

Seven pieces of maiolica from the former Pringsheim Collection,
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In 2008 the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Foundation received a letter written on behalf of the heirs of the German collector Prof. Alfred Pringsheim (1850-1941), the owner of a celebrated collection of Italian maiolica, from which seven pieces were acquired by the collector J.N. Bastert that are now in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen.

The heirs asked the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Foundation, which was the owner of the objects, to return them. The museum responded by proposing that the question be jointly submitted for a binding recommendation to the Advisory Committee on the Assessment for Items of Cultural Value and the Second World War (the Restitutions Committee). The museum is currently awaiting the heirs' reply, but in the meantime has launched its own investigation of the history of the collection, which is being carried out by the art historian Judith Niessen.



Alfred Pringsheim was a well-known and highly respected professor of mathematics at the Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich. His father left him a large fortune made in the coal and railway industries, which enabled Pringsheim to become a major benefactor. He and his wife Hedwig Dohm, a prominent feminist who was the daughter of a journalist, entertained many guests from the cultural elite of Bavaria and Munich in the 'palace' they had built in Narcissstrasse. Thomas Mann, one of their regular visitors, married Katia, the Pringsheim's daughter, who bore him five children.



Pringsheim was a collector in several spheres, but was known internationally above all for his collections of maiolica, silver and gilt objects. The maiolica collection was described by Otto Falke, director of the Schlossmuseum in Berlin, in an authoritative, two-volume scholarly catalogue.

Alfred and Hedwig Pringsheim were non-practising Jews. In 1933 they were forced to sell their house to the Nazi Deutscher Arbeitsverein and had to move. Their collection had formed a large part of their capital since 1912, and they now started eating into it as a result of the unfavourable sale of their house and the difficult position they found themselves in.

They had been trying to sell parts of the collection since 1933, including the maiolica, but that became completely impossible in 1936 when the maiolica was put on the national heritage list, which prohibited its export. The Pringsheims' passports were seized in 1937, scotching any prospect of fleeing to Switzerland, as Katia and Thomas Mann had been urging. On 21 November 1938 much of their collection was confiscated by the Gestapo, including the silver and the paintings. The couple finally got permission to auction the collection abroad, provided various pieces and two silver beakers by Ludwig Krug were 'donated' to the state. The sale took place in June and July 1939 at Sotheby's in London. A large portion of the disappointing proceeds had to be paid to the German state, with Alfred and Hedwig Pringsheim using the remainder to emigrate to Switzerland.

At the London sale on 7-8 June and 19-20 July several of the maiolica objects were bought by Hein Hamer for Jaap Bastert (1891-1976) and his wife Iet van Schaardenburg (1894-1985). Dr Mienke Simon Thomas, senior curator of decorative arts in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, published an article on the collector J.N. Bastert in the anthology *150 jaar Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen* (Rotterdam 1999).

In 1940, Museum Boijmans staged an exhibition of the Bastert-Van Schaardenburg Collection under the title *Oud-aardewerk van 1250 tot 1650. Tentoonstelling van oud-aardewerk uit de verzameling Bastert-van Schaardenburg* (Old Earthenware from 1250 to 1650. Exhibition of Old Earthenware from the Bastert-Van Schaardenburg Collection). On 1 May that year Bastert was appointed a curator in the museum, and that summer negotiations got under way for the sale of the collection, which included maiolica from the Pringsheims.

The collection was bought in 1941 with funds provided by the Rotterdam Administration Fund Foundation (which was closely allied to the Promotion of Popular Well-Being Foundation), the Erasmus Foundation, the Rembrandt Association and Bastert's father-in-law. It was given to the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Foundation on permanent loan and was bought by the City of Rotterdam in 1948.

The Pringsheims died in exile - Alfred on 25 June 1941 and Hedwig on 27 July 1942. After the Second World War the proceeds of the auction were repaid in full and the objects confiscated by the Nazis (precious metal and other objects) were returned to the Pringsheim heirs. Problems over the export of these objects from Germany were finally resolved in 1953 after the sale of the so-called Holbein goblet to the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum.

Translation: Michael Hoyle

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