

The Amerbach Cabinet as civic founding act

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

Part B told the story of the Amerbach family, the printers and jurists of the humanist period, and of the purchase of their collection by the city and the university in 1661.¹ The legal and economic aspects of that purchase need not be repeated here. Its cultural dimension, however, deserves a second look, because the decision of 1661 established the pattern on which Basel's later identity as a city of art rests.

The cabinet had been assembled mainly by Basilius Amerbach, the son of Bonifacius, in the second half of the sixteenth century. It contained paintings and drawings by Hans Holbein the Younger, works by Konrad Witz and other masters of the Upper Rhine, coins and medals, goldsmiths' models, natural specimens and the books and papers of the family, including material linked to Erasmus.² When its sale abroad became a real possibility after the death of the last heir, the city treated the collection as a common good whose loss would diminish the community. The council and the university bought it with public money and installed it in the house *zur Mücke* near the cathedral, where it was opened to visitors in the 1670s.³

Three elements of that decision recur throughout the later history. A private collection was transferred into public ownership. The transfer was made to keep cultural capital in the city at a moment when the market would have dispersed it. Finally, the collection was entrusted to a learned institution, the university, which gave it a scholarly purpose beyond display. Each of these elements returns in the twentieth century, when Basel citizens voted to keep two paintings by Picasso, when the Hoffmann family placed contemporary art in a foundation dedicated to public access and when the Sacher family created an archive of musical manuscripts for researchers from all over the world.

The cabinet is often described as the first municipally owned public art collection in Europe, and sometimes in the world. Such claims of primacy are difficult to verify because the boundaries between princely,

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ecclesiastical, academic and civic collections were fluid in the seventeenth century.⁴ The Kunstmuseum Basel uses the date 1661 as its founding date, to which the city's cultural institutions refer as the origin of their tradition. The cultural power of the date lies precisely in that use, since it allows Basel to present itself as a city whose citizens chose art over money more than three and a half centuries ago.

1 Notes

1. On Johann, Bonifacius and Basilius Amerbach and the acquisition of the Amerbach Cabinet in 1661, see Part B, Chapter I. To be verified. ↩
2. On the contents of the Amerbach Cabinet, including the Holbein paintings and drawings, coins, goldsmiths' models and natural specimens, see Elisabeth Landolt and Felix Ackermann, *Sammeln in der Renaissance: Das Amerbach-Kabinett*, exhibition catalogue, Historisches Museum Basel and Kunstmuseum Basel, 1991. Title and details to be verified. ↩
3. On the installation of the Amerbach Cabinet in the Haus zur Mücke on the Schlüsselberg and its opening to the public around 1671, see the publications of the Kunstmuseum Basel and the *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*, article "Amerbach-Kabinett". Date to be verified. ↩
4. On the claim that the Amerbach Cabinet represents the first publicly owned art collection opened by a city, and on the competing claims of other early public collections (for example the Capitoline collections in Rome, 1471, and the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, 1683), see the literature on the history of museums. To be verified. ↩

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