

by Dardis McNamee

Three strapping guards in trim blue uniforms stood chatting outside the gate to Haus Wittgenstein at Parkgasse 18 in the 3rd District. It was a balmy evening in late April, but happily still well ahead of the appointed hour, and the magic word *Vernissage* brought a friendly smile and a wave even before the invitation was unfolded. On up the steps past the entry, lofty and shimmering white, is a pristine vision of line and form that philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, with architect Paul Engelmann, had designed and built for his sister Margarethe Stonborough-Wittgenstein and completed in 1928.

Haus Wittgenstein is a work of pure *Bauhaus*, form following function, all ornament stripped away. Wittgenstein had been fascinated with the project: "Ludwig drew every window, every door, every fastener, every radiator, with the exactness of a precision instrument," his eldest sister Hermine remembered in her memoirs. Hardly a comfortable place, and it is hard to imagine the rooms ever feeling cosy.

But it is a wonderful space for presenting art – which happily was the occasion for this evening's visit: an exhibition of the sculptures and lithography of H.E. Gabriela von Habsburg, along with several paintings from the Pangaea Collection for World Peace. Described as an evening of "Art Diplomacy" by the IDEA Society, sponsors of the annual International ARTconnection, president Stefan Stoev intended it as a kind of "cultural dialog between the Danube and the Black Sea."

For this, Gabriela Habsburg was an ideal choice: The fourth child of the late Otto Habsburg – once crown prince and committed Pan-European – she became a Georgian citizen after moving to Tbilisi in 2001 to teach at the Academy of Fine Arts. Then in 2009, she was asked by President Mikheil Saakashvili to serve as the country's ambassador to Germany, the country where she grew up.

So where, exactly, is home? Habsburg



laughed. "It's actually quite simple," she said, leaning on the grand piano at the far end of the exhibition space, to create some privacy. "I am a European, and with complete conviction!" She laughs easily and seems at ease with the many ironies of her complicated life.

"You see, I was born in Luxembourg, and grew up in Munich; I had an Austrian passport but wasn't allowed to enter the country until I was grown up. If my schoolmates took a class trip to Salzburg, I had to stay behind." Long exiled by politics from the country her family had defined for over six centuries, she was 24 when the ban was lifted by an act of the Austrian Parliament in 1980. Today, Habsburg speaks German, English, French and Spanish fluently, as well as some

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million) sale of Edvard Munch's 1895 iconic painting *The Scream*, on 2 May. That 12-minute dogfight resulted in the most expensive work ever sold at auction. Overshadowed somewhat too by Christies and Bonhams, auction highlights from the Dorotheum are still no slouch: Frans Francken II (1581-1642), *Man between Virtue and Vice*, price €7.02 million; Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (1591-1666), *il Guercino*, €1.04 million; Friedrich von Amerling, *Girl with Straw Hat*, €1.5 million; Piero Manzoni, *Achrome* (1958/59), €1.11 million.

Quality over notoriety

Still, Humer remains undaunted, stressing how the Dorotheum places emphasis on quality, especially in regard to items connected with the



Above: The sculpture *Ushba*, by Gabriela von Habsburg, exhibited at the Wittgenstein Haus (below), designed by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. **The building now houses the Bulgarian Cultural Institute.** **Far left:** IDEA Society president Stefan Stoev with H.E. Gabriela von Habsburg. Photos: (above & left) Pia Vortisch (below) Lisa Thomson

nobility. "You really have to be careful that the quality you offer, fits the prices." For example, he discloses, "we auctioned a pair of Emperor Franz Josef's underwear for €7,000."

What makes a car or motorcycle a desirable classic depends on a number of factors. Age, rarity, historical significance, popular interest, and



The price for Bill Gates' Porsche 911 Turbo 3.3 is estimated at €39,000-50,000 Photo: Dorotheum

personal impulse all play into the mystique surrounding the value of an object. "Volkswagen Beetles were made in the millions," he observes, "yet today it is a sought after classic." At auction, value is expressed and redefined before an array of bidders who are representative of open market parameters.

Creating classic cars

And in fact, the concept of classic cars at all is a recent one. "After the war, our records show the Dorotheum auctioned two Bugattis from the 1930s, that were categorically offered as everyday used cars." The idea of classic automobiles came long after the dark chapter of the Third Reich. "The Nazis stole a lot of art and forced people to sell their works for ridiculous prices," Humer says. "They used the Dorotheum as a convenient platform to broker their loot." As an issue of primary concern to the management, in 2006 the

Italian ("but I don't count that"), and now what she describes as "presentable" Georgian. So five languages, and then some.

"But not nearly as many as my father!" She shook her head in a gesture of obvious respect. Otto Habsburg had had complete mastery, spoken and written, of German, Hungarian, Croatian, English, Spanish, French and Latin, and wrote his books in Hungarian and French as well as German. This versatility made him a particularly effective debater during his two decades of service (1979-1999) as a member of the European Parliament, a role found late in life, for which he was ideally suited. Raised to lead a many-peopled empire, he had adapted and found in the EU a republican embodiment of the Habsburg vision. Asked at his 95th birthday in Vienna in 2007 what he thought of the now 27-member union, he had replied, with a smile, that "this is what we had in mind all along." By which he meant the Habsburgs. Here was a man who didn't think in quarterly financial statements, or annual reports, or even five-year plans. He thought in centuries.

On hearing the story, Gabriela Habsburg laughed again. It was typical of him, apparently.

"My family were involved in politics for many hundreds of years," she had said in a recent interview with the *Financial Times*, "I grew up in a family where we never spoke about anything at mealtimes except politics." It was a preoccupation that Otto Habsburg clearly had passed on to his children. "And of course, that is reflected in my sculpture."

Just then, a couple approached – a large man with thick dark hair and a woman in vivid colours – and with a nod of apology, the ambassador turned to greet them: "¡Hola! ¿Cómo están ustedes? ¿Es un placer verlos otra vez!" It was Spanish, which I can only follow in the dimmest outline. But Habsburg fell easily into the soft melodies of the language, completely at home. ("The languages do help," she confided later. "When you share a language with people, they accept you.") I left them to their conversation, to take a closer look at the art.

Threading my way through the crowd, I headed for a group of lithographs that had caught my attention on the way in, geometric arcs, circles and wedges of colour, elements suspended in a field of washed grey, immediately reminiscent of Joan Miró, although these were much lighter, airier. Alexander Calder was closer. But it was the sculptures that commanded attention. These were scattered, in effect, across the black floor, each given a setting in white chalk stencilled precisely around and below it. The show stopper was a triangle of polished stainless steel poles, standing on one edge, transitioning into an X at the top, with a perforated steel pennant curling around it like a twist of candy, its "shadow" captured in chalk on the ebony flooring. And at some distance, a much smaller sculpture of the same elements lay over by the wall, as if broken off and tossed aside.

This was art that described a world in pieces, an art of robust, solid elements that float past each other or do not meet, leaving shadows that are easily brushed aside. It is disjointed and deceptively insubstantial, but in a material that pleads for permanence.

Habsburg and I met again later out on the terrace, as darkness was falling. The main work of the evening done, we shared some very pleasant Georgian wine and talked of sculptors she admired: Calder, whom she had never met, and George Rickey, whom she had. And with Rickey, she shared a fascination with the challenge of large public works, involving a complex marriage of art, politics and engineering.

"That's the fun of it," she insisted, which makes sense for someone for whom diplomacy was the family sport. This was the closest we ever came to a discussion of her work. I had asked about the sculpture with its part tossed aside. "Let's come back to that later," she had said.

But we never did. ◇

auction house deposited payment of \$32 million (€25.4 million) to the General Restitution Fund for Victims of National Socialism.

With no possibility to test-drive, buying a car at auction is a risk beyond the investment. It's the proverbial pig in a poke sale, Humer says – "die Katze im Sack kaufen". The attraction, he contends, is the *chance* to acquire a design icon for a price below inflated those at vintage dealers.

In practice, there are three ways to bid, says Humer, who also acts in the role of auctioneer: You can stand in the room and raise your hand, telephone your bid, or bid *in absentia* by forwarding your maximum by letter, telegram, fax, or e-mail. Once Humer had a bid on the telephone for two million euros. "It's a tough business," he admits. "You become a little nervous when you raise your hand for two million. [But] that's when it gets interesting." ◇