

Art Basel: the foundation of 1970

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Art Basel was founded in 1970 by three Basel gallerists: Ernst Beyeler, Trudl Bruckner and Balz Hilt. Beyeler, who had begun as a dealer in antiquarian books and prints after the Second World War, had become one of the most important dealers in classical modern art in Europe, with clients and suppliers among the great collectors of the time. Bruckner and Hilt ran smaller galleries in the city. The model they had in mind was the art fair in Cologne, which had been founded in 1967 as the first fair devoted to contemporary art and which admitted only a limited number of German dealers. The Basel founders wanted an international fair open to galleries from different countries, held in the halls of the Mustermesse and supported by the fair company.¹

The first Art Basel, held in June 1970, brought together about ninety galleries and publishers from ten countries and attracted, according to the fair's own history, more than sixteen thousand visitors. Its success was immediate. Within a few years, Art Basel had overtaken Cologne as the most important international fair for modern and contemporary art. Its location helped. Basel lay at the meeting point of Germany, France and Switzerland, within a few hours' drive of the collectors of the Rhineland, Paris, Zurich and Milan. Switzerland offered a stable currency, discreet banks and a liberal regime for the import and export of works of art. Above all, the city had a tradition of collecting that went back to the acquisition of the Amerbach cabinet in 1661 and that Part J will discuss in its cultural dimension.²

The early organisation of the fair already contained the features that would make it successful. A selection committee composed of gallerists decided which applicants could exhibit. The committee applied criteria of quality, reputation and programme, so that admission to Art Basel became a mark of distinction for a gallery. The fair took place each June, in the same week, which allowed collectors, curators and museum directors to plan their year

around it. The fair company provided the halls, the infrastructure and the marketing, while the gallerists shaped the content. This combination of commercial organisation and peer selection by the trade itself gave the fair a legitimacy that a purely commercial event would have lacked.³

Ernst Beyeler remained a central figure of the Basel art world until his death in 2010. In 1997, together with his wife Hildy, he opened the Fondation Beyeler in Riehen, a museum designed by Renzo Piano that houses their collection of classical modern art and has become one of the most visited art museums in Switzerland. The connection between the dealer, the fair and the museum illustrates the interweaving of commerce and culture that characterises the Basel art world. A dealer who founded the most important art fair in the world also created one of its most respected private museums. Later chapters return to the foundations and museums, so this chapter confines itself to the commercial side.⁴

1 Notes

1. On the foundation of Art Basel in 1970 by Ernst Beyeler, Trudl Bruckner and Balz Hilt, the role of Beyeler as a dealer in classical modern art, and the model of the Cologne art fair (Kunstmarkt Köln, founded 1967), see the publications of Art Basel, the Fondation Beyeler and the literature on the history of art fairs. To be verified. ↩
2. On the first Art Basel in June 1970 (about 90 galleries and publishers from ten countries; more than 16,000 visitors according to Art Basel's own history) and its rise to the leading international art fair in the 1970s, see the publications of Art Basel. Figures to be verified. ↩
3. On the role of the selection committee of gallerists in the admission of exhibitors to Art Basel and the fixed date in June, see the exhibitor regulations of Art Basel and the literature on art fairs, for example Barragán, *Art Fairs*, 2008, and Morgner, *Weltkunstbetrieb*, 2014. Titles to be verified. ↩
4. On the Fondation Beyeler in Riehen (opened 1997, architect Renzo Piano) and the death of Ernst Beyeler in 2010, see the publications of the Fondation Beyeler. To be verified. ↩

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