

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2005

Datebook, Section E-1, 3

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“Autoportrait” (1916) by Sonia Delaunay-Terk, an artist admired by Modernism Inc. gallery owner Martin Muller.

What’s the avant-garde up to? Ask Martin Muller. His S.F. gallery leads the way in **Modernism.**

Modernism Inc. gallery owner Martin Muller knew he was on to something as the first to exhibit Andy Warhol's work in San Francisco in 1982. The deal was sealed at the Factory in New York City, over a lunch arranged by Muller's stepsister, Diane von Furstenberg, whose portrait Warhol had painted. Warhol, in his white nylon wig and pink glasses, "kept saying 'groovy' to everything I was saying," Muller recalled.

To Muller, the Pop artist was not only a painter and graphic artist, but also a theoretician who would change art profoundly.

The show drew nearly 1,000 people on opening night. The works were cheap at \$20,000 each. But sales were downright dismal. It seemed that Warhol, whose works go for more than \$1 million a piece today, wasn't on the collectors' radar -- at least not yet.

The Bay Area has spent the past 25 years catching up to the Swiss-born Muller, whose closest friends regard him as nothing short of prescient.



“Coeurs Volants” (1936) gouache au pochoir, by Marcel Duchamp

"Looking back, he has never made a single mistake in his judgment of what important art in America was," said longtime friend John Martin, former publisher of Black Sparrow Press, the book house that discovered poet Charles Bukowski and others. "Martin has been like a talent scout who never signed anybody who wasn't good."

That wasn't how the public perceived it. Muller, who'd guaranteed to sell two Warhols, sold only one - and had to buy one himself.

Modernism Inc., currently at 685 Market St., has staged more than 500 shows since opening in 1979, with Muller and business partner Jeffrey Browning at the helm. The pair distinguished themselves by showing modern and contemporary European works in a scene dominated by Bay Area representational art.

In 1980, Modernism became the first gallery on the West Coast to show Russian avant-garde art, and is one of only two galleries in the nation that continue to exhibit such works today. Browning has since left the gallery to become an artist.

Muller, through gallery shows, has helped build the careers of American realist painter John Register, sociopolitical conceptual artist Gottfried Helnwein, social portraitist Robert Crumb and narrative painter Mark Stock, to name a few.

Stock remembers the day 20 years ago that Muller, in trademark bowtie, knocked on the door of his studio in a dangerous section of Los Angeles. He'd been struck by a reproduction in a magazine of Stock's "The Butler's in Love" works, showing a butler holding a lipstick-stained glass.

" 'You don't realize how much I've been looking for you,' " Stock recalled him saying. " 'It's taken all this time. It's incredible.' "



Martin Muller has helped build many artists' careers.

But even people who have never set foot in Muller's gallery have felt his effect.

The intellectual, with 25,000 books at his Nob Hill home, has spurred many people to collect, who go on to donate to public museums. Kent Logan, the former managing director of NationsBanc Montgomery Securities, who now lives in Vail, Colo., with his wife, Vicki, used to visit Muller's gallery one or two afternoons a week. The Logans built a collection so vast they gave part of it to SFMOMA and a Denver museum, and have 900 artworks left over.

"He was mentor, teacher, professor," Logan said. "I enjoy that dialogue, rather than have a dealer just try to sell you what he's got."

Muller has also helped with exhibitions at Bay Area museums such as Helnwein's challenging show, "The Child," at the Palace of the Legion of Honor last August, and the show of conceptual and abstract art, "Keeping Time: Naomie Kremer Works 1992-2004," at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.

"My job as an art dealer is to speed up people's awareness of an artist's work," Muller said. "I have only exhibited artists that I respond to emotionally and intellectually and that, in my opinion, raise the right questions. Muller, a native of Geneva, started reading Russian literature at age 16, graduated from the Hotel Management School in Lausanne, Switzerland, and studied art history at the University of Geneva. On a trip to Russia, he was treated to a private viewing of a trove of Russian avant-garde art -- produced from 1900 to 1930 during a time of political and social change -- owned by a man named George Costakis. It was illegal, at that time, to own or show.

When he saw Kasimir Malevich's abstract "White on White," it provided Muller with "the emotions that I would get out of Schoenberg, experience out of reading Dostoevsky, Nietzsche or Schopenhauer," he said. "It was all in one picture. That's why I was so moved and shaken and why I had to pursue this journey. And that's precisely why I did."

After finishing his studies, he moved to San Francisco. The United States and its "vastness" had always been appealing to him, compared with the confined quarters of Europe, he said.

Here, he was introduced to Prince Nikita Lobanov-Rostovsky and his wife, Nina. The prince would become his mentor in art, art dealing and personal style -- from fashion to learning how to host literary salons. Muller began to earn commissions and built his own personal art collection, and some years later, used profits from the sale of his Warhol to begin buying Russian avant-garde art to bring it to the Western world. It was that, he said, or risk it being destroyed forever.

Like his mentor, who lent him countless art books, Muller cannot let friends or visitors leave his gallery without heaping a stack of books into their arms, to broaden their intellectual horizons.

"He loves to share, to educate people," said friend and author Barnaby Conrad III. "He has given away thousands of books over the years. He'll say, 'Have you read Stefan Zweig? No? You must. I'll get it for you.'"

Muller also plays jazz piano, paints, and holds a black belt in karate, Conrad added.

Muller, not content to stick with art, is at the helm of another enterprise: the publication of a literary journal in Paris called Luna Park.

"He's an extremely enterprising and brilliant galleriste, in terms of being able to straddle several different areas of interest at once," said Steven Nash, director of the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, who used to work at the Fine Arts Museums in San Francisco. "To introduce and stick with, in a very dogged fashion, a subject as relatively esoteric as Russian avant-garde art is truly remarkable."

Robert Johnson, a curator at the Fine Arts Museums, considers Muller "visionary."

Martin, the former publisher, agrees: "He's still 25 years ahead of the curve. I don't think the world will ever catch up with Martin Muller."



"Late Afternoon Light" (1994-95), by John REGISTER, oil on canvas.