

The Picasso vote of 1967

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The episode that most clearly expresses the civic character of Basel's patronage took place in 1967. In April of that year an aircraft of the charter airline Globe Air, in which the Staechelin family held a major interest, crashed near Nicosia in Cyprus with heavy loss of life. The airline's collapse left the family facing large claims, and the family foundation announced that it would have to sell two paintings by Pablo Picasso that had hung in the Kunstmuseum for years: *Les deux frères* of 1906 and *Arlequin assis* of 1923.¹

The response of the city became famous. The cantonal government proposed a credit of six million francs towards the purchase price, while citizens raised a further sum through private donations and a public festival, the so-called *Bettlerfest*, at which students, artists and residents collected money in the streets.² Because the credit was challenged by a referendum, the voters of Basel-Stadt had to decide whether public money should be spent on two paintings. In December 1967 they approved the credit with a clear majority.³

Picasso was moved by the vote. He invited the director of the museum, Franz Meyer, to his house in Mougins and offered the city a gift of four further works, among them a study for *Les Femmes d'Alger*, which the museum received shortly afterwards. Maja Sacher added a further painting of the Cubist period to mark the occasion.⁴ The square in front of the museum's extension was later named Picassoplatz.

The Picasso vote has become a founding legend of modern Basel. It demonstrated that the population as a whole, far beyond the patrician families, regarded art as part of the common good. It also showed that direct democracy, which is often associated with fiscal restraint, can produce generous cultural decisions when citizens identify with the object. Its structure repeated the pattern of 1661, since public money was again used to prevent a work from leaving the city. In 2017, on the fiftieth

anniversary, the Kunstmuseum and the city recalled the vote with an exhibition and public events.⁵ For a financial centre, the episode carries a further lesson: the willingness of a community to pay for culture is itself a signal that wealthy individuals and institutions read when they decide where to live and to give.

1 Notes

1. On the crash of a Globe Air Bristol Britannia near Nicosia on 20 April 1967, the bankruptcy of Globe Air and the decision of the Staechelin family foundation to sell the two Picasso paintings *Les deux frères* (1906) and *Arlequin assis* (1923), see the publications of the Kunstmuseum Basel and the *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*. To be verified. ↩
2. On the cantonal credit of CHF 6 million, the private fundraising of about CHF 2.4 million, including the Bettlerfest of December 1967, and the total price of about CHF 8.4 million, see the publications of the Kunstmuseum Basel and the literature on the "Picasso-Abstimmung". Figures to be verified. ↩
3. On the cantonal referendum of 17 December 1967, in which the voters of Basel-Stadt approved the credit for the purchase of the two Picasso paintings, see the official results of the canton of Basel-Stadt. Date and vote shares to be verified. ↩
4. On the gift of four works by Picasso to the city of Basel after the vote of 1967, including a study for *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907), following a visit by Franz Meyer to Mougins, and on the additional gift by Maja Sacher-Stehlin of *Le Poète* (1912), see the publications of the Kunstmuseum Basel. Details to be verified. ↩
5. On the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Picasso vote in 2017, see the publications of the Kunstmuseum Basel. Status to be verified. ↩

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