

## Jean-Jacques Aillagon

Born in 1941, Jean François Prat was indeed a child of that half-century which came out of the tragedies of the war but to whom everything seemed possible again. The world continually set its horizons on all conceivable conquests: science, progress, peace, development and creation at last freed from the weight of dogmas and, quite simply, of too comfortable certainties. Jean- François Prat's life, ended too soon, was marked by impressive professional success ranking him among the best French business lawyers, those who stand out on the international stage and whom their peers, often their competitors, consider with respect. His life could therefore have been divided between his professional accomplishment and his happiness at home. A passion, however, gave that life a very special luminescence, which was bright, sincere and radiant: a passion for art, a passion for the creativity of his time, he shared with his wife, Marie-Aline.

As soon as they arrived in Paris, in 1964, Marie-Aline and Jean-François had more than just pleasure in the banal sense of the word, but an intense joy, in visiting art galleries, such as that of Jacques Kerchache, of artists such as Yann Meyer and the "penseurs de l'art" such as Hubert Damisch. At once they felt a strong need to acquire works of art, to live with them, that is to say, to live more passionately, more profoundly and more vividly. Their first acquisitions led them towards Russian Constructivists and towards Otto Freundlich. At that time, their taste and no doubt as well the means that they could mobilise, steered them towards drawings, which, over the decades, came to form a prodigious collection. In 1968, their meeting with Martin Barré decisively took them to a new phase in this passion and led them, during the next ten years, to take a keen interest in the work of James Bishop, Christian Bonnefoi and Claude Rutault. As Jean-François Prat's professional success was confirmed in the 1980's, they endeavoured to purchase less accessible, more expensive, works of art. This is how their collection came to be enriched with works by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Franck Stella, Baldessari and Dubuffet.

Over a period of nearly fifty years, they therefore continually applied their vision with vigilance and audacity, encompassing successively the French art scene, then that of Europe, and America, and finally, as their field of vision expanded to the whole planet, the world scene. What is striking in the expression of this "life passion", is its perpetual movement. It never stopped. It always knew how to be, and was able to be, attentive to the new forms of expression of creation, to the advent of new ways of saying and doing art. It never became stuck in nostalgia for a past epoch which could have become, with the memories of youth, ideal "perfect time", a sublime moment definitively stopped in the swift passage of time. It is this motivating force which led them to take an interest in galleries which set out to discover new territories, such as that of Yvon Lambert and Chantal Crousel, as well as Olivier Castaing's School Gallery. It is thus easier to see why and how their collection, alongside established talent in the European and American scene, was able to welcome several successive generations of up-and-coming artists like Alain Declercq or Charles Sandison today.

The Prat collection, the fruit of a veritable adventure into the "tracks of creation", thus

conquered what lacks sometimes in certain collections: character, i.e., that singularity where the originality of a stare, the sincerity of a viewpoint or the demanding nature of an attitude manifest themselves. This character depends of several factors. It is largely due to the collectors' predilection for painted artwork in all the successive audacities of its expression.

It was reinforced through their refusal to limit their passion to only the recommendations of "main stream" art criticism, that the second half of the 20th century and, especially, the beginning of the 21st century, made excessively subject to the performances of a globalised market, and a market which was therefore becoming increasingly stereotyped. Thus they built up a remarkable and lively collection, frequenting with assiduity and generosity the circles of sociability which formed around the passion for art, such as the "friends of" associations of the Musée national d'art moderne, the musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, la Maison rouge and the Palais de Tokyo, and even as member of the Association pour la Diffusion Internationale de l'Art Français, an association for the promotion of French art worldwide.

The departure of Jean-François Prat could have threatened the sumptuous effervescence of this passion. But that would have underestimated the strength of character of Marie-Aline and her determination to continue their shared adventure. Does she not dream of a place which could welcome both their collection and visitors, who would thus be able to share it with its authors? That would also not take into account the faithful attachment to Jean-François' memory by his colleagues and partners at their firm, that firm which had become, as the walls of his family flat were no longer sufficient, one of the locations of the Prat collection. With enthusiasm, they set up an annual prize bearing Jean-François' name and which will support the work of a young artist. When they, through Frédéric Brière, whose initiative to put together a Guide de l'Artiste I had welcomed, asked me to chair the first edition of this prize, I accepted with joy. How could it be otherwise for me? Having been at the head of large public institutions on several occasions, I knew how much they find strong support in being surrounded by the passion of private individuals. Having been the instigator of a few fights to obtain that today's creations gain recognition or quite simply awareness by a wider and less distrustful public, I knew what the example of art collectors like the Prats can contribute to those who doubt the prodigious permanence of the artistic adventure of humanity. Former Culture Minister and author of the law of August 1, 2003 on art patronage and foundations, I was convinced that in a developed society such as ours, in parallel to a strong public initiative, cultural and artistic development must also be the business of society, i.e., private individuals, of their associations and of companies. Here are many objectives that the creation of the Jean-François Prat prize achieves. It will join the magnificent list of already established prizes, including the Marcel Duchamp award, the prizes of the Guerlain, Ricard or Cartier-Bresson foundations or, amongst others, the "Discovery Award" of the Friends of the Palais de Tokyo. May this new prize both perpetuate the memory of a great man of talent and passion, support the emergence of new talent and, above all, show our contemporaries that art never stops at what it has already achieved, that its adventure always continues and that there is nothing forcing us to deprive ourselves of its power to lead us to go beyond ourselves. It is indeed in this

way that Jean-François Prat lived out his admirable compagnonnage with the creation of his time. May his memory be thanked.

Jean-Jacques Aillagon advises several art foundations. He served as President of Château de Versailles (2007-2011), Secretary of culture & communication in the French government (2002-2004), President of Centre Pompidou (1996-2002) and head of Cultural affairs of the City of Paris.