picasso drawings, which have been meticulously removed from their spiral-bound sketchbook, are on display at the John Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco in the exhibition "Picasso: The Berggruen Album," through April 10. Then they'll be shown in New York.

The entire sketchbook of 26 drawings -- some in pen and ink, others in pencil, one colored with felt pens -- is being sold for \$3.6 million.

"I thought it would be wonderful to do something kind of in collaboration with my father," says Berggruen, 60, who was in his early 20s when he really got to know his dad, hanging around Heinz Berggruen's little gallery in Paris' Left Bank. The Grant Avenue gallery John Berggruen runs with his wife, Gretchen, has never been a part of his father's enterprise, despite the widespread assumption that it was.

Heinz Berggruen is a German Jew who left his native Berlin in 1936, two years before the Nazi anti-Semitic terror of Kristallnacht, to study at UC Berkeley. He landed a job as an arts critic at The Chronicle and married Lillian Zellerbach, scion of the prominent San Francisco family.

Berggruen became one of the first curators at the San Francisco Museum of Art (before it added the Modern to its name), where he organized a show of drawings by the great Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, whose then ex-wife, Frida Kahlo, had a fling with the young curator.

Modern art "was a new world to me, and very fascinating. I was very much drawn to it, and it stayed with me all my life," says Berggruen, who divorced when John was a baby.

Drafted in the U.S. Army, the multilingual Berggruen served in the signal corps in England and Germany. Returning to Berlin, he found the city in ruins and his family home destroyed.

"It was very depressing. I didn't see much hope there," says Berggruen, who moved to Paris, where he went to work in the fine arts division of UNESCO, run by his former boss at the San Francisco Museum of Art, Grace Morley. Within a few years he opened a small bookshop on the Ile St. Louis, specializing in illustrated books and later selling lithographs.

"I bought and sold, I had no money to start a collection," Berggruen says. But he did begin collecting "after I managed to do some very good deals. "

One of them was with the French Surrealist poet Paul Eluard, who needed money and offered to sell his friend Berggruen a beautiful Picasso drawing for about \$800. Berggruen didn't have the money, but after Eluard offered to throw in a lovely little Paul Klee piece for free, he scraped together the funds. A week later, a Swiss collector came into his shop and bought the Klee for what Berggruen paid for the Picasso drawing, "La Dormeuse."

"So the Picasso cost me zero. I gave it to my wife. We have it hanging in Berlin," says Berggruen, who became nearly as crazy about Klee as he is about Picasso. In the 1980s, he gave New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art more than 90 Klees, which hang in a gallery named for him.



Picasso, he says, "was the most fascinating man I had the chance to meet in my life. He wasn't playing the artist; he was just an extremely bright, witty, generous human being. I loved him. Throughout his long life, through all these various periods, starting with the Blue Period but even before, he was like a whole

continent. His talent was so vast, until the end. It was a great experience to be with a man who was so wonderfully creative."

John Berggruen got hooked on art and the business of selling it after connecting with his father in the 1960s. He'd earned a degree in political science at San Francisco State and worked in the political campaigns of President Lyndon Johnson and California Gov. Pat Brown. But politics went by the wayside after he saw Heinz Berggruen in action.

"I kind of knew him from a distance when I was younger," says Berggruen, a compact, energetic man with blue eyes and a smooth blond-fringed pate, standing among the Picassos the other day. "I wanted to get to know my father, and the easiest way do that was through his love of art and his work. He was passionate about his work. I found that I had an affinity for art. Maybe it's intuitive or genetic."

After working at galleries in London and New York, Berggruen came home to San Francisco in 1970 and opened a gallery of his own -- over his father's objections.

"When he started 40 years ago, I did everything I could to discourage him, " Heinz Berggruen says. "It's a tough business, I told him, do something else. I was very nervous. But he succeeded. I was wrong and he was right. He's doing very well, with Gretchen at his side."

At first, John Berggruen sold lithographs on consignment from his father. He'd pay him \$800 for a Miro print that retailed for \$1,000.

"My commission was 20 percent, which was a hard way to make a living," Berggruen says. "But I stuck it out and eventually got involved with some of the American artists from New York and here. I always had an interest in Diebenkorn and Thiebaud. I decided I wanted to work with living artists." Berggruen has shown works by Frank Stella, Manuel Neri, Ed Ruscha, Squeak Carnwath and many other artists over the years.

"People think I was part of the Berggruen gallery empire, but I never was, " says Berggruen, who put on a Matisse drawing show in collaboration with his father before Heinz closed his Paris gallery in 1980. "I was always on my own. That's the way my father was. He felt I should make whatever success or failure on my own."

Although he focuses on contemporary art, he says, "It's always wonderful to come back and do a Picasso drawing show. There's a continuity with the past and our family traditions."



Chronicle / Deanne Fitzmaurice

The elegant hardbound exhibition catalog has an essay by Berggruen's brother, Olivier, and one by Picasso biographer John Richardson, who writes that Picasso made these drawings in part to prove to himself that "he had lost nothing of his graphic skills." He quotes the artist: "I want to make sure that my hand has not developed a wobble." Clearly, it hadn't. The facility and economy of line is extraordinary in these drawings, as is the power of the erotic images.

"Note the five peeping Toms who appear in the last of the November 5 drawings," Richardson writes. "They help to give this sketchbook its keyhole intensity." By the time Picasso reached his 80s, Richardson says, "the brothel

and the studio had become one -- a place where fantasies could be realized, where art and Eros could keep Thanatos at bay."

John Berggruen loves the simplicity and sureness of Picasso's line, as well as the invention and intensity of the images.

"There's 89 years worth of experience there, 89 years of voyeurism," he says with a laugh.

At 90, Heinz Berggruen has lost none of his lust for life. He still works in the museum that bears his name, talking to visitors and checking on the postcard sales. He moved back to Berlin in 1996, seven years after the Berlin Wall came tumbling down, and decided to give many of the great works in his collection to the German people "as a gesture of reconciliation," he says.

He's been criticized by people who wonder how he could bestow such a gift "after what the Germans did to the Jewish people," Berggruen says. "I said, 'Let's try to work things out.' I feel the same thing about the war between the Israelis and the Arabs." He also has a sentimental attachment to the city of his youth, and the desire to expose the German people to art that the Nazis banned as degenerate. "I've been in the position where I can show the Germans again what Picasso and Klee are like, and they appreciate it greatly."

What did he teach his son about art and the art world?

"I told him to go to museums, to see as much art as he could. So many dealers don't bother to set foot in a museum, which is terrible. They only see it as a business. I told John, 'You have to be genuinely involved.' And he is. "

As for the younger Berggruen, he credits the old man with instilling the notion that "There's no substitute for hard work and professionalism. I also learned from him to be independent, to trust your instincts, your institution, and follow things through.

"He trusted his own eye, his own instincts. I do that myself. It has stood me in good stead. I've made some mistakes. You just go on to the next thing and hope you're right."