

In the spring of 1997, I saw them in person for the first time: the head-footers of O.T. Together with Johann Hauser's blue star, they greeted me on my way to the *House of Artists* (fig. 54) in Gugging and I was immediately dumbfounded. Simultaneously simple and highly expressive, today the two figures created by Tschirtner still adorn the wall, which is approximately eight meters high. Although what was then the exterior facade has since been covered by the addition that enlarged the building in 2011, its effect is nonetheless just as imposing in today's entrance area as it was back then. Turning our attention to the gigantic dimensions of the figures, it raises the question: How did the artist succeed in "translating" his unique head-footers, which are usually to be found in smaller formats, into such large dimensions? I looked forward to getting to know him and being able to ask him about this. As soon as I entered the *House of Artists* for the first time, I immediately had the opportunity to meet many of its residents and talk with them; I even played a board game with August Walla. Unfortunately, I would not yet be able to meet Oswald Tschirtner at that time. Fascinated by the exceptional nature of this extraordinary place, I nonetheless decided to come back again, and I made arrangements to have a conversation with Johann Feilacher. He was the one who had involved Tschirtner in the decoration of the now famous wall of the House of Artists. Through him, I also heard how scaffolding had been put up in front of the building and how Tschirtner had worked on the wall while secured by means of a safety harness. Thus liberated from his fear of heights, he succeeded in reproducing the unique formal idiom of his head-footers on this impressive scale.

My Experience with O.T. – Oswald Tschirtner

I was finally able to meet the artist a little later, in September 1997, when I began working at the *gallery gugging*. His achievement in the face of the facade's formidable height now seemed all the more impressive to me: Tschirtner was a delicate and well-dressed man, who was 77 at that time. He was quiet and introverted. His rituals included his daily walk to the newsstand, from which he always returned with an instant lottery ticket (fig. 93) and, occasionally, with a book of crossword puzzles. It was unimportant to him whether his lottery ticket was a winner, but he enjoyed the puzzles. To do them, he withdrew to the room he shared with Johann Hauser. He also spent a lot of time reading in the Bible there. As someone who would have liked to go to seminary to become a priest, he loved this activity. He always greeted and bid farewell to visitors with the word "peace." I experienced Tschirtner as a very refined, reserved man who only raised his voice when one of his fellow artists said something indecent. With a loud "No, don't! Peace!", he would then turn away. His fragile, delicate manner as well as his slender physique almost gave me the feeling that I needed to protect him from the world outside the refuge of his room.

Because he loathed traveling, he also usually refused to attend openings outside of Gugging. He even felt uncomfortable at those held at our own *gallery gugging* and *art brut center gugging* when they were attended by a large group of people he did not know. He always listened politely to enthusiastic guests, customers, and collectors, but he would then answer them only with a succinct "yes." Even so, he often wanted to go back to the *House of Artists* directly after the exhibition had been opened, in order to have his "blessed calm" there.

Tschirtner loved to work in peace and quiet. Thus, his art was usually created with just one other person present, who was chosen to be at his side and permitted to help him. Originally, Prof. Leo Navratil and then later Prof. Johann Feilacher calmly assisted Tschirtner as he selected sheets of paper, canvases, drawing utensils and/or paints. Occasionally I was allowed to be present during this creative process, which Alois Marksteiner has referred to as "art à deux." This privilege also proved to involve an extended procedure:

Before a decision could be made about which piece of paper or canvas was to be used, a selection of motifs to be considered for depiction on them had to be discussed. In this context, Tschirtner chose from diverse thematic realms – however, he usually opted for content from the areas of “people” or “religion.” On paper, Tschirtner then usually worked with pen and ink; on canvas, with permanent marker. He was always sparing in his use of color. A master of the image reduced to its essential elements, he ultimately always realized his subject matter with a perfect sense for the space available on the material he had chosen to work on. All of this took place in a completely tranquil, calm, and cool-headed manner and with a great sense of natural ease that deeply impressed me. Tschirtner’s minimalistic works reflect his noble nature, which aimed at peace, harmony, and modesty. He additionally succeeded in delighting the viewers of his works with a (not always intentional) slightly humorous note.

One of my first tasks involved mounting and framing 155 works by Tschirtner for an upcoming traveling exhibition. The books *Das rote Zebra* (The red zebra; fig. 101) and *Menschen mit Heiligenschein* (People with haloes; fig. 103) were published to accompany the show, and they contain all of the works I had been allowed to prepare for the exhibition. For me, it was an honor to be permitted to have such intense contact with them at the very beginning of my work in Gugging. Over the course of my lengthy engagement with the works, I became genuinely absorbed with the artist’s unique visual idiom, which has deeply moved me ever since. I had the feeling I was holding a remarkable treasure in my hands and making it

available to the world as an ambassador for the *Artists from Gugging*.

When the works had returned after nine highly successful months at four venues and were put up for sale at the *gallery gugging*, it was particularly important to us that they made their way into good museological as well as private collections. Thus they can now be found at the Collection de l’Art Brut and the Museum de Stadshof as well as in the collections of Hannah Rieger, Helmut Zambo, Bob Greenberg, Rolf Röthlisberger, and Arnulf Rainer and in the ABCD collection.

However, Tschirtner’s artworks had already met with great enthusiasm long before that. In 1970, Vienna’s Galerie nächst St. Stephan became the first to show the artist’s very sought-after works. At that time, they could be bought for around 100 schillings. This show was followed by exhibitions at the St. Etienne, Rosa Esman, and Phyllis Kind galleries in New York, at Heike Curtze and Steinek in Vienna, Susi Brunner in Zurich, Altnöder in Salzburg, Hilt in Basel, Judy Saslow in Chicago, Susanne Zander in Cologne, and Yukiko Koide in Tokyo. Tschirtner’s work was additionally presented at many museums and was acquired for their collections. The Collection de l’Art Brut in Lausanne houses not just the famous *Schneefall* (Snowfall; fig. 405), but also other works, such as *Japan* (fig. 240). Among other museums, Tschirtner’s art can also be found in the Niederösterreichische Landessammlungen in St. Pölten, Museum Moderner Kunst (MMK) in Vienna, Museum de Stadshof in Zwolle, Setagaya Art Museum in Tokyo, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Because of his increasing fame, postcard-sized pictures are now being offered for around €3,500. Works from the 1970s and images on canvas are especially rare. Since Tschirtner’s death in 2007, the *gallery gugging* has been particularly careful in overseeing the works of his estate. Nonetheless, artworks by Tschirtner from other collections can also occasionally be found at auctions. Sotheby’s 2016 auction of David Bowie’s private collection, which contained a work by Tschirtner, proved particularly spectacular. As a great fan of the *Artists from Gugging*, Bowie had even come to Maria Gugging once, in order to visit them. In 2018 Tschirtner’s *Ich weine* (I cry)

sold for €5,526: a record result for an artwork of this size. I am very grateful to Tschirtner. I was already enchanted by his work as well as his nature during my first visit to Gugging, and they continue to fill me with joy to this day. They have accompanied me during the most important stages of my career: I studied education and psychology in Klagenfurt, Austria, and wrote my thesis on the topic of schizophrenia, art, and art therapy. I originally came to the House of Artists in Gugging to interview Prof. Feilacher. At the same time, I also had the pleasure of seeing Tschirtner's works – which I knew from Navratil's *Schizophrenie und Kunst* (Schizophrenia and art) and *Schizophrenie und Sprache* (Schizophrenia and language) – in person for the first time. Later, I had the chance to get to know Tschirtner himself and prepare the travelling exhibition featuring his art; the first exhibition that I opened, on October 1, 1997, was a solo exhibition of Tschirtner's work at Zurich's Galerie Latal. Tschirtner directly captivated me with his oeuvre and, in doing so, he made me into what I am today.

I feel and have always felt a deep need to dedicate myself to insuring that the art Tschirtner and his fellow artists have created outside the mainstream, at Gugging, is seen and receives the recognition it deserves – that the artists can enjoy and celebrate their success during their lifetimes – and it is important to me to be able to contribute something towards this goal. It is correspondingly significant to me to be able to identify Oswald Tschirtner as one of the truly great artists of Art Brut who has long since taken his place in the world of contemporary art.