

Palais Schaumburg

TERMINAL LOT OF A SPECTACULAR AUCTION

Prince's palace, soldiers' quarters, seat of the Federal Chancellor, then second official residence – built in 1858–1860 by the cloth factory and spinning mill owner Alois Knops and sold to the textile entrepreneur Wilhelm Loeschigk in 1860, for decades Palais Schaumburg was the social centre of Bonn, the royal court of western Germany. Close family ties link the late classicist villa with the English House of Welf, Hohenzollern, Schaumburg, Hesse, and others.

Of all the residents of the prestigious building, one probably caused the most talk amongst Bonn society: Princess Viktoria of Prussia (1866–1929). Daughter of Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm and later 99-day Emperor Friedrich III and sister of the last German Emperor Wilhelm II, Viktoria was born into politically difficult circumstances. Her grandmother was Queen Victoria. The Princess was consequently called 'the Englishwoman' at court and suspected of upholding British interests at the German imperial court.

As a young girl, she had fallen in love with Prince Alexander von Battenberg, an officer in the Berlin Guard Regiment, and thus became a victim of the so-called 'Battenberg Affair'. Prince Alexander, nephew of the Russian Tsar, was elected Prince of the newly created Principality of Bulgaria at the Congress of Berlin in order to represent Russia's interests. Von Battenberg, however, had other plans and became a spokesman for the Bulgarian national movement.



Palais Schaumburg



Princess Viktoria of Prussia

This circumstance caused Otto von Bismarck to fear that the engagement of a Prussian princess to the inexpedient Prince Alexander could plunge German-Russian relations into a serious imbalance. Under threat of his resignation, the 'Iron Chancellor' insisted on a dissolution of the engagement, and Viktoria renounced with a heavy heart.

Instead, a short time later, she married Prince Adolf zu Schaumburg-Lippe – a union perhaps less passionate, but at least appreciative. They settled in the newly acquired Palais Schaumburg, which developed over the next three decades to become the centre of Bonn high society.

The princess's situation changed with the horrors of the First World War. In 1916, Prince Adolf succumbed to pneumonia while fighting on the French front. In 1918 Wilhelm II abdicated the throne and went into exile.

At the age of 61, by now considered somewhat eccentric, Princess Viktoria married the 26-year-old Russian Alexander Zoubkoff, to the great astonishment, if not horror of the entire aristocracy. Even from his exile, the emperor vetoed the proposal – in vain. The Russian turned out to be an imposter, and at Palais Schaumburg, the princess's belated happiness in love faded as Zoubkoff quickly squandered her fortune and left her to emigrate to Luxembourg. He initially took a job there as a waiter and caused a gastronomic sensation when the restaurant openly advertised with the slogan 'The emperor's brother-in-law serves you here.'

The press was just waiting for a scandal like this, as well as the Bonn society, which was already unfavourably disposed towards the princess, and was the talk of the town for weeks. Her private and financial misfortune led to bankruptcy proceedings in 1929 which demanded the auction of the Palais Schaumburg's inventory. The auction contract was awarded to Kunsthaus Lempertz, which had already sold the inventory of Villa Hammerschmidt a year earlier directly from the former Emperor in Haus Doorn. The final lot was the Palais itself. Within a year, the family business, which has its roots in Cologne and Bonn, had auctioned off the furnishings of the later official seat of both the Federal Chancellor and the Federal President.

Once the auction catalogue for the sale of the 'Library of the Palais Schaumburg, Bonn' was produced, interested buyers and numerous onlookers were able to view the 'Bankruptcy Estate of Mrs Alexander Zoubkoff/Viktoria, née Princess of Prussia' in the riding hall of the palace. The '287th Lempertz Art Auction' from 15–29 October 1929

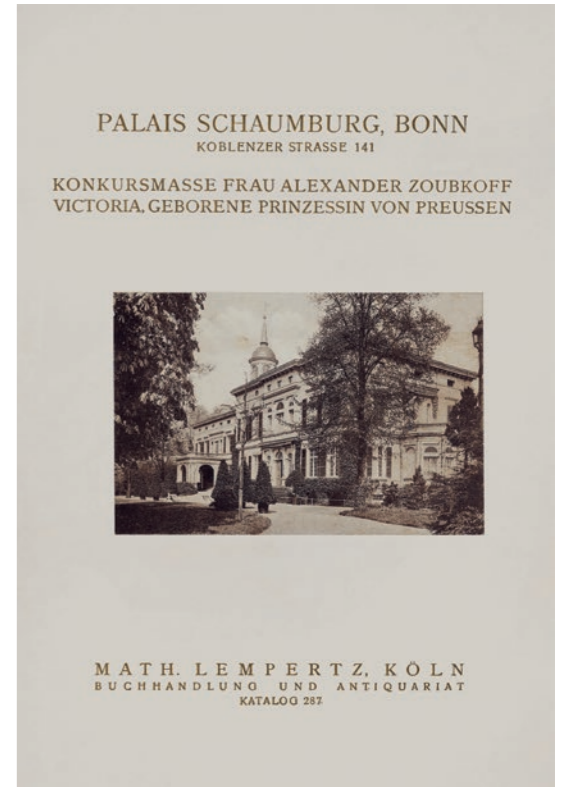
included almost the entire furnishings, whilst the collection of paintings subsequently came under the hammer on 21st October. "When I opened the auction in the riding hall, over a thousand people were present, including reporters from all over the world", recalled Josef Hanstein, the owner of Lempertz at the time. Princess Viktoria was also present in the auction room at times.

A glance at the numerous artefacts shows that many of the objects came from the respective families of the two spouses from the Berlin Palace or, via Viktoria's mother, from the English royal house. The extensive holdings of the palace mainly contained silver objects, furniture and paintings. Much of the furniture and pictures were from the Kaiser-Friedrich-Palais (now the Altes Palais, Berlin) and still bore the relevant inventory labels or the monogram V of the British Crown Princess Viktoria – later Empress Friedrich – on the back, who had brought some of these pieces from her parental home. This applied above all to the objects of old London silver as well as impressive pieces from workshops in Augsburg and Hamburg. One of the most striking was a richly engraved Japanese silver service weighing over 44 pounds, which Emperor Wilhelm I gave to both his son Friedrich and his daughter Luise on the occasion of his silver wedding anniversary with Empress Augusta.

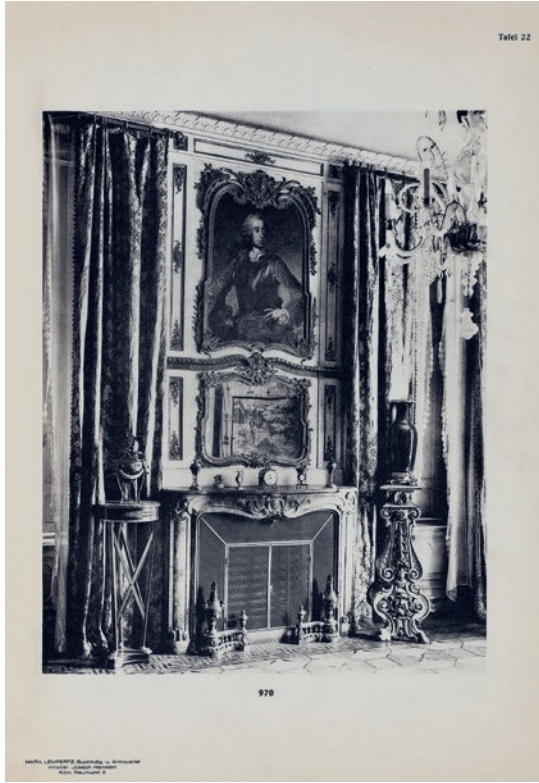
The auction offer included a large selection of Dutch and German seating furniture, small French 18th-century Fournier pieces and numerous mahogany examples of Empire and German Classicism. Among the most extraordinary pieces in the richly illustrated auction catalogue with a total of 1551 lots was a marble fireplace with matching boiserie set with a portrait of Cologne Elector Clemens August from the 18th century.

The collection of paintings also bore witness to the aristocratic origins of its collectors. The Hohenzollern family pieces included oil portraits of the imperial couple by Heinrich Angeli, a large-format portrait of Friedrich Wilhelm III by Franz Krüger, and a marble bust of the same by Christian Rauch.

Viktoria's story is one of unhappy love affairs and political turmoil. The memoirs she left behind are unconventional and surprisingly honest, published presumably out of financial necessity in a series of 25 installments in the Bonner General-Anzeiger shortly before her death and before the big auction. She died that same year at the 'Villa Friede' boarding house in Bonn-Mehlem and was buried in Kronberg im Taunus, her mother's retirement home.

Catalogue of the 287th Lempertz Auction from 21st October 1929

The marriage of Princess Viktoria and Alexander Zoubkoff



Marble fireplace with corresponding boiserie and a portrait of Cologne Elector Clemens August

In 1949, Palais Schaumburg became the seat of the Federal Chancellor and remained so until 1976, when the new Chancellery was completed. Adenauer, Erhard, Kiesinger, Brandt and Schmidt had their official residence here.

A new use is now being sought for the property on Bonn's Adenauer-allee. "Palais Schaumburg is looking for new users" was the headline of the Kölnische Rundschau newspaper on 2 July 2024, reporting on the extensive refurbishment and development plans for the villa.

L. E.

LEMPERTZ

1845