

Art, finance, and elite networks

The Presidents of the Zurich Art Society (Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft), 1890-2021

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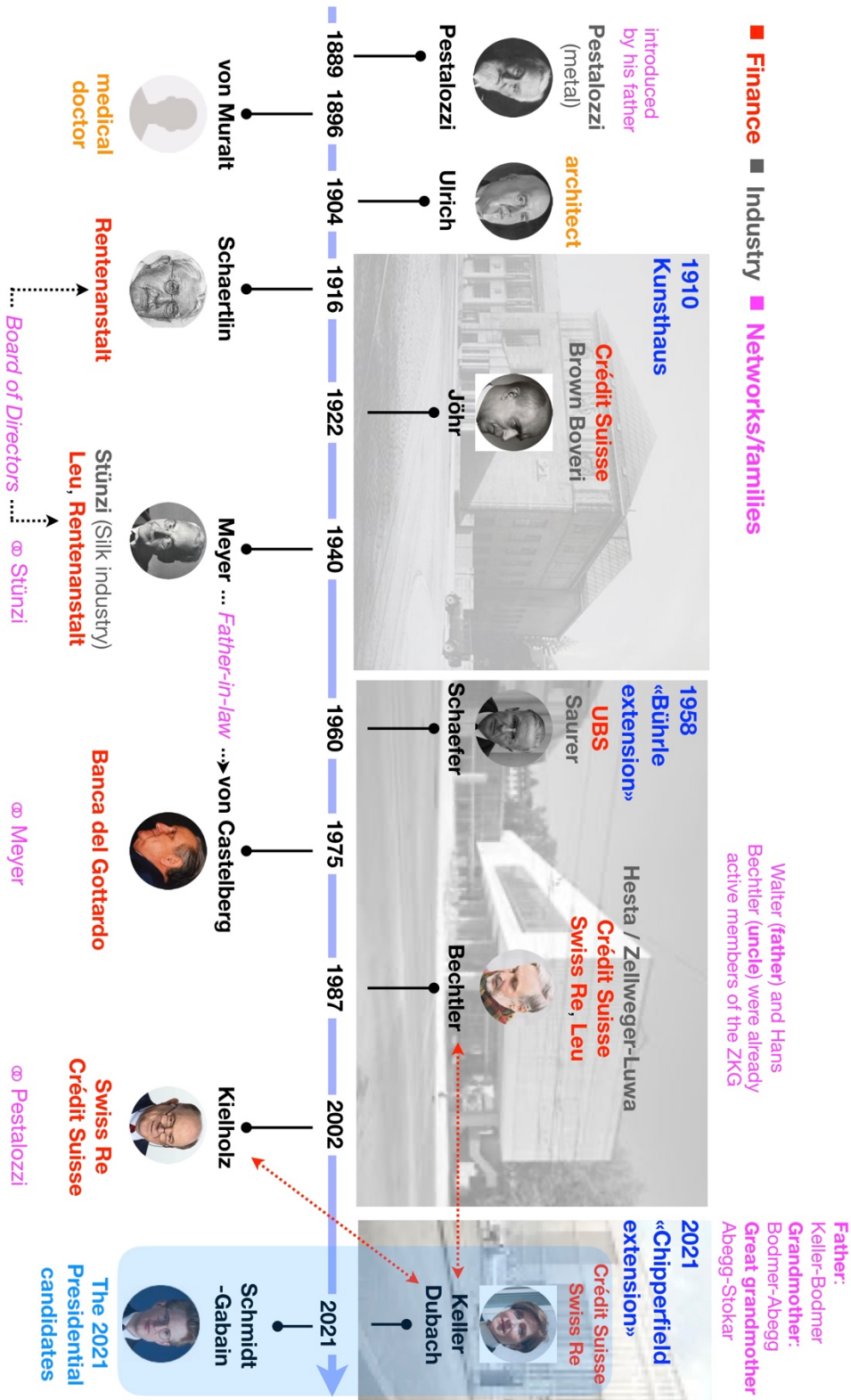
Dynastic continuity versus «palace revolution» ?

In late May 2021, the general assembly of the Zurich Art Society (Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft, hereafter ZKG) will elect its 11th president. For the first time in its history, the insider candidate of the ZKG Committee, **Anne Keller Dubach** – who could thus become the first woman to lead the society and who has developed her career in close contact with two former ZKG Presidents (**Thomas Bechtler** and **Walther Kielholz**) – has been challenged by an outsider candidate, lawyer **Florian Schmidt-Gabain**. As various journalists have underscored, such a «generational change» and «palace revolution» has little chance to take place.¹ This election coincides with important developments for the Kunsthau Zürich, namely the opening of its new «Chipperfield» extension, which will host among others the famous and controversial Bührle art collection, as well as the nomination of a new director for the Kunsthau.

This conjunction of events has motivated us to present a concise centennial perspective on the trajectories of the ZKG Presidents since 1896. The short sections below offer a first periodization of the evolution of this influential Zurich cultural institution, in particular its long-term integration into local financial networks. This periodization is also displayed in a synthetic **timeline**. Interested readers can consult the individual **biographical profiles** of ten ZKG presidents (as well as the 2021 candidates for this office). This note also points to ongoing research elaborated in the context of our wider research project on local urban elites in Switzerland.

¹ Christoph Heim, Palastrevolution in der Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft, Tages Anzeiger, 21.3.2021; Philip Meier, Wer weist dem Kunsthau Zürich den Weg in die Zukunft?, NZZ, 29.4.2021; Daniela Janser & Kaspar Surber, Kunsthau. Die Zürcher K-Frage, in WOZ Die Wochenzeitung, 29.4.2021; Daniele Muscionico, Zürcher Kunsthau: Geld und Geist liegen im selben Bett, St. Galler Tagblatt, 15.5.2021.

A timeline of ZKG Presidents, 1890-2021



1890-1922 – Welcome to the Heimplatz.

Amateurs, artists, and notables in the early years of the ZKG

The *Zürcher Künstlergesellschaft*, founded in 1787, belonged to the first wave of art societies that emerged in Switzerland. Founded by a heterogeneous group of artists and art amateurs to promote and stimulate artistic sensibility and patriotic art, the association accepted members on the condition these ones would donate a work of art they had either produced themselves or purchased, which laid the foundations of the *Künstlergesellschaft* own collection. During the second half of the 19th C. the *Künstlergesellschaft* repeatedly – and unsuccessfully – tried to obtain subsidies from the city council to build a new museum dedicated to permanent exhibitions. Some of its members founded in 1853 the *Zürcher Kunstverein* to raise money to expand the art collection, while a third society, the *Künstlerhaus Zurich*, whose main ambition was to build a permanent exhibition building in the city centre, emerged in 1895.

The *Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft* (hereafter ZKG) originated from the 1896 merger of the three previously mentioned societies. This new art society was characterized by a selective admission system as well as high financial contributions – which ensured an exclusive and elitist membership of around 1000 persons. A new executive committee, supported in its tasks by various commissions, finally managed to open its own museum, the *Kunsthhaus*, in 1910. The first three presidents from this early period (**Pestalozzi, von Muralt, Ulrich** > for **biographical profiles**, see below) displayed relatively similar profiles: they all worked in liberal professions and entertained contacts in both the artistic and economic spheres. Gottfried **Schaertlin**'s nomination as ZKG President marked a transition in the ZKG presidents' profiles, who since then all had strong networks in the finance and banking sectors.

Emilie Widmer's ongoing doctoral thesis analyses the constitution and activities of the Geneva, Basel and Zurich art societies from 1890 to 1946, with a particular attention given to their presidents and the membership of their executive committees. Contact: emilie.widmer@unil.ch

1922-1975 – The rise of the «financial praetorians».

The ZKG as platform for financiers and art collectors

The 1922 appointment of Schweizerische Kreditanstalt (SKA/Crédit Suisse) director **Adolf Jöhr** as ZKG President confirmed the entry of powerful financiers at the pinnacle of the ZKG, a development that coincided with the consolidation of Switzerland, and Zurich in particular, as an international financial centre. Jöhr also promoted the admission of collective members to the ZKG to meet the growing financial needs of the Kunsthhaus. In the mid-1920s, the ZKG had over 2000 individual members and 8 new collective members – most of them insurance companies and banks, prominent among them the Crédit Suisse. During Jöhr's presidency, some ZKG members publicly criticized him for strengthening both the power of the ZKG executive committee (Vorstand) and that of the collective members, to the detriment of the ZKG General Assembly. Tensions between artists and financiers – who were dubbed «financial praetorians» (Finanzprätorianer) by their less-moneyed opponents – surfaced repeatedly. From Jöhr onwards, all ZKG presidents were members of the financial elite. Jöhr's successor, **Franz Meyer**, president of the Rentenanstalt and vice-president of the Bank Leu, collaborated closely with industrial magnate and art collector Emil Bührle to build a major extension of the Kunsthhaus in 1958. **Alfred Schaefer**, Meyer's successor, was himself the director of the Schweizerische Bankgesellschaft (SBG/UBS).

In addition to financial grandees and artists, the ZKG committee also included (since the 1890s) representatives from the City Council. By 1960, the Kunsthhaus Zürich had become a national level museum and a flagship of municipal culture. Confronted with increasing financial needs, the ZKG regularly requested an increase in municipal and then cantonal subsidies. At the time of the opening of

the «Bührlebau» in 1958, these public subsidies already accounted for more than half of the ZKG budget.

Stéphanie Ginalska and **Emilie Widmer** are currently analyzing with **Claire-Lise Debluë** the interwar rise of the «financial praetorians» (Finanzprätorianer) within the ZKG in an upcoming paper. Contact: stephanie.ginalska@unil.ch

Matthieu Leimgruber's study on industrialist and art collector Emil Bührle, a key ZKG benefactor, highlights the manifold links between Bührle and ZKG Presidents Franz Meyer and Alfred Schaefer. For the report (in German, with English and French summaries, see <<https://www.fsw.uzh.ch/de/personenaz/lehrstuhlleimgruber/Forschung/Bührle.html>>. Contact: matthieu.leimgruber@uzh.ch

1975-2021– The «financial praetorians» and the consolidation of the Zurich cultural «Standort»

Until 2021, the overall profile of the ZKG presidents has remained stable and was characterized by close connections between finance and prominent families. **Carlo von Castelberg**, who succeeded Alfred Schaefer in 1974 was thus the stepson of Schaefer's predecessor (**Franz Meyer**) as well as a prominent banker contributing to the development of the Lugano banking place (Banca del Gottardo). Castelberg contributed to open the Kunsthaus to emerging contemporary art. His successor, **Thomas Bechtler**, was a well-connected entrepreneur and sat on the boards of major Zurich banking institutions. Both Bechtler's father and uncle had already been long-time prominent members of the ZKG in the 1950s-1960s. These profiles underscore the growing importance of private foundations created either by the families of ZKG Presidents (e.g. Bechtler Stiftung, 1955) or their banks (e.g. SBG/UBS Foundation, 1962) in cultural affairs.

The current, and soon outgoing, President (since 2002) of the ZKG, **Walther Kielholz**, represents in this context the culmination of an almost century-long development. An almost paradigmatic example of high-density Zurich elite networks, Kielholz initiated both the realization of a new grand extension of the Kunsthaus – the soon to be opened «Chipperfield building» – as well as the integration of the world-class Bührle modern art collection in the new building. His designated successor, **Anne Keller Dubach** comes from «blue blood» Zurich families and has made her career in corporate cultural foundations of the financial sector (Crédit Suisse and Swiss Re). In this very structured tradition, the unexpected candidacy of young lawyer **Florian Schmidt-Gabain** seems indeed a little out of place. This candidacy mirrors nevertheless the expansion of the ZKG beyond its usual elite networks: from 1980 to 2019 the ZKG membership almost tripled (from around 7000 to over 20000) while Walter Kielholz also greatly increased the number of collective corporate members.

Supported by dense and deep private connections and corporate patronage, the ZKG and the Kunsthaus thus continue to play a key role in elite networks. At the same time, this private prestige is sustained by the continued injection of public money.

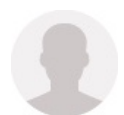
This overview of the ZKG presidents' profiles highlights the enduring preeminence of closely-knit family and financial networks in the commanding-heights of the society. These preliminary results open several avenues for further research, which are currently investigated in our SNF research project on local elites and power structures in the cities of Zurich, Basel and Geneva. The interactions and potential tensions between financial, artistic and political elites within the ZKG deserve further attention, particularly with regard to both the definition of cultural and artistic policy and the financing needs of the Kunsthaus. The role played by the *Vereinigung Zürcher Kunstfreunde* (today: Zürcher Kunstfreunde) – a private patronage association founded in 1917 to support the ZKG – also deserves more scrutiny. Finally, ongoing studies on the Basel and Geneva art societies will allow us to integrate the Zurich case in a comparative perspective.

Biographical profiles

1890-1922 Welcome to the Heimplatz



Friedrich Otto Pestalozzi-Junghans (1846-1940) – Middle class origins, with ancestors who were merchants over several generations. He came from a Pestalozzi family branch which had lost its importance but was in the middle of a social upturn. Worked as a tradesman in the family ironworks (Gebrüder Pestalozzi) and took part in the activities of the then *Zürcher Künstlergesellschaft*, of which his father was already a member. Pestalozzi was **President of the *Künstlergesellschaft* from 1889 to 1896**. He then became a member of the Vorstand of the *Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft*, (ZKG) which resulted from the 1896 merger between the *Künstlergesellschaft*, the *Kunstverein* and the *Künstlerhaus Zurich*.
<https://www2.unil.ch/elitessuisses/index.php?page=detailPerso&idIdentite=88786> [link to the OBELIS – Swiss elites database]



Karl von Muralt (1856-1942) – From an old patrician family. His maternal and paternal origins descended from renowned Zurich merchant families who prospered between the 16th and 17th centuries. Trained as a medical doctor, von Muralt was affiliated with the *Zunft zur Safran*, a corporation in which his predecessor Friedrich Pestalozzi was also a member. **President of the ZKG from 1896 to 1904**.



Paul Ulrich-Schulthess (1856-1935) – Middle class origins. Alongside his architect career, his passion for art led him to take an active part in the local and national art scene, as a member of the ZKG (**President from 1904 to 1917**), but also of the Federal Commission for Fine Arts and the Swiss Society of Architects and Engineers. During his presidency of the ZKG, he supervised the construction of the *Kunsthhaus* and implemented reforms that improved the structure of the society.
<https://www2.unil.ch/elitessuisses/index.php?page=detailPerso&idIdentite=56049>



Gottfried Schaertlin (1857-1938) – Originally from a working-class background, S. was granted bourgeois status in Basel. After a doctorate in mathematics, this self-made man eventually became director of the *Rentenanstalt* (today: Swiss Life) and developed a strong network in the economic sphere, with affiliation to the Zurich Chamber of Commerce as well as the Swiss Association of Insurance Companies. **President of the ZKG from 1916 to 1922**.
<https://www2.unil.ch/elitessuisses/index.php?page=detailPerso&idIdentite=50783>

1922-1975 The rise of the «financial praetorians»



Adolf Jöhr (1878-1953) – Middle class origins (his father was a veterinarian). Doctorate in economics and political science. A central and influential *Crédit Suisse* banker, Jöhr also sat on the boards of numerous industrial firms (e.g. Brown Boveri, Georg Fischer) as well as the Swiss National Bank. Patron of the arts and an art collector. In 1922, Jöhr was elected **President of the ZKG (1922-1940)**. A decade later, he was publicly criticized for «packing» the ZKG membership with «financial praetorians» and thus transforming the fragile balance of power between artists and elites within the ZKG. Jöhr twice supported an extension of the *Kunsthhaus*.
<https://www2.unil.ch/elitessuisses/index.php?page=detailPerso&idIdentite=51324>



Franz Meyer-Stünzi (1889-1962) – Old Zurich money (his father had made a fortune in the tobacco business and owned plantations in Sumatra). Doctorate in law. Held leading posts at the *Rentenanstalt/Swiss Life*, Stünzi Silk Co. and Bank Leu. Like his father, who had donated paintings by Ferdinand Hodler to the *Kunsthhaus*, Meyer was an important art collector. He **joined the ZKG Committee in 1919, became vice-president in 1930 and President in 1940 (until 1960)**. He also entertained close links with millionaire art collector Emil Bührle and sponsored his integration in the ZKG. Meyer also partnered with Bührle to build the important 1958 extension of the *Kunsthhaus*. Meyer married Hedwig Stünzi, from a silk industry family. Their son Franz Jr. married painter Marc Chagall's daughter and became director of the *Kunsthalle Bern* and then of the *Kunstmuseum Basel*. Meyer's daughter Marian married banker Carlo von Castelberg, future president of the ZKG (see below).
<https://www2.unil.ch/elitessuisses/index.php?page=detailPerso&idIdentite=50947>



Alfred Schaefer (1905-1986) – Father architect and owner of a building firm in Aarau. Doctorate in law. Influential banking career within the UBS (1941: Member of the General Direction; 1953: President; 1964: Chairman of the Board). Board member of the Swiss Bankers' Association and active at the Swiss National Bank, Schaefer played a key role in the postwar international expansion of the UBS. Schaefer was both involved in Emil Bührle's cultural foundations and organized the 1973 entry of the Oerlikon-Bührle family firm on the stock market. **Replaced in 1956 Emil Bührle as Vice-President of the ZKG, which he then presided from 1960 to 1975**.
<https://www2.unil.ch/elitessuisses/index.php?page=detailPerso&idIdentite=50977>

1975-2021 The reign of the «financial prateorians»



Carlo von Castelberg (1923-2006) – From an old patrician family. Doctorate in law. Son-in-law of former ZKG President Franz Meyer-Stünzi. Began his career in international trading (DESCO von Schulthess) and then occupied leading positions in the Banca del Gottardo in Lugano. Fostered Swiss contemporary art and was very involved in the curatorial renewal of the Kunsthaus. **Member of the Committee of the ZKG (since 1972), which he presided from 1975 to 1987.**

<https://www2.unil.ch/elitessuisses/index.php?page=detailPerso&idIdentite=54271>



Thomas W. Bechtler (*1949) – From an entrepreneurial family. His father and uncle, founders of the electrotechnical firm Zellweger Luwa were both active in the ZKG. Doctorate in law. B. himself held important positions in numerous Zurich financial institutions (Bank Leu, Credit Suisse, Swiss Re) and industrial firms (Conzzetta, Sika). Also headed the family cultural foundation, founded by his father in 1955. **Vice-president (1986), then president (1987-2002) of the ZKG.**

<https://www2.unil.ch/elitessuisses/index.php?page=detailPerso&idIdentite=50581>



Walther B. Kielholz (*1951) – Middle class origins. Studies in economics at the St. Gallen Business School. Worked at first in the reinsurance business and opened two art galleries with his wife Daphne Pestalozzi, from a Zurich patrician lineage. Prominent career in banking and reinsurance, with leading, and parallel, mandates at both Credit Suisse and Swiss Re. **Tipped by Thomas W. Bechtler to succeed him as President of the ZKG in 2002.** Supervised the current extension project of the Kunsthaus Zürich.

<https://www2.unil.ch/elitessuisses/index.php?page=detailPerso&idIdentite=50628>

2021- Dynastic continuity or «palace revolution» ?



Anne Keller Dubach (*1957) – From a lineage of prominent families (Bodmer, Abegg, von Stokar). History and literature studies. Career in philanthropy, corporate art and sponsoring at first at the Crédit Suisse and then (from 2000 onwards) at Swiss Re. Committee postings in several high-profile cultural institutions (e.g. Fotomuseum Winterthur, Swiss Institute for Art History (ISEK/ISEA). Member of the ZKG Vorstand and close collaborator of the current ZKG President (and Swiss Re CEO) Walter Kielholz. As the natural candidate to succeed her mentor, K. personifies the multi-faceted familial and financial dynamics that characterized ZKG Presidents since the beginning of the 20th C.

<https://www2.unil.ch/elitessuisses/index.php?page=detailPerso&idIdentite=97509>



Florian Schmidt-Gabain (*1982) Middle class origins (Biel). Doctorate in law (2011) and studies of art history. Member of the Kunstfreunde Zurich and the ZKG since 2012. Founder and director of the Zurich Centre for Artistic Estates since 2019, as well as arbitrator at the Court of Arbitration for Art (CAfA) in The Hague and member of the executive committee of the Swiss Association of Music Publishers. (SVMV) since 2020. Currently working at the Zurich law firm Nobel and Hug, specialized in art and entertainment law. Candidate for the upcoming ZKG president election.