

# William N. Copley

## A Ballad of a Womanizer

CARL HAENLEIN

*Lempertz has repeatedly achieved very good prices for works by the artist William Copley who began his career as an art dealer, but went on to become a painter and collector. An unusual and exciting life, as briefly outlined by the former director of the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hannover, Dr Carl Haenlein.*

The oeuvre of William Copley, since it has been acknowledged, has received an extreme degree of fluctuating attention. Phases can be noted in which these pictures appear at the focal points of contemporary culture – documenta and Westkunstausstellung could be mentioned as examples. But periods follow which are characterised by an almost frightening absence of public echo. These may occasionally have been problematic even for Copley's robust temperament. The only constant against the backdrop of this wild pendulum swing of reception is the repeatedly expressed respect of important artists.

With Copley's beautiful statement *“Let Warhol have his shoes and his electric chair, Picabia and Kafka divine machines – let me have my grand piano and my guillotine”*, the author approaches a résumé choreographed between California, New York and Paris.

An artist is under debate who has defied almost all offers of the so-called art industry – and yet achieved a singular position. If there is such a thing as cultural correctness – Copley has at any rate treated it with supreme disregard.

It is easy to understand that the art scene has trained rigid structures: to this belong the economic interests of the market, the critical tones of the supplements, the mandate of art spaces and museums, the enormous influence of collectors, the vocational livelihood of the artists. Some fit well



Untitled. 1994  
Acrylic on canvas, 81.5 x 102 cm  
Estimate: € 80,000 Result: € 262,000  
AUCTIONED AT LEMPERTZ, JUNE 2021



The sun never sets. 1982  
Acrylic on canvas, 97 x 130 cm  
Estimate: € 50,000 Result: € 93,000  
AUCTIONED AT LEMPERTZ, JUNE 2018



William N. Copley, c. 1960



Copley Galleries, c. 1948, Beverly Hills, California

to certain artistic characters, some not, or less so. On this basis, one could almost tentatively sketch out the typology of an artist who, as far as one can at all predict, has better chances of a career than another.

With Copley's life in mind, it becomes clear that he damaged or disregarded almost all the conventions which normally successfully govern the career of a young artist: Copley appears as a character who does not harm the unwritten conventions of the scene with the fanatical attitude of the revolutionary, but in the pleasurable demeanour of the connoisseur. Copley always seems to have known that the damage of a taboo affords a different, perhaps greater pleasure than the observance of morality.

No sooner was Copley born, than the famous golden spoon was placed in his mouth. One can hardly believe it, but Copley was a foundling, adopted by a wealthy provincial publisher. And thus – if you will – the artist's start to life was already a breach of the rules. Since van Gogh's meagre days, constantly threatened by abject poverty, the myth-creating forces of 20th century culture have loved the ascent of the artist out of poverty.

The fact of the adoption was probably initially the cause of an incipient distancing of the adolescent from the family – later there was a break, and then a spectacular trial. For the time being, however, Copley had no intention of renouncing the inherited fortune and the family. On the contrary. He invested what he had in art: In 1947 the artist founded the Copley Galleries in Beverly Hills and immediately appointed himself as director.

With this, Copley impressively demonstrated that he was not shy about the extensive fortune. However, the family, initially only taken aback, was quickly shocked when it became clear that Copley had no hesitation in frittering away large sums of money, and indeed, cronies of the early years reported that he watched with satisfaction as the inherited millions dissolved – into settlements for his many wives, and into castles in the country and in the air.

Copley started work as a dealer. Together with his brother-in-law, he opened the aforementioned gallery which was distinguished by spectacular vernissages – at which all of California's birds of paradise seemed to gather – as well as by the almost non-existent business routine. Let's hear Copley himself:

*"When I left the army, the first thing I did was get married. She had a noteworthy brother-in-law, John Ployardt, who was an artist. Up until then I had never met one, and this one impressed me. In those days I drank perhaps more than today. The same went for my brother-in-law John Ployardt. It was*

his job to make Mickey Mouse and such like for Walt Disney. He hated Disney and declared himself a Surrealist. I did not know of such things. I had tried to be a liberal, which had mostly consisted of handing out leaflets for some poorly attended event. I played tennis with Henry Wallace who always beat me soundly because he always hit his balls so brazenly high. I had a hangover. He was a petty winner and criticised my lifestyle.

The brother-in-law, John Ployardt, shared his lifestyle. He taught me Surrealism and encouraged me to think in terms of exaggeration. That was exactly what I needed. Surrealism made everything comprehensible: my family background, the war, and why I appeared at the Yale Prom without shoes. It seemed like a thing I could be successful at.

I understood there to be two sides to reality: the public or social, which we are taught and in which everything has a name – that is, reality in which we must make ourselves understood; and alongside it, the private reality which is reality only for each individual. Surrealism is what poetry and above all metaphors require in order to communicate. This is super-realism. And that makes sense.

Southern California in 1946 was a most unsuitable and surely completely redundant place for the preparation of surrealism. As Man Ray once said, there proliferated more Surrealism in Hollywood than all the serious Surrealists could invent in their life's work. The location was an intellectual desert, despite all the film industry's claims to the contrary ...” So much for Copley!

While Copley still had one finger in the trader's pie, he made a further faux pas with another. Through his work as a dealer, the artist came into contact with the European Surrealists who had dispersed to the USA. Copley's elfish appearance must have had a strong effect on the emigrants, on Matta, Max Ernst, Man Ray and Duchamp, but also on the American artists such as Dorothea Tanning and Joseph Cornell. Like mushrooms from the forest floor after the rain, friendships sprang up overnight – like rhizomes, alliances grew here which were to last for decades.

Copley wanted the pictures and sculptures of these artists, now friends, to stand at the centre of his commercial efforts. Because, however, this proved sensationally unsuccessful, he started buying his friends' works himself.

With this, Copley brought movement into the gallery's balance sheet. It doesn't take much imagination to conceive the suspicion with which this type of trading activity was observed by the family. In addition to this came the friendship with the eccentric artists, the fictitious deals that came about with the works of these friends: The compilers of the strict



July 5 (Great Day Coming). 1975  
Acrylic collaged with firecrackers on canvas,  
166 x 133 cm  
Estimate: € 60,000 Result: € 104,000  
AUCTIONED AT LEMPertz, JUNE 2018



Trust Lust. 1989  
Acrylic on canvas, 163 x 138 cm  
Estimate: € 80,000 Result: € 213,000  
AUCTIONED AT LEMPertz, DEC. 2020



Installation view of René Magritte exhibition at the Copley Galleries, Sept. 1948



Untitled. 1959  
Acrylic on canvas, 33 x 41 cm  
Estimate: € 30,000 Result: € 138,000  
AUCTIONED AT LEMPertz, JUNE 2021

tablets of law into which the commandments of art business are carved, had reason to turn up their noses and raise their eyebrow. All the more so in the American province. Copley's beginning was thus full of blunders. In an original, amusing and contradictory manner, Copley's flirtation with the muse had begun. He had however long since sniffed out another taboo, which he quickly and gleefully set out to break. At roughly the same time as the launch of his gallery, Copley realised – in 1947 – that that which brought his friends so much fun and so little money, would also have to become his life.

And already the young man, striving to be an artist, was in trouble again, up to his neck. Trade is trade and art is art, and the industry does not at all appreciate the mingling of the two elements. As far as I know, there is no other example of the metamorphosis of the dealer into artist – the laws of the business are reluctant to permit the immoral mutation ... if one disregards Dubuffet's oscillating existence between the wine trade and painting, which is another topic anyway. Copley is the exception. We can understand how comfortable he felt when he once again succeeded in irritating proper structures when we look at his memoirs, *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Dealer*, obviously written with great pleasure. Of course, Copley had selected exactly this phase of his life, in which he so successfully irritated family, surroundings, the proper pattern and expectations, for his life's confession.

In the life of a young artist, the academy era is the phase of adaptation, the period of self-discovery. It is almost a law that the young genius adapts the canon of art by slipping into another artistic guise and thus realising the powers of creative action.

Once again, Copley is quite different. Here as well he goes against the mainstream. While other young artists might shed the skin of appropriation, he felt at home in the works of his friends – he announced this to the world, and the friends were pleased – the world less so.

It was only logical that he should dedicate wonderful monuments of affection to the amicable relationships with Duchamp, Picabia, Man Ray, pictures that openly showed his admiring love. These works that made Copley famous, were created in this way. Pictures that breathe the spirit of Picabia, that pay homage to Marcel Duchamp – an impressive bow to the austere talent of Ferdinand Hodler, and Copley would not be Copley if he had not given this picture in particular a frivolous accent – fragrant lingerie.

Hidden in the homage character of these works are laconic, to some extent fundamentalist analyses that are unique in their eye-opening and bizarre reductions. The logical naivety generated by the metamorphosis of a picture by Picabia into a panel by Copley has that irrational quality of the beginning of the century when Rousseau, the custom's officer, described the life in the milieu of Picasso and the Bateau Lavoir. The custom officer's understanding of art, as fantastic as it is absurd, is the most famous after-dinner speech of twentieth century art. Rousseau formulated it on the occasion of the banquet given in his honour by Picasso: *"You Picasso, are the greatest in the Egyptian style (he meant Cubism), but I am the greatest in the modern."* It is such insights that made Rousseau a saintly-naïve hermit in Montmartre – and a chosen brother in the spirit of Copley.

The archangels who to this day guard the paradises of the avant-garde with orthodox strictness were not comfortable with what was happening. This also explains why the number of Copley's appearances in large museums or exhibition spaces remained small. Apart from a series of exhibitions in 1980/91 between Bern, Eindhoven and Paris and an exhibition in the Kestner Gesellschaft in 1995, the waters of great fame remained quiet and still for many years.

That which seemed suspicious to the guardians of art was appreciated all the more by his fellow artists. If it was Copley who collected works by Duchamp, Man Ray, Joseph Cornell, Dorothea Tanning and other friends in his early days, his friends, led by Max Ernst, did not hesitate to equally admire his work. In the trenchant collections of Matta, Max Ernst and others, Copley has been gloriously represented. And his own acquisitions have become a magnificent collection that must be accorded world status.

Take a look at these artists whom Copley made his family: There is Max Ernst, one of the greatest artistic wizards of the 20th century. His collages are about the secret of mystification which Ernst distils from the most banal of printed matter, medical atlases, picture postcards with the kitschiest perspectives possible. Thus, a labyrinthine landscape is created, permeated by calculation and dream of computation and vision. The poetic power of his inventions has perhaps only been equalled by Klee. His collages, the songs about the unspeakable, these hymns to the dream, fascinated Copley. They became the basis of a deep friendship.

And Duchamp: Through him, the great revolution of Dadaists received a fulminant overture. Today it has long been heard and felt as a grand opera.



Star and Garter. 1964  
Acrylic on canvas, 81.5 x 65 cm  
Estimate: € 40,000 Result: € 105,000  
AUCTIONED AT LEMPERTZ, DEC. 2017



A photograph documents René Magritte, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst and Man Ray at the opening of the 1966 Copley exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam; they present the exhibition catalogue. Four great Surrealists – Francis Picabia missing – meet here to congratulate their important “disciple”.



Coffee Break. 1963  
Oil on canvas, 51 x 61 cm  
Estimate: € 40,000 Result: € 109,000  
AUCTIONED AT LEMPERTZ, JUNE 2020

There, in the famous photo from Amsterdam one can of course see Man Ray, who in his photographs, gave light and darkness, these archaic medium with a centuries-long tradition, a new existence.

And once again to that photo: Magritte also appears in it – the conservative wing of the surrealist revolution follows him to the barricades – and the reality of the world changes before our eyes in the Bengal light of his art.

Copley selected the greatest of the artists from what we now regard as the classic period of the 20th century as patrons for his art. He could also have drowned under these patrons. But the opposite was the case: Equipped with existential and artistic vitality, Copley found himself, his style, his art.

But it is not the case that Copley’s life was limited to these testimonies of friendship, to these homages. Copley is a famous friend of the female portion of the world. He has admired countless ladies. He was married five times and the charms of this American virility and Parisian wit is praised to the skies. A *homme à femmes par excellence*, naturally a macho man whose erotically optimistic life has become a legend.

His pictures are also testimony to this. We can leaf through this vita erotica like a book, his passions depicted in impressive images, and always with nonchalance; his obsessions can be traced – elegant exchanges – in his drawings, in his texts. Those who study this, will surely find their reward. When one looks at these duets that are being sung in these pictures – the dances that are spun here show everything and cover nothing. It is completely clear: this is not a victim who has entered the arena of the battle of the sexes under duress – here the perpetrator speaks out of passion; the desire for erotic action determines life as well as art.

Nothing is suffered, everything bears witness to enjoyment, to a direct, uncomplicated joy of life. The overt and drastic language of this art, the *joie de vivre*, the lust for life that expresses itself here easily enables Copley to commit a further serious breach of the establishment rules. Obviously, optimistic clarity and enchanting cheerfulness, which form the basis of this course of love, were stuck in the jaws of the *zeitgeist*. This would have left Copley cold, and his productivity would not have been irritated by it in the least.

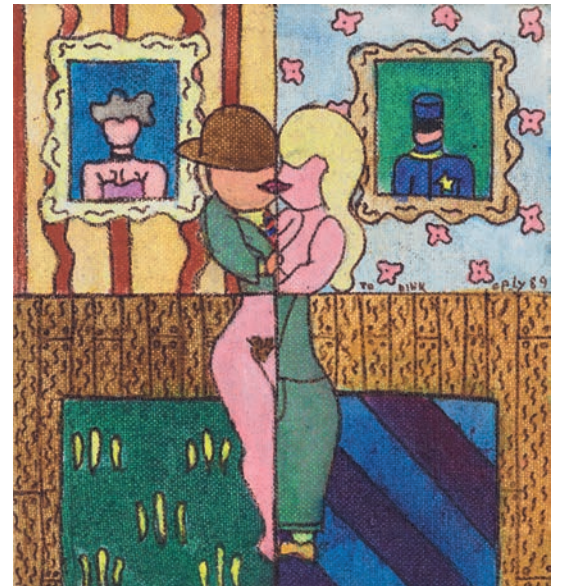
With Copley’s death in 1996, a distinctive voice in the spectrum of 20th century art fell silent, one which despite all attempts to deprive it of its word, had become unmistakable.

Copley's work is, if you will, a single pictorialised homage to the eruptive powers of Eros. The artist tells his stories of the pleasures of the lonely gentleman in the streets of Paris, the talents of the beautiful blonde on the next street corner, in a tone marked by irony, by sceptical and laconic formulations. Whoever allows this tone of voice to sink in will realise that these pictures are much more sophisticated and complicated than suggested at first glance.

The openness with which Copley talks about the erotic inclinations of his protagonists is noteworthy, and the comments he makes are amusing, free of illusion and completely unprejudiced definitions from the handbook of erotic behaviour. *"My discovery that I had secrets to share does not come from books, though books did tell me there was no knowledge. I only know that nothing can be beautiful to the eye alone. Only lust is beautiful and it cannot be seen..."* as said by Copley. Let's leave it at that ...



Untitled. 1960  
Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 73 cm  
Estimate: € 50,000 – 70,000  
AUCTION ON 3/4 DEC. 2021



Untitled. 1989  
Oil and marker on canvas, 28 x 25.5 cm  
Estimate: € 20,000 – 30,000  
AUCTION ON 3/4 DEC. 2021

This article is based on texts by Carl Haenlein published over the years. The title refers to the 1984 painting by William N. Copley, *Ballad of a Womanizer*.

Carl Haenlein (born 1933) received his doctorate from the University of Munich on the work of Andrea Mantegna. He was the Director of the Kestner Gesellschaft Hannover from 1974 to 2002 and in 1997, under his leadership, the Institute made the much-acclaimed move to its current home, the 'Damenbad' of the city of Hannover, built in 1905. Carl Haenlein was involved as curatorial advisor in the construction of the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg and the furnishing of the German Bundesrat with works by Per Kirkeby (roof sculptures) and Rebecca Horn (foyer), whilst the 'Molecule Man' by Jonathan Borowsky, which has become a landmark of Berlin, was initiated by him. Carl Haenlein lives and works as a freelance art consultant in Hannover.



Bob it. 1994  
Acrylic on canvas, 127 x 102 cm  
Estimate: € 80,000 – 120,000  
AUCTION ON 3 / 4 DEC. 2021

LEMPERTZ

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