

For This Art Collector, Owning Isn't Everything

Through her foundation for contemporary art, Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza has turned a family passion into collaborations with artists.



By Hilarie M. Sheets

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It is one thing to collect art, but quite another to help produce it. Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza, a fourth-generation collector in the Thyssen family, has found a way to do both.

“I grew up in a family where ownership was nine-tenths of the game,” said Ms. Thyssen-Bornemisza, whose family’s treasures — both inherited and acquired by her father, Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza — now reside in the Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum in Madrid. “But contemporary art and working with living artists gives you a completely different field of possibilities.”

Since creating her foundation Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (TBA21) 20 years ago, now with hubs in Madrid and Vienna, the 63-year-old Swiss-born philanthropist and activist has taken a more fluid approach to the art of collecting.

Working directly with artists including Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, Olafur Eliasson, Carsten Höller, Sharon Lockhart, Ragnar Kjartansson and Matthew Ritchie, TBA21 has helped produce more than 100 commissions, often large-scale and experiential, that are exhibited in international venues.



Ms. Thyssen-Bornemisza's foundation, TBA21, has commissioned works that examine the oceans through the lens of art, like “Moving Off the Land II” by Joan Jonas. Enrico Fiorese

A newer venture, TBA21 Academy, has supported projects by Joan Jonas, among others, that focus on exploring the oceans through the lens of art.

These have been exhibited at Ocean Space in the Church of San Lorenzo, a deconsecrated building in Venice that was damaged in the Napoleonic Wars. Ms. Thyssen-Bornemisza restored and opened the building in 2019 as an incubator for cross-disciplinary research.

“Collecting is not an indulgence,” Ms. Thyssen-Bornemisza said in a video interview from her mountain chalet in Flendruz, Switzerland, near where she grew up. “You may think you own something that is indeed seductive, interesting, beautiful, but it is your responsibility to protect it, to nurture it, to bring it back out of the cobwebs, to revisit it, to republish it.”

“The Commissions Book,” released by Sternberg Press in 2020, anthologizes the foundation’s collaborations with artists.

Four monumental video installations by Mr. Kjartansson from TBA21’s collection are on view through June 26 in the exhibition “Emotional Landscapes” at the Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum.

The museum opened in 1992 to house almost 1,000 works of European and American art from the 13th to 20th centuries acquired by Spain from Baron Thyssen, a billionaire industrialist. (At the time, the sought-after private collection was rivaled only by that of Queen Elizabeth II.)



Another project she backed involved large video installations by Ragnar Kjartansson, being shown in the “Emotional Landscapes” exhibition at the Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum in Madrid. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza

It is the seventh show in the last five years to shuffle some of Ms. Thyssen-Bornemisza’s contemporary pieces inside the family jewel box, with Mr. Kjartansson’s musical performances staged in lush settings — including “The Visitors” (2012), filmed along the Hudson River — in lively conversation with 19th-century American landscapes collected by Baron Thyssen.

In 2005, early in Mr. Kjartansson’s career, the Reykjavik-based artist performed “The Great Unrest” in an abandoned theater in remote Iceland, southeast of the capital. Ms. Thyssen-Bornemisza was one of the few people to make the trip to see it. “She was the second person, after a personal friend of mine, to ever buy a piece from me,” Mr. Kjartansson said.

He has done three commissions with the collector, including “The Palace of the Summerland” (2014). In that case, he told Ms. Thyssen-Bornemisza he was “trying to make a bad film about the greatest novel in Icelandic history,” he recalled, a reference to Halldor Laxness’s “World Light.”

“Francesca was like, yes, let’s do it, rock ’n’ roll!” The artist produced the piece with his friends in residency at TBA21 in Vienna and playfully cast his patron as one of the novel’s socialist revolutionaries working in a fish factory. “She had the guts to make some outrageous artistic dream happen,” he said.

For Ms. Thyssen-Bornemisza, who said she was a terrible student in her youth, the commissioning process has been an incredible education. “Each one of them gave me an opportunity to dive into something that I didn’t know before,” she said.

She accompanied Ernesto Neto on his trip into the Amazon forest to collaborate with Huni Kuin shamans on the mythical powers of plants, part of the research underpinning his 2015 installation that created a communal space for healing rituals and celebrations in Vienna at TBA21.

The TBA21 Academy supported Diana Policarpo's recent sea expedition to the Savage Islands off Portugal to film the otherworldly terrain and study a deadly neurotoxin, ciguatera, which passes through the food chain in the surrounding waters. "TBA gave me the chance to actually go into this unknown remote place," Ms. Policarpo said.

Her large-scale scenographic sculpture, embedded with videos of land and sea, and immersive sound piece based on field recordings opens on April 9 at Ocean Space in Venice.

In her most ambitious collaboration to date, Ms. Thyssen-Bornemisza has entered a new three-year partnership with the Spanish city of Córdoba, a crossroads of Roman, Jewish, Muslim and Christian cultures.

"We want to elevate Córdoba, which is already an icon due to its historical legacy, as a place for current and contemporary creation," said José María Bellido, the mayor, who described his first meeting with TBA21 as "love at first sight."

A third partner in the alliance is the regional administration of Andalusia, which oversees the Andalusian Center for Contemporary Creation, a large exhibition space in Córdoba that will host rotating exhibitions drawn from TBA21's collection of more than 300 works.

The first, "Abundant Futures," opens April 1 with works by about 40 artists including Tomás Saraceno, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Claudia Comte that map out new ways of living together.

Ms. Thyssen-Bornemisza aims to bring the skills her foundation has honed in Venice and apply them to new artist commissions that could highlight spaces around Córdoba, including archaeological sites, the agricultural foundation, the university, the botanical garden and historic courtyards.

"We have such a fertile place around us," she said of the Spanish city. Isabel Lewis, who created a dance performance related to water for Ocean Space in 2021, is among the first to be selected by TBA21 to go to Córdoba, where she is researching the origins of flamenco and migration of cultures.

It was the wish of Baron Thyssen, who died in 2002, that the Thyssen family collection be kept intact in a dedicated museum.

But Ms. Thyssen-Bornemisza is more free-spirited with the art in her care. "Buildings can kill you," she said, preferring to operate outside the conventional structure of museums. "It's infinitely easier for a private independent art foundation to experiment with that — to put their money where their mouth is and to look for alternative ways of interacting with people.

"Ultimately that's what we're trying to do today with TBA21," she said, "breaking down the boundaries that we live in, bringing new forms of seeing and inspiring people to think differently."