

## **JEAN PLANQUE: AN EYE FOR ART**

Interview

Interview by Véronique Bouruet-Aubertot for the “Planque collection in Aix-en-Provence” special edition of *Connaissance des Arts*.

**Bruno Ely**, head curator at the musée Granet, and **Florian Rodari**, curator of the Planque collection, talk about the collector’s life and character, his passion for Cézanne and 20th century painting, his encounters and his changing ideas about art.

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### **Nothing about Jean Planque’s humble beginnings in a family of Protestant farmers marked him out as a future collector of modern art – nothing except his “eye”, admired by both painters and art professionals.**

**Florian Rodari:** Jean Planque was raised in the rural canton of Vaud, Switzerland, where he received a rudimentary education in the 1910s and 1920s, only returning to school later, in Lausanne, where he studied business. One day, at the age of 19, he was on the way to school when he noticed a painting of a small bouquet of roses in the window of the Vallotton gallery. He went inside to ask the price and was scandalised by what he heard. He left feeling all art dealers must be thieves - especially when he was told the even higher price of an unfinished painting of three apples. This was his first encounter with the works of Renoir and Cézanne. This anecdote throws an interesting light on Planque, who was irresistibly drawn to certain works, which he immediately wanted to own, despite his complex relationship with money. Some years later, after moving to Basle for work, he took up painting and visited exhibitions where he was astounded to discover the poetic world of Paul Klee. In 1942, back in Lausanne, Planque met a man who was to have a decisive influence on his life. After buying an unsigned work at a flea market, he almost immediately recognised it as a painting by the great Swiss painter René Auberjonois. He contacted the painter who agreed to meet him. Auberjonois confirmed Planque’s hunch and, struck by the young man’s skill, made an observation others were to make over the years: “you’ve got the eye”. Able to recognise good paintings, he worked for the Tanner gallery in Zurich between 1947 and 1948 and, the following year, now financially independent, set up his easel at the foot of Montagne Sainte-Victoire to “paint where Cézanne painted”. In 1951, he moved to Paris, visited the city’s museums and enrolled at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, where he honed his painting skills.

### **Jean Planque lived in Paris from 1954 to 1972, working for gallery owner Ernst Beyeler. It was an incredible opportunity for him. What role did Planque play in the gallery’s extraordinary success?**

**F. R.:** Jean Planque called this encounter his “life’s miracle”. Buying paintings in Paris for Ernst Beyeler to resell in Basel allowed him to indulge his passion and use his “eye” without having to worry about the financial side of things. Beyeler put complete trust in him and bought everything he suggested. In the flourishing art market of post-war Paris, which was flush with works, Planque, with his unrivalled eye, advised him to purchase works that secured the gallery’s reputation. This unique partnership and friendship lasted 18 years.

### **Friend and adviser of painters, Planque was much more than an agent or art buyer. He was close to Dubuffet from 1958, and won the trust of Giacometti, Picasso and others.**

**F. R.:** Jean Planque was a painter but he realised he didn’t have what it takes to be a great artist. Although extremely shy, this made him even more determined to approach the painters he admired.

Painting always came before business, and he forged close ties with Dubuffet, Picasso, Giacometti and Bissière. His work for Beyeler allowed him to devote his time to doing just that.

### **He used his contacts and earnings to build up his own collection.**

**F. R.:** He used his first wages from the Tanner gallery to buy a watercolour by Cézanne and a painting by Bonnard. Despite his rather modest commission at Beyeler (5% of the purchase price), he managed to build up his own collection. The artists he was so close to would often sell works to him at a special price and some, like Dubuffet, Sonia Delaunay and Claude Monet's son, would occasionally even give him major works.

### **What sort of collector was Jean Planque?**

**F. R.:** He was dissatisfied with his own work and bought paintings he would have liked to have painted himself. Planque wasn't a historian, much less a speculator, and he didn't want his collection to be an A to Z of 20th century art. Since he had a limited budget, he selected works on an ad hoc basis. He made a very close study of the paintings he wanted, however, and he expected them to nourish him throughout his life. He chose works that last, which stand the test of time. In fact, he very rarely sold anything.

### **In his long life as a collector, which artists did he prefer? What were the major turning points in his collection?**

**F. R.:** Right from the start, Paul Cézanne was at the top of the ladder, the absolute master. His meeting with Dubuffet, in 1957-58, upset this hierarchy. He revised his position, and came to see spontaneity and bad manners as part of the creative process, and he temporarily took an interest in outsider art. His discussions with Picasso, from 1960 onwards, helped restore a balance between invention at any price, hard work and respect for great artists of the past.

**Bruno Ely:** There was also an intermediate stage, in 1952, when Jean Planque saw a work by Manessier in the window of a gallery in Paris. Although he hadn't been interested in abstract art until then, this discovery came as shock and made him rethink everything, and even eventually led him to Dubuffet.

### **How would you describe this collection?**

**F. R.:** The Planque collection's quality is its coherence: even minor masters echo great ones.

**B. E.:** For me, it says something about the collector, like all true collections. The works sometimes remind us of an encounter and always fit perfectly into the collection as a whole.

### **In 1997, shortly before his death, Jean Planque created the Jean and Suzanne Planque foundation. What is its aim?**

**F. R.:** From 1972, with his wife Suzanne, he played with the idea of giving his collection anonymously to a museum. He very modestly felt that it lacked masterworks. In 1997, however, he decided to create a foundation to keep the collection together as a reminder of his life's passion. The foundation guaranteed the inalienable nature of the works and its vocation is to present the collection to the public. It was the subject of 13 European exhibitions in 10 years.

### **Why and how did the Planque collection come to be loaned to the musée Granet d'Aix, nearly 15 years later?**

**F. R.:** Talk of loaning the collection to the musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne dragged on for 10 years. The plans were rejected in a referendum, although the architectural designs for the museum had already been completed. We were then free to get in touch with museums which had previously expressed an interest in hosting the collection. In 2008, we were contacted by the musée Granet as part of the "Picasso Cézanne" exhibition and this was how we met Bruno Ely. Planque's ties with Cézanne and the Aix region made the musée Granet an obvious and logical choice. Things moved very quickly after that.

**B. E.:** Local politicians and administrators worked with us in exemplary fashion and I'm still surprised by how quickly everything happened. Picasso once said there was no such thing as chance. Planque always talked about Provence, Aix and his stay in Puylobier as one of the high points of his life. He regularly returned to the region and, when he was living in Paris, he dreamed of returning to live there. For him, the landscape and surroundings were ideal; in a letter, he described it as "where I could be."

**Where does this loan fit into the museum's overall policy?**

**B. E.:** Henri Pontier, the museum's curator during Cézanne's lifetime, said that "As long as I live, no Cézanne will ever enter this museum." For a long time, his word was law. It was almost fifty years after the artist's death before Aix began to be considered as the city of Cézanne. That's something both I and Denis Coutagne, the previous curator with whom I worked for many years, worked to achieve. Ten years ago, the musée Granet's modern collection was practically non-existent. Thanks to the Philippe Meyer collection, held on long-term loan since 2003, and now the Planque collection, which is much larger, we've made up a lot of lost time. The musée Granet is now one of the Midi's major 20th century art museums.

**F. R.:** The museum and foundation work together and we organise joint initiatives such as exhibitions and publications, and work with other venues and institutions to keep Jean Planque's spirit of dynamism and discovery alive.