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## Magic Circles

### New schemes are helping collectors gain a foothold in the art scene

Visitors to Art Basel this month may spot a small group of French and Swiss collectors led through the aisles by the jovial art advisor Frédéric Elkaim. But there will be small talk among these art glitterati: they are developing their aesthetic and commercial acumen by signing up to Elkaim's Cercle Franco-Suisse, a collectors' circle which brings together affluent patrons eager to find their way around the art world.

Such enterprising schemes are becoming increasingly popular across Europe, especially in France and Belgium. But can they really help collectors gain a foothold in the inscrutable art scene?

Elkaim's initiative involves one-day excursions to key events in art centres such as Paris and Geneva at a cost of €190 for each session. In March, for instance, participants visited art fairs in the French capital, as well as the Cornette de Saint Cyr auction house. Last month, a second Paris itinerary took in significant collectors, from contemporary art power couple Chiara and Steve Rosenblum to Héléna and Guy Mottais, who presented their trove of 16th-century Italian paintings.

Picking up the tricks of the trade is pivotal. "I want to give members the tools to understand the nitty-gritty of the art business so that they are comfortable and informed about acquiring pieces," Elkaim says. The former director of Drouot Formation, the French art education and advisory company, he is unabashed about the advisory role of the scheme. "Through le Cercle Menus Plaisirs [a partner Swiss art consultancy], we can give direct advice on acquisitions. But this is definitely not a condition of the project; members often liaise directly with the professionals we meet."

Le Cercle Franco-Suisse, he stresses, embraces the budding collector as well as established buyers. "The categories [of participants] are very fluid. There are, for instance, people interested in fine art who relish learning about contemporary art, and vice versa," says Elkaim. His aim now is to extend the scheme to Brussels which has an increasingly influential collector and dealer community.

Another French patronage scheme, Le 7.5 club, aims to be more exclusive. Its co-founder, French collector Bernard Chenebault, is unashamedly highbrow about his ambitions for the membership venture. "Our privileged members will see experimental creations in music, dance, fashion and art around 12 times a year in a private ambiance, often at a beautiful mansion in Paris. It's elitist, but in a friendly fashion: a very different experience from the vernissages at, say, Art Basel or Frieze Art Fair," he says.

Crucially, there is a commissioning component, called Le Cercle des Producteurs, at the heart of the newly formed society. Members of this inner circle will help finance and commission new works which will then go on temporary display in a museum; the collector who funded the work eventually acquires the piece "at a lower cost than on the market", says Chenebault.

But doesn't producing primary market works in this way mean dealers are cut out of the equation? "It very much depends on the artist and his relationship with his gallery. Sometimes the gallery will be involved, sometimes not. In this instance, we see le 7.5 as a facilitator benefiting the museum, the artist, the collector and, if applicable, the art dealer."

How these fledgling bodies fare in the market will be watched with interest by art world stalwarts, from collectors to gallerists. Claude Fain, a former Paris-based dealer, throws light on how his membership association, Happy Art Collectors, operates. "I choose the best galleries, and if a piece is sold when we visit his show the owner pays 5-10 per cent to Happy Art Collectors," Fain explains.

"With Happy Art Collectors you will have VIP access to must-see contemporary art events around the world," boasts the website. The subscription (€300 for individual membership, €500 for joint) will apparently open doors to the art world, and Fain adds that discovering "emerging artists whose prices are still interesting" is an aim.

Another new and privately backed French organisation, Art-Collector, is even more focused, blatantly supporting homegrown artists. "We felt the need to promote France-based artists as the contemporary art market is not strong enough here," says its founder, the collector Jacques Deret, former president of Sara Lee C&T France. His radical plan is to mount exhibitions three times a year devoted to French artists selected by a panel made up of Deret and his wife Evelyne, along with 10 others, ranging from scholars to journalists. The first show is dedicated to Iris Levasseur, and opens on June 18 in a newly refurbished display space in the ninth arrondissement.

Works from Deret's own collection by Levasseur, along with those of four other collectors, will be on show while 15 works priced from €1,000 to €20,000 will be available through Levasseur's dealer. The charge that Art-Collector is propping up the market for artists hand-picked by the society is rebutted by Deret: "Art-Collector will co-operate with all professional

stakeholders: the gallery, the curator, media and institutions... it will create added value for the market by collectively valorising artists' works.”

Since the downturn, buyers have fled to the perceived safety of the masterpiece market, or to branded names in the contemporary sector. Thus the challenge for these newly formed collecting fraternities is to galvanise prices and interest in mid-priced works by less bankable artists, especially in the contemporary sector.

The French collector Loic Malle, who buys works by US artists of the 1960s and 1970s, welcomes Art-Collector – although he questions the staying power of such patronage bodies in the current economic climate. But Deret believes that his project will find its niche.

“Our aim is not just about speculating and buying. It’s all about enlarging networks. We have something to say and contribute about artists and the art market,” he declares.