

Spring 2023 Wild Art Kim Lim 21st-Century Folk Katrin Bellinger The Sounds of Nature Ai Weiwei

Art Quarterly



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Left: Katrin Bellinger in her London home

Meet the collectors: Katrin Bellinger

Elizabeth Fullerton visits the London home of a collector whose passion for drawings, particularly Old Masters, and works of art that highlight the creative process, has led to an extensive body of work, and a foundation through which to support and share it. Portrait by Philip Sinden

German-born collector and philanthropist Katrin Bellinger's name may not be widely known publicly but behind the scenes she has supported many of the exhibitions widely enjoyed in museums and galleries around the UK. In 2022 alone, her Tavolozza Foundation (Tavolozza meaning 'palette' in Italian), in London, supported 'Fuseli and the Modern Woman: Fashion, Fantasy, Fetishism' at the Courtauld Gallery, 'Inspiring Walt Disney: The Animation of French Decorative Art' at the Wallace Collection, and the Royal Academy's acclaimed 'Making Modernism' exhibition, to name just a few. Supported shows on this year include 'The Van de Veldes: Greenwich, Art and the Sea', opening at the Queen's House on 2 March. Bellinger's own collection, which numbers around 1,800 works, primarily drawings, is focused on the theme of the artist at work.

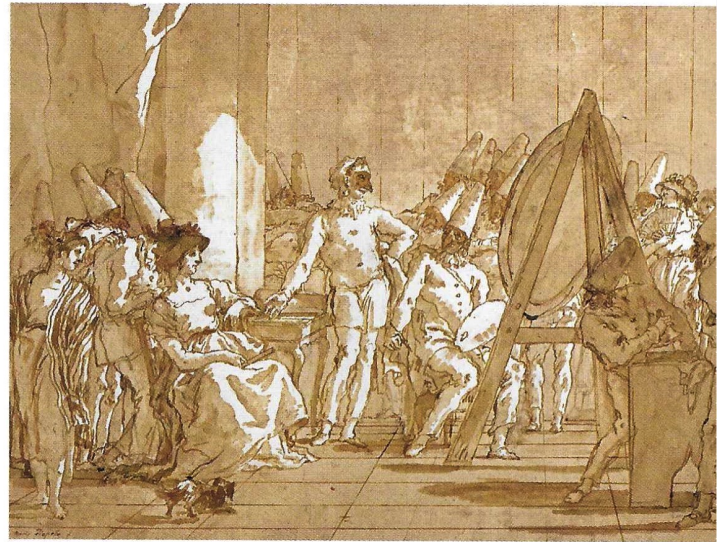
With themed collections there is always the risk of becoming repetitive, but Bellinger has broadened the scope beyond just the artist in the studio to encompass sub-themes of artists working in the landscape, in the academy, artists' models, artists' tools and women artists through the ages. 'Basically, I'm intrigued with looking over the artists'



Above: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Rembrandt and Saskia*, 1636; right: Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo, *Punchinello as a Portrait Painter*, c1802-03



Right: Francesco Mazzola (Parmigianino), *Apollo at an Easel*; facing page: Pier Leone Ghezzi, *Self-Portrait*



shoulders. How do they do it, the artistic process, workshop practices? How do artists get trained? It's very wide-ranging, and therefore I haven't gotten bored,' Bellinger says.

Spanning the 1500s to the present day, the collection includes works by Parmigianino, Rembrandt, Ingres, Seurat, and Schiele, among many others, and has also diversified into different media, expanding first from Old Master drawings into prints, then into oil sketches and photography.

Bellinger regularly lends works – most recently for shows including Whitechapel Gallery's 'A Century of the Artist's Studio: 1920-2020' and 'Reframed: The Woman in the Window', at Dulwich Picture Gallery. For their show 'Absent Artists' in 2022 at Charleston, near Lewes, artist-curators Langlands & Bell selected works from Bellinger's collection exploring the themes of the artist's space and working implements. 'The pleasure of collecting is to share it, that's what's fun,' Bellinger says from her elegant home, whose walls are hung salon-style with drawings.

Bellinger has been collecting art since 1985, initially alongside her career dealing in Old Master drawings, but gradually, it took over. 'Collecting in general is an affliction that I feel

you're born with,' she notes. She began as a child, collecting pebbles and shells and as a teenager moved on to biscuit tins and early-20th-century advertising posters. Later, as an adult, she channelled her obsession into drawings. 'I find that drawings are more immediate,' she explains. 'You can see the faults of an artist on paper, how they're working something out, trying to solve a problem. You can really see the hand of an artist.'

Sculpture rarely fits into the collection's theme of the artist at work, but there are exceptions such as a bronze cast of the 19th-century painter Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier's hands by Vincenzo Gemito (1852-1929) and a set of bronze paintbrushes by established contemporary artist Phyllida Barlow. The latter sits on a sideboard in the dining room where this interview takes place, beneath three black wall vitrines containing pots by artist and writer Edmund de Waal, and alongside a group of silver arms stretching skyward by the Swiss artist Not Vital, an old friend. 'We swapped,' says Bellinger. 'I've always loved his work. He got a Tintoretto drawing and I got the sculpture.' There's also a huge narwhal tusk, a Marc Quinn flower sculpture and a vase bearing a self-portrait by German artist Andreas Schulze.

Two large, vibrant contemporary paintings hang on the wall which seem conspicuously unaligned to her theme. They were just work that took her fancy, Bellinger admits, but she points out that both have oblique links to Old Masters. One, by the Romanian twins Gert and Uwe Tobias, was inspired by an 18th-century chinoiserie print and the other, by Jörg Immendorff, is based on a woodcut by Caspar David Friedrich.

When buying a work, it has to contribute value to an aspect of the collection, Bellinger says; it isn't just about ticking boxes in terms of the theme. 'The first thing has to be that it speaks to me and touches me. Then I go through the process: does it fit the collection? Does it add something? If I really love something, then I slightly bend the rules,' she adds.

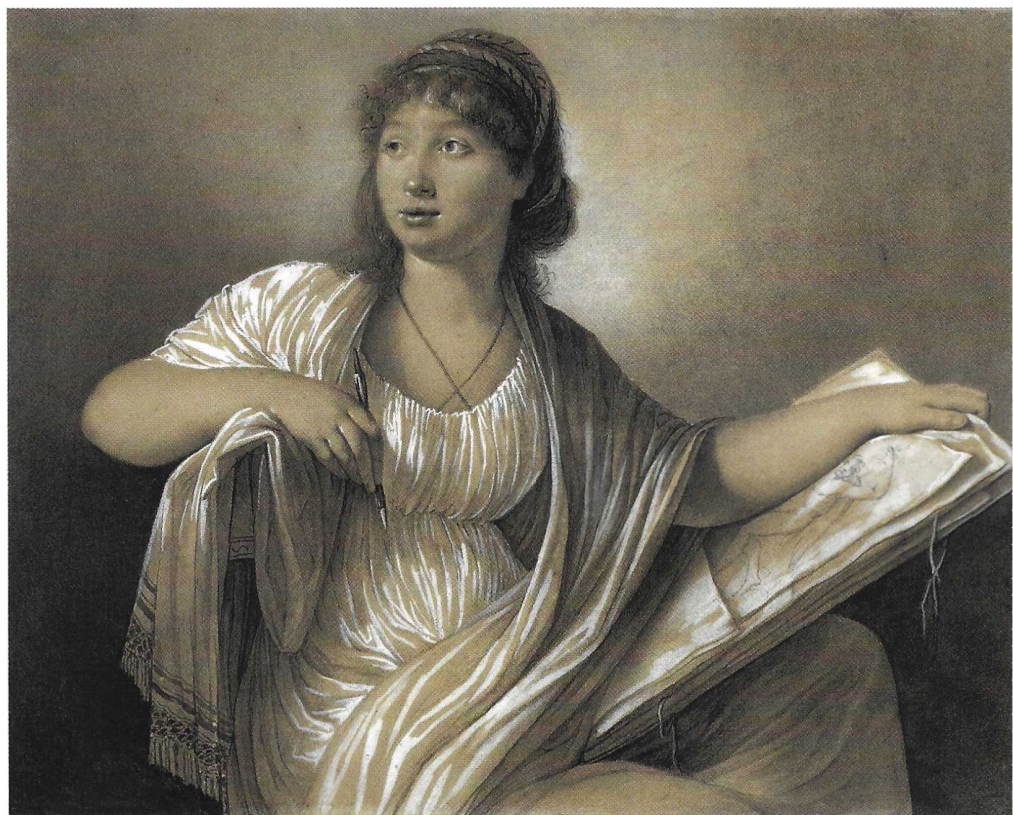
Bellinger's heart first and foremost belongs to Italian drawings from the 16th and 17th centuries – works she owns by Giambattista Tiepolo and his son Domenico hold a special place. But, as they rarely come up for sale, she turned her attention to French 18th- and 19th-century works on paper, which are more available. Her first acquisition was a small self-portrait in pen and brown ink by Pier Leone Ghezzi (1674-1755), which she bought





ALL IMAGES COURTESY KATRIN BELLINGER COLLECTION

Left: François Bonvin, *A Woman Painting at an Easel*, c1848; below: Anne Guéret, *Portrait of a Female Artist With a Portfolio* (Self-Portrait), c1793



Facing page: Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Portrait of Auguste Gaspard Louis Boucher-Desnoyers*, 1825

as a dealer and then became reluctant to part with. Collecting what you deal in can pose a conflict of interest, as a dealer can't bid against their clients. One of Bellinger's toughest dilemmas was when a series she had her eye on – *Twenty Drawings Depicting the Early Life of Taddeo Zuccaro* (c1595) by his brother, the Italian Renaissance artist Federico Zuccaro – came up for auction. She was geared up to buy the series and in her mind had already hung it in her collection, but then the J Paul Getty Museum called asking her to bid for it – which she did. 'Of course, it's much better that the series is in a public collection,' she says. 'But it's a weird thing, that wish to own a work. That's the particular mindset of the collector.'

There are other pitfalls to collecting: occasionally, the desire to acquire an artist's work can cloud one's judgement, as happened in the case of a drawing by the German Realist artist Adolph von Menzel (1815-1905). 'I was so desperate to get a Menzel,' says Bellinger. One came up that was catalogued as a Menzel, although it didn't look like the artist's hand, but the expert accepted it as such. 'My first reaction at the time was, "That's not by Menzel," she recalls. 'You should always go with your instinct. But I didn't because

I so badly wanted it. I talked myself into it... but I still love the drawing.'

Born in 1958, Bellinger grew up in Cologne, steeped in art. Her mother regularly took her to visit Romanesque churches, the Old Masters at the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum and the collection of modern and contemporary art at the Museum Ludwig. It was the heyday of Cologne's art scene, and she came into contact with art that was then avant-garde, by artists such as Georg Baselitz, A R Penck, Marcus Lüpertz, Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter.

She began dealing in Old Master drawings in her late twenties after doing a Works of Art course at Sotheby's and learned on the job. It was a very different time. 'Auction houses didn't even sell contemporary art – and,' she notes, 'you still, as a woman, had to wear a skirt and not slacks.' Having enjoyed success in dealing, she set up the Tavolozza Foundation in 2001 to support the medium of drawing. Its work has two main strands: supporting shows connected to the theme of the artist at work and keeping works on paper visible. 'I'm worried, with funding being cut to museums, that drawings will be the first to suffer because they're sensitive to light and live in boxes in print rooms,' she says. As a result, Bellinger is doing

what she can to fund exhibitions, acquisitions and scholarly publications around her areas of interest and to put collections online to make them virtually accessible. Tavolozza has also helped to fund capital projects such as Leighton House in London's newly built space for drawings, and it supports the Artist's Studio Museum Network, initiated in 2016 by the Watts Gallery, the former studio-home of George and Mary Watts in Surrey. Among the international exhibitions the foundation is currently supporting is 'Beyond the Light: Identity and Place in Nineteenth-Century Danish Art' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (the Met), showing to 16 April.

After nearly four decades of collecting, Bellinger has reached a critical juncture. 'Being in my sixties, you think about what you do with it all,' she says. She had always assumed her two grown sons, who live in the US, would not want to be burdened with the collection because 'it's a headache to look after works on paper'. She considered giving it away, but since few museums could take it on in its entirety, she would most likely need to dismantle it. 'Then I had a conversation with my boys and they actually said: "Oh, but we love your collection, it's what we grew up with."' Now Bellinger is

Below: Egon Schiele, *Office at the Mühlring Prisoner-of-War Camp, 1916*; right: Lucian Freud, *The Artist's Studio, With a Study for 'Large Interior After Watteau' on an Easel, 1983*



Left: Phyllida Barlow, *Untitled: Paintsticks, 2011*; facing page: Georg Baselitz, *Der Maler, 1969*



excited about the prospect of showing her children the ropes and gradually handing over to them. 'Of course, if they take it on, it's their decision whether they keep it or sell it,' she says. 'In a few cases I would say: "It would be very nice if this ended up at the British Museum or the Met. But then it's up to them."'

In the meantime, Bellinger is taking the collection in a new direction. Although she started buying contemporary art some time ago, the move has given her fresh inspiration. 'I had Pablo Bronstein here last week because I thought it would be great if he could do something,' she says. 'Bridget Riley came for lunch yesterday. Sadly, she doesn't do self-portraits. And Celia Paul, who of course has lots of self-portraits.' One advantage of collecting contemporary art is the opportunity to meet the artists. But, 'because you might like the person but not the art, or like the art but not the person, it gets much more complicated to judge things'.

Bellinger gives me a quick tour of her home. The bulk of the collection is stored at a separate location and the displays are rotated regularly. The bright front room is filled with 19th-century oil sketches – of artists at their easel, in the life room at the Royal Academy, artists' palettes and self-portraits. In a second living room, under

low lighting, are drawings of and by women, mostly from the 18th and 19th centuries. Two highlights, by professional women artists, are a wonderfully vivid portrait of a female artist by Anne Guéret (1760-1805), who was a pupil of Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825), and a portrait of the painter François-André Vincent (1746-1816) by Marie-Gabrielle Capet (1761-1818). Most of the works, though, are by amateurs for whom drawing, singing and playing the piano were simply part of the repertoire demanded of an accomplished society lady. 'You were not expected to be too good, that wasn't ladylike,' says Bellinger. 'So that threshold to professionalism was a very difficult one to cross.' In another part of the room hangs a sketch of David Hockney by the illustrator Pierre Le-Tan and one of Le-Tan by Hockney. A Lucian Freud drawing graces another wall.

This room leads into an even darker one – 'We're very conscientious here,' says Bellinger by way of apology for the lack of light. One wall is largely devoted to works by the 19th-century French painter François Bonvin. Bellinger was thrilled to unite two preparatory sketches by the artist with the finished paintings; particular gems are a drawn and a painted portrait of

Bonvin's mistress' sister, the artist Sophie Unternährer at her easel. Most of the recent contemporary acquisitions are to be found upstairs in Bellinger's bedroom. Among them are a fabulous Donna Huddleston, a brooding self-portrait by Lisa Brice and another by Chantal Joffe using pastel, clearly looking at Degas. Above the bed hangs a magnificent Barbara Walker work after Johann Liss' *Judith in the Tent of Holofernes* (c1622), which isolates the Black servant who is rarely noticed, being almost completely eclipsed by Judith's sensual gleaming back.

Elsewhere, Bellinger's contemporary collecting is mainly focused on drawings by younger artists which are more affordable, as she doesn't want to compete with her prior focus of Old Masters. Incredible patience must be needed to collect Old Masters, I suggest. 'Sometimes you hunt for things for years,' Bellinger acknowledges. 'And you always have a collection in your mind of works you missed but, in the end, I believe things are either meant to come to you or not.'

● For more information about the collection foundation, visit katrinbellingercollection.com and tavolozzafoundation.com

