

PROVENANCE RESEARCH AND THE ART TRADE

Ed. Peter Wehrle

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CASE STUDY

THE KÜHNS ART DEALERSHIP – AN APPROXIMATION

Research reveals little knowledge of the Berlin art dealership Kühns and its Jewish owner Malwine Kühns, née Weiß (February 1, 1874 Vienna – October 16, 1941 Berlin).¹ To date, no research has been carried out into the firm's business volume and its artworks, and nothing has been published on the family's persecution history. An investigation was originally prompted by research into a painting depicting Falstaff by the artist Eduard von Grützner, consigned for auction, which had been sold by Galerie Heinemann to Friedrich Kühns from Berlin (August 20, 1864 Prague – March 13, 1925 Berlin)² in August 1916 (*fig. 1*).³ This study provided first insights into Malwine Kühns's persecution and the forced dissolution of her art business, as can be reconstructed from preserved files.⁴

An art gallery on the move

Born in Vienna on February 1, 1874, Malwine Weiß was brought up in a family of Mosaic faith.⁵ It is not known when she gave up Austrian citizenship in exchange for a German one,⁶ and the exact date of her marriage with Friedrich Kühns is not certain either. It certainly was before 1897, possibly in Breslau (today Wrocław). Four of their seven children were born in this Silesian city between 1897 and 1902⁷ where Friedrich Kühns already ran a business selling art.⁸ His passion for art and culture also showed in his initial profession as a theater actor. Even as a youth, Friedrich Kühns was engaged for starring and supporting roles at theaters in Bremen, Düsseldorf, Strasbourg, Hanover and Breslau.⁹ It is not known whether he continued to pursue his acting career in Berlin parallel to his art dealer activities, and it also remains unclear whether the Kühns family was living in Heringsdorf on the Baltic Sea at times – the place where their two daughters Charlotte and Gertrud were born between 1905 and 1908.¹⁰ Their relocation to Berlin can be verified in 1909 at the latest.¹¹ Documents prove a registration at the Berlin address from April 1910 to 1941 at the latest.¹²

Fig. previous page: detail from fig. 1

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Fig. 1: Eduard von Grützner (1846–1925), *Falstaff mit Zinne und Weinglas*, 1914, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 cm.

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While their residence on Friedrichstraße 248 is confirmed from as early as 1910, sources regarding the location of the art dealership paint a very mixed, even contradictory picture. Between 1909 and 1938, no fewer than 17 different locations of the Kühns art dealership can be found in the Berlin address and business directories, initially registered in Friedrich Kühns's name, and as of 1933 under Malwine Kühns, who continued to run the business after her husband's death in 1925.¹³ The address changes are not evaluated as part of this paper. However, the location can be assessed in general terms, as the Kühns art dealership was located on Friedrichstraße and on Leipziger Straße, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s. From the 1920s to the early 1930s, there were many medium-sized art dealers on Friedrichstraße, so it would have made sense for Kühns to set up shop there, too. Running parallel to the grand boulevards Unter den Linden and Leipziger Straße, which were also lined with art dealers and auction houses, the Kühns business address on Friedrichstraße was located in the heart of the Berlin art trade, in the immediate vicinity of, for example, Arthur Dahlheim's art shop (see Carolin Faude-Nagel's article in this book).¹⁴

Information on business volume and private assets is of equally mixed quality and incomplete. Here, too, further research is needed, which should take possible correlations with address changes into account.¹⁵

Business closure and auction

From 1933, Malwine Kühns was among the victims collectively persecuted by the National Socialist regime for their religious affiliation, and the measures taken against her also had a massive impact on her work as an art dealer. She was able to keep her store, ‘quite large’ business rooms¹⁶ on Friedrichstraße 160 until 1936. When she signed the lease in 1934, Malwine Kühns was wealthy enough so that her landlord Dr. Curt Radlauer did not have any concerns about concluding the contract with her.¹⁷ However, when persecution measures became more severe, boycotts led to declining sales, so that Malwine Kühns had to move her business to smaller premises on Friedrichstraße 105 in early 1936. The new location also had a large storage cellar, and she hoped she would be able to keep the art shop despite the losses. This hope was also reflected by the fact that she had business cards printed for the new address (fig. 2), for which she did not spare costs. On the card Malwine Kühns advertised “ständige Gelegenheitskäufe”¹⁸ (“regular bargain sales”) and “Gemälde anerkannter Meister”¹⁹ (“paintings by recognized masters”).

But in November 1936, her hopes were crushed. Forced to “give up her ‘Pictures and Cultural Objects’ department as a result of a ban imposed by the Reichskulturkammer”,²⁰ Malwine Kühns had to sell the stock-in-trade. Initially, the Berlin auctioneer Edgar Lach on Oranienburgerstraße 2 was commissioned to hold the auction of some 650 items with a total estimated value of 19,669 Reichsmark. On top of 13 pieces of furniture, lighting and various other pieces from her shop fittings, 571 paintings, 14 watercolors, two drawings and one pastel, as well as five reproductions were listed. In addition, 65 smaller unframed works from the storage cellar were offered as a job lot with an estimate of 100 Reichsmark.



Fig. 2: Business card of the Kühns art dealership, from the legal proceedings of Malwine Kühns's grandson against the German Reich (sheet 23).

Image credits: Archive shelfmark: Landesarchiv Berlin, B Rep. 025-06, no. 2977/50

7 !

Nr. 1081. des Geschäftsbuches

(Stempel-
marke)

Versteigerungs-Auftrag

Ich, 10 unterzeichnete..... Auftraggeberin

Vve. Frau Malvine Kühns, Berlin, Friedrichstr. 105b. geb. Weiss
(Vorname, Name, Ort, Straße, Hausnummer)

erteilt hierdurch dem unterzeichneten Versteigerer

Philo W ü e s t , i/Fr. Dr. Walther Achenbach, W.50., Hardenbergstr. 29a-e.
(Vorname, Name, Ort, Straße, Hausnummer)

den Auftrag, die in anliegender Liste unter laufender Nr. 1..... bis 650..... enthaltenen Sachen zu versteigern.

Die Versteigerung soll am 2.u.3.12.36. ab 11 Uhr in Berlin,
Friedrichstr.105b., die Befichtigung daselbst am 2.u.3.12.36. um 9Uhr stattfinden.
(Straße)

Der Auftraggeber ist Eigentümer der genannten Sachen.

oder

Eigentümer der genannten Sachen ist - find -
.....
(Vorname, Name, Ort, Straße, Hausnummer)

der Auftraggeber ist aber verfügungsberechtigt, weil

.....

Das Eigentumsrecht - Die Verfügungsberechtigung - hat der Auftraggeber glaubhaft gemacht, indem er auf den tatsächlichen Besitz Bezug nahm. (§ 1006 BGB.)

.....

Die Sachen sind gebraucht - nicht gebraucht.

Anlaß der Versteigerung:
Aufgabe der Abtlg. »Bilder u. Kulturguts« infolge Verbots der Reichskammer der bildenden Künste.

.....

Die Sachen befinden sich **in den Geschäftsräumen Friedrichstr.105b und stammen aus der aufzulösenden Abtlg. dieses Geschäftes.**

.....

Formular für den Versteigerungsauftrag ohne Sonderbestimmung der Notizen und Beilagen des Versteigerers - § 88 Versteigerungsrichtlinien -

Nr. A 1. 36. VI. 376. Nachdruck verboten!
 Carl Seymanns Verlag zu Berlin 308

Fig. 3: Malvine Kühns's auction order.

Image credits: Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv (BLHA), Potsdam, Rep. 36A Oberfinanzpräsident Berlin-Brandenburg (II), no. 20705, fol. 7

From 1937 to 1941

Despite the persecution and the fear for life and limb, Malwine Kühns did not give up. In 1938, she rented a small store on Chausseestraße 120²⁶ and sold second-hand furniture and decorative items after she had been banned from selling art. Unfortunately, she was also forced to close this store the same year, as she did not make enough money due to boycotting measures.²⁷ Listed in the directory as a tradeswoman and no longer as an art dealer, Malwine Kühns is only listed on Friedrichstraße 248 by 1941.²⁸

Malwine Kühns did not cede her works of art even during this time. After the forced closure of the art dealership, she kept the storage cellar on Wilhelmstraße 2/3 – approximately 80 square meters – where she retained around 1,000 works of art until 1941. Her grandson, who was often on site between 1938 and 1941, described this stock in detail, albeit summarily due to the ‘mass-produced goods’ it contained.²⁹ In addition, Malwine Kühns had deposited the best and most valuable pieces in her apartment, some of them rolled up and hidden underneath the flooring, always hoping to be able to start again with these works after the war.³⁰

The seven-room family apartment, furnished with high-quality pieces and Persian carpets, also contained paintings from the private collection.³¹ Experts commissioned in the course of the compensation proceedings in the late 1950s estimated the value of the apartment at a total of around 90,000 Deutschmark, including 25 paintings and seven copies after works by Old Masters.³²

On October 16, 1941, the Gestapo raided the apartment on Friedrichstraße 248 in search of Malwine Kühns and her two children Otto Kühns (born February 20, 1920 in Berlin, pronounced dead on December 31, 1945) and Irmgard Kühns (born January 14, 1902 in Breslau, pronounced dead on December 13, 1945). The family was supposed to be deported to Łódź on transport I/450 on October 18, 1941.³³ Otto Kühns had already fled to France by this time; he was deported in 1944 and murdered in Auschwitz on May 30, 1944.³⁴ Irmgard Kühns was arrested and killed in the Kulmhof (Chelmo) extermination camp.³⁵ In despair and to avoid arrest, Malwine Kühns jumped out of a window to end her life.³⁶ The apartment and the storage cellar were sealed. A few days later everything was auctioned or confiscated by the Gestapo – the traces of hundreds of works of art disappear here.³⁷

The difficulties of securely identifying artworks

How to deal with the information found in the files on the seized artworks from the dealership and from Malwine Kühns’s private collection? The main problem in this respect is clearly a secure identification of the works. The rudimentary information provided by the auction records and the auction application is just as insufficient as the grandson’s recollections of the warehouse. Although the more extensive descriptions of the more valuable works in her apartment may make it easier to identify them, the time lag between the memories of the 1950s and the events of 1941 must be considered.³⁸

The attribution becomes even more complicated because of the dimensions specified by the daughter Olga van de Weyer in the compensation proceedings, as she largely referred

to rough standard sizes between 50 by 60 and 70 by 100 centimeters, which are certainly not the actual dimensions. It also remains unclear whether the frame was included or not.³⁹ Furthermore, claimants in compensation proceedings often generously ‘rounded up’ the dimensions – for good reason, as for unidentifiable works it was mainly the size of the painting, apart from the artist, which determined the compensation amount.

In the face of such a vast loss which is nevertheless lacking in detail, it would be even more important to establish the provenance markers of the Kühns art dealership. Were the reverse sides of the works in any way marked with inscriptions or labels? Any comparable works are not yet known to the author. However, it should be noted that the painting by Grützner mentioned at the beginning is inscribed “No 814 LUSS,-” in blue grease crayon on the reverse (*fig. 5*). This surely originated in an art trade context, as “LUSS,-” is probably a price code, as can be assumed from the comma and dash. Could this inscription perhaps be from the Kühns art dealership?

There still is a lack of further examples for comparison, and it will certainly be difficult to identify the lost works in the future without concrete findings on the reverse. Further research into the Kühns art dealership and the private collection of Malwine Kühns would therefore be urgently needed. Only rarely will it be possible to identify a work of art as clearly as the Falstaff painting. In fact, this was only possible thanks to a further source: the files handed down from the estate of Galerie Heinemann – with a historical photograph and the documented sale to Friedrich Kühns (*fig. 6, fig. 7*).⁴⁰ Might the *Mädchenportrait* showing a ‘young, blonde girl’⁴¹ by the artist Franz von Lenbach from Kühns’s private collection also be found in the same way?⁴²



Fig. 5: Eduard von Grützner (1846–1925), *Falstaff mit Zinne und Weinglas*, 1914, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 cm, reverse (detail).

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Kühns, Friedrich
Berlin

KATAL.-NR.	NAME DES KÜNSTLERS:	
12406	Ed. Brizner	3500.-
11348	J. v. Nees	3000.-
4430	H. v. Barsels	1500.-
11008	F. v. Lerbach	3500.-
9845	P. Salin	4000.-
	"Beim Zahnarzt"	3010.80

ENGLEDER & FINKENZELLER, BÜROBEDARF, MÜNCHEN

Fig. 6: Galerie Heinemann, Munich,
Entry in the buyer's card index:
Friedrich Kühns.

Image credits: Nuremberg, Germanisches
Nationalmuseum, Deutsches Kunstarchiv,
NL Heinemann, Galerie, KK-K-213

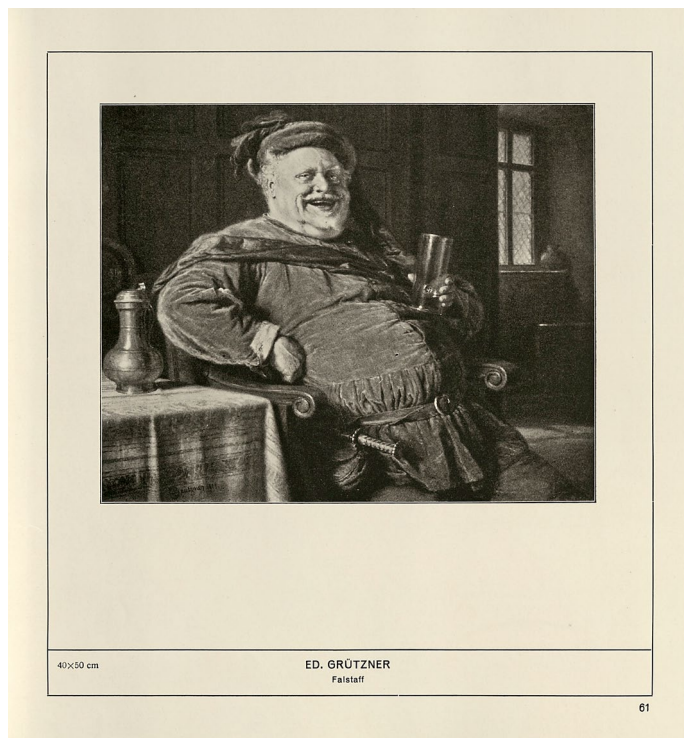


Fig. 7: Galerie Heinemann, Munich, *Permanente Ausstellung von Werken erstklassiger deutscher, französischer, altenglischer und altspanischer Meister*, inventory catalog 1914, p. 61.

Image credits: Library of the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich

ANNOTATIONS

- 1 Entry on Malwine Kühns, in: Death records C, Register Office Berlin-Kreuzberg, 1941, vol. 6, no. 3047.
- 2 Entry on Friedrich Kühns, in: Death records C1, Register Office Berlin-Grunewald, 1925, vol. 1, no. 18; Kosch, Wilhelm: *Deutsches Theater-Lexikon. Biographisches und bibliographisches Handbuch*, vol. 2. Klagenfurt/Vienna 1960, p. 1124.
- 3 Ketterer Kunst, Munich, auction 538, 19th Century Art, June 10, 2023, lot 622.
- 4 The files of the restitution and compensation proceedings initiated by the heirs of Malwine Kühns provide initial clues about the Berlin art dealer: Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB), B Rep. 025-06 No. 2977-2985/50, B Rep. 025-06 No. 11034/59. Landesamt für Bürger- und Ordnungsangelegenheiten (LABO), Reg.-Nr. 352082. In the Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv (BLHA), a file on Malwine Kühns is preserved in the inventory Rep. 36A Oberfinanzpräsident Berlin-Brandenburg (II): BLHA, Rep. 36 A (II) No. 207095. This file lists the Kühns art dealership's holdings that were put up for auction on December 2 and 3, 1936. In addition, the auction record exists in the Berlin Landesarchiv holdings: LAB, A Rep. 243-04 No. 57.

- 5 Certificate issued by the Jewish community of Berlin, in: LABO, reg. no. 352082, fol. M8.
- 6 LAB, B Rep. 025-06 no. 11034, fol. 4v; LABO, reg. no. 352082, fol. M1.
- 7 Information from Olga van de Weyer, née Kühns, dated November 27, 1946, in: LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 2977/50, fol. 4. Born in Breslau: Margarete Kühns, born May 28, 1897; Olga Kühns, born September 12, 1889; Elisabeth Kühns, born December 30, 1899; Irmgard Kühns, born January 14, 1902. Born in Heringsdorf on the Baltic Sea: Charlotte Kühns, born October 21, 1905; Gertrud Kühns, born July 20, 1908. Born in Berlin: Otto Kühns, born February 20, 1920.
- 8 Address book Breslau and surroundings, 1900, p. 416. The art dealer Friedrich Kühns can be found on Gartenstraße 18.
- 9 Kosch 1960, as note 2, p. 1124.
- 10 LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 2977/50, fol. 4.
- 11 In October 1909, the art dealership Friedrich Kühns was registered on Umlandstraße 114/115, as well as with a second address on Jerusalemer Straße 32-35. Letter from the Berlin Landespostdirektion dated May 2, 1957, in: LABO, Reg. no. 352082, fol. M13r and M13v.
- 12 Letter from the Berlin Landespostdirektion dated May 2, 1957, in: LABO, Reg. no. 352082, fol. M13r and M13v.
- 13 Ibid. and Berlin address book 1909–1938.
- 14 Examples of art dealers on Friedrichstraße in 1927: Kunstauktionshaus Friedrichstadt, Kunst-Auktions-Haus Emma Riemann, Kunsthandlung Pulvermacher GmbH, the art dealer G. Pineus, the art dealer C. F. Schröder. The art dealer Arthur Dahlheim in the immediate vicinity on Kochstraße 6/7; Galerie van Diemen & Co. GmbH, Unter den Linden 17; Kunstsalon Rheinland Walter Louran, Unter den Linden 44 II. Berlin address book 1927, vol. 2, business directory, p. 384f.
- 15 According to the assessment of an art trade expert in the compensation file, the art dealership, with an estimated annual income of up to 15,000 Reichsmark in the years 1930 to 1933, is presented as a thoroughly prosperous business. The entry in the commercial register mentioned in the compensation file paints a different picture. Here, the Kühns art dealership is valued with a business capital of 15,000 Reichsmark for 1930 and a business total of 7,000 to 8,000 Reichsmark. The rent for the 7-room apartment on Friedrichstraße 248 is said to have amounted to 90 Reichsmark. LABO, reg. no. 352082, fol. E3 and M48.
- 16 Affidavit by Dr. Curt Radlauer, dated June 30, 1949, in: LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 2977/50, fol. 6.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 2977/50, fol. 23.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Quoted according to the reason for the auction given by Malwine Kühns, in: LAB, A Rep. 243-04 No. 57.
- 21 LAB, A Rep. 243-04 No. 57.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Quoted from: BLHA, Rep. 36 A (II) No. 207095, fol. 1.
- 24 Quoted from: *ibid.*
- 25 *Ibid.*, fol. 1–4, 10–35.
- 26 Letter from the Berlin Landespostdirektion dated May 2, 1957, in: LABO, Reg. no. 352082, fol. M13r and M13v.
- 27 Cf. LABO, reg. no. 352082, fol. M5 and fol. M13.
- 28 Incorrectly entered in the address book under Kühne instead of Kühns for the years 1940 and 1941. Berlin address book 1940, Part 1 – Heads of households, companies and tradesmen registered with

- the commercial court by name, p. 1652 and 1655; Berlin address book 1941, Part 1 – Heads of households, companies and tradesmen registered with the commercial court by name, p. 1664 and 1667.
- 29 The total sum of the works of art is said to have amounted to at least 1,000 paintings, 30 marble busts, at least 15 bronzes and picture frames; as an example, the grandson names several works of art summarized under the artists' names in an affidavit, in: LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 11034, fol. 22–25. Confirmed by affidavit of the daughter Olga van de Weyer, née Kühns, in: LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 11034, fol. 27.
- 30 LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 2977/50, fol. 109, statement by the grandson.
- 31 A detailed list of the furnishings, pieces furniture, carpets and paintings by the grandson of Malwine Kühns in: LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 2977/50, fol. 209–214 (furniture); fol. 214f. (carpets), fol. 216–218 (paintings); list of paintings by Olga van de Weyer, in: LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 2977/50, fol. 85f.
- 32 Cf. expert opinion from Dr. R. Parow on the value of the paintings of 43,840 D-Mark, in: LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 2977/50, fol. 225–229; cf. expert opinion from the furrier P. Erdmann on the value of the furs of 3125 D-Mark, in: LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 2977/50, fol. 237; cf. expert opinion from Fritz E. Croner on the jewelry value of 8,640 D-Mark, in: LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 2977/50, fol. 241–244; cf. expert opinion from K. Wittkowski on the value of the furniture of 32,580 D-Mark, in: LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 2977/50, fol. 249–257.
- 33 Documents on the deportation in the Arolsen Archives, here: <https://collections.arolsen-archives.org/de/document/11242262> (last access on July 19, 2023).
- 34 Declaration by Olga van de Weyer, née Kühns, in: LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 2977/50, fol. 3; entry in the Federal Memorial Book: <https://www.bundesarchiv.de/gedenkbuch/de1064015> (last access on July 20, 2023).
- 35 LABO, reg. no. 352082, fol. M10, fol. M45f.; declaration by Olga van de Weyer, née Kühns, in: LAB, B Rep. 025-06 no. 2977/50, fol. 3.
- 36 Cf. death register, as note 1.
- 37 LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 2977/50, fol. 206; LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 11034/59, fol. 22–25.
- 38 LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 2977/50, fol. 112f.
- 39 Ibid., fol. 85f.
- 40 <http://heinemann.gnm.de/de/kunstwerk-3942.htm> (last access on July 19, 2023).
- 41 LAB, B Rep. 025-06 No. 2977/50, fol. 113.
- 42 Friedrich Kühns acquired the painting *Weibliches Porträt mit Hut* by the artist from Galerie Heinemann on October 9, 1916: <http://heinemann.gnm.de/de/kunstwerk-6568.htm> (last access on July 19, 2023).

PROVENANCE RESEARCH AND THE ART TRADE

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