Eva Rovers

Helene

The woman who turned Vincent into Van Gogh

Published by Prometheus in 2010
Translation Rights: Bee Rights
German translation Athena Verlag 2016

Word count: ca. 235.000 / ca. 185.000 excluding references.
Complete Dutch and German abbreviated version available: 163.000 words / 128.000 excluding references

An old metal chest filled with 3,400 letters sparked the search for the true story behind the world's greatest Van Gogh collector, Helene Kröller-Müller. In 1911, a near death experience prompted Helene to devote the rest of her life to establishing a museum of modern art centered around the work of the work of then-unknown painter Vincent van Gogh. Although hardly anyone had ever heard of Van Gogh, let alone dared to buy his paintings, Helene was convinced that his work would change the course of art history. Regularly she bought several of his paintings at once and made sure they were shown to the public, either by exhibiting them in her own gallery or by sending them abroad. By challenging both the aesthetics and the gender roles of

her time, she established Van Gogh's reputation as a visionary artist and herself as a force to be reckoned with. However, the personal price she paid for her success was high.

In this compelling biography, Eva Rovers reveals the forces that allowed Helene Kröller-Müller to shake up the male dominated art world of the early twentieth century. Despite fragile health, great personal tragedy, and a dwindling personal fortune Helene succeeded in opening the first large museum of modern art in Europe. To this day the Kröller-Müller Museum is world-famous for its varied collection of modern art, which includes paintings by Picasso, Mondrian, and over 300 works by Vincent van Gogh.

Eva Rovers (b. 1978) is a cultural historian with a PhD from the University of Groningen. Her biographies of art collector Helene Kröller-Müller and writer Boudewijn Büch received great critical acclaim. Together with filmmaker Leo de Boer, she produced a documentary film about Kröller-Müller's turbulent life. Eva was guest editor for the *Oxford Journal of the History of Collections*, and editor of the Dutch journal *Tijdschrift voor Biografie*. Besides biographies Eva Rovers wrote various books on civil resistance and other ways individuals can change the world. Her philosophical essay *Ik kom in opstand, dus wij zijn. Nieuw Licht op verzet* (*I Rebel – Therefor We Are. Casting a Different Light on Resistance*) was shortlisted for the Socrates Award. With *Practivisme. Een handboek voor heimelijke rebellen* (*Practivism. A Handbook for Closeted Rebels*) she empowered many people who had never considered themselves to be rebels.

For the reader of

- *Mistress of Modernism. The Life of Peggy Guggenheim*, by Mary V. Dearborn (2004).
- *Catherine the Great. Portrait of a Woman*, by Robert K. Massie (2011).
- *Van Gogh. The Life*, by Gregory White Smith and Steven W. Naifeh (2011).

- *Ninth Street Women. Five Painters and the Movement That Changed Modern Art*, by Mary Gabriel (2017).
- *Becoming*, by Michelle Obama (2018).

Press and Awards

"Succeeds in captivating until the end by cleverly weaving together art, business affairs, private life and the spirit of the age." —*Trouw*

"A more than interesting biography [...], an exceptional book. A pleasure to read, despite the density of information." —*De Groene Amsterdammer*

"A comprehensive portrait of a demanding, authoritarian but determined 'Ma'am.'"
—*NRC Handelsblad*

"An exemplary and fascinating biography" and a "compelling story." —*Vrij Nederland*

Helene. The Woman Who Turned Vincent into Van Gogh received great critical acclaim; it was declared one of the best books of 2010 by the leading Dutch newspaper, NRC Handelsblad. It also won the Bookseller's Decoration, the Dutch Foundation of Art Historians' Jan van Gelder Award, and the Hazelhoff Biography Award, a prestigious biennial prize for the best Dutch biography. In cooperation with director Leo de Boer, Rovers produced a documentary film about Helene Kröller-Müller, Helene: A Woman Between Love and Art, which was a success on its own at several international film festivals (an English version of this film is available on DVD and online).

Helene. The Woman Who Turned Vincent into Van Gogh is:

* a biography of an independent, ambitious and enterprising woman in a male dominated world, who bucked the conventions of her time to single-handedly open one of the first and largest museums of modern art in Europe.
* the untold story of a woman who introduced the work of Vincent van Gogh to the

world.
* a personal and moving story about the search for meaning in life.
* an exploration of a complex character who chose her art collection over family life, and art over love.
* an exemplary tale of how the efforts of one determined collector can be of critical importance to the breakthrough of artists and new art movements.
* a compelling history of a world-famous art collection, set against the turbulent background of early 20th-century Europe.
* a result of exclusive access to more than 3,400 letters written by Helene Kröller-Müller between 1909 and 1939, most of them addressed to her confidant Sam van Deventer, a man 20 years her junior.

CHAPTER SYNOPSES

Prologue

August 1911. Helene Kröller-Müller, aged 42, is lying in her hospital bed. Her doctor has just told her that she must undergo dangerous surgery to remove the lumps discovered in her abdomen earlier that day. As there is a high risk that she may die of complications during the operation, Helene is confronted with her own mortality, which makes her contemplate her life. Until that moment, she has viewed herself mainly as the mother of four children and the wife of one of the most wealthy, influential and successful businessmen in the country. Now she realizes that neither of these two roles satisfies her. What makes her happy is her collection of modern art, which she had just begun to assemble. Looking death in the eye, she decides that, should she survive the surgery, she will dedicate her life to her great passion—art. When her husband Anton arrives the next morning, she unfolds her plan: if she lives, she will no longer collect art for her own pleasure, but with the aim of sharing it with the world. Her dream is to build a museum to house her collection, thereby creating “a cultural monument, [...] a museum as natural and lively as has never existed before.”

1. Rags and Riches

The troubles of childhood

Given Helene's background, it was not likely that she would become a wealthy collector of modern art. Her grandparents were of humble, if not poor, descent, and worked hard to make a living. When Helene was born in 1869, her father, Wilhelm Müller, had managed to escape poverty by employing the same perseverance his daughter would inherit. After many setbacks in both the United States and Germany, he founded Müller & Co., a company that distributed coal and iron throughout Europe. The head office was located in Düsseldorf, the city in which Helene grew up. Her parents raised her in a conventional milieu, in which financial success was key, and the company always came first.

The Müller family showed minimal interest in art and culture, but her school introduced Helene to the books of great German writers, such as Goethe and Lessing. Deeply affected by their progressive thoughts on religion, Helene refused to be confirmed, which led to a long and painful quarrel with her Protestant parents. In the end, she was forced to obey their wishes, but she would never accept ecclesiastical religion and kept searching for a more personal spirituality. A second decisive quarrel arose when her parents denied Helene further education, instead sending her to a boarding school where she was taught how to be a good housewife. When she returned in 1887, a husband awaited her: Anton Kröller, a Dutch employee of her father, who was also the younger brother of his business partner. Wilhelm persuaded his 18-year-old daughter to marry Anton, whom he considered of vital importance to the company. Helene acquiesced, as she sensed that Anton would give her more freedom than her parents ever had.

(The Müller family around 1882, and Anton Kröller around 1910, © Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo)

2. Strategy and Love

The merchant's wife

Helene jr., Toon, Wim and Bob Kröller. © Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

In 1888, Helene married Anton and moved to his hometown of Rotterdam, in The Netherlands. Within a few months she learned to speak and write Dutch fluently, determined to adopt a new identity and leave her suffocating German roots behind. Only a year after their marriage, her father died, and since Anton's older brother had fallen seriously ill, 27-year-old Anton became the new director of Müller & Co. He proved to be an extremely talented businessman, expanding the company to five continents within a few years and adding a wide range of branch activities, from transporting meat through South America to exploiting gold mines in Russia. In fact, everything he touched seemed to turn to gold. In 1901, Anton moved the firm's headquarters to The Hague, the country's political centre, in a successful attempt to influence politics to the advantage of Müller & Co.

Together with their young daughter and sons, Helene and Anton moved to The Hague as well. There they bought, demolished and rebuilt two luxurious villas in city's rural outskirts. These conspicuous activities, further enhanced by their early purchase of several automobiles, led to their social isolation in the aristocratic city, where they were perceived as *nouveaux riches*. It was not so much Helene who was interested in this display of wealth. She preferred to retreat to the seclusion of her boudoir, where she read and reread Goethe, Lessing, Dante, Spinoza, Nietzsche, and many other authors. This was the room where she wrote her many letters, trying to grasp and order her thoughts aroused

by these “great men,” as she called them. Great men found their way to Helene in a different way; she and Anton actively supported the Boer Wars in South Africa, and as a result they welcomed both president Kruger and president Steyn to their home.
Looking back on this period in 1912, she wrote: “I was a nanny, housekeeper and lady, all at the same time. […] Yet beneath all that lay something stronger, something I can trace back to my childhood years—idealism, the better me, which at the time could not yet find its way.”

3. Seeing and Believing

Vincent van Gogh as “the key to so much”

Helene’s art teacher Henk Bremmer. © Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

Although Helene appeared to be living a perfectly happy life, she felt that something was missing. In 1906, at age 37, she took the first step towards becoming that “better me.” Helene met the renowned art teacher and connoisseur Henk Bremmer and discovered why her life felt unfulfilled. Bremmer played a crucial role in the introduction of modern art in The Netherlands. The main objective of his lessons was to give his students the ability to distinguish whether or not a work of art conveyed a “spiritual emotion.” This ability could not be learned from books, but solely by looking at art as closely and as often as possible. This is why Bremmer encouraged his students to collect art—being surrounded by art would help them to truly *see* art.

This highly personal, spiritual understanding of art was exactly what Helene had

been seeking. Instead of attending the usual single hour of art appreciation, she would attend for four, or sometimes even six, hours per week. She also asked Bremmer to teach at her home, so that her husband and children could attend the classes too. In 1907, Helene hired Bremmer to spend one day per week helping her to form an art collection, for which she gave him almost unlimited freedom and resources. He laid the foundation of what would become a world-famous collection, beginning with paintings by great international masters, such as Millet, Courbet and Seurat, as well as renowned Dutch artists like Toorop, Breitner and Israels. He also introduced Helene to the work of the artist he personally admired most: Vincent van Gogh. At that time, Van Gogh was hardly known outside of a small circle of fellow artists, and if people had heard from him, they usually considered him a madman who could not paint. Helene recognized in Van Gogh's work his struggle with religion, which gave her much solace. Besides this sincere personal fascination, she also anticipated that Van Gogh would be of great importance in establishing her reputation as a visionary collector.

4. Parents and Children

A cuckoo in the Kröller nest

Sam van Deventer and Helene Kröller-Müller sitting outside the family's cottage. © Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

It was not just spiritual struggle for which Helene sought solace; as the years went by and her children grew older, she admitted to herself that motherhood did not satisfy her. In fact, she was downright disappointed in her children. She had hoped that they would share her love of literature and philosophy, but all three of her sons preferred to spend their time

with friends on the tennis court rather than reading Dante with their mother. What made matters worse was that none of her sons possessed the talent to succeed their father as director of Müller & Co. It was more likely that her only daughter, Helene Jr., would take up that position someday; she was as ambitious and eager to learn as her mother. Helene had high hopes for her daughter, and gave her every opportunity to study and develop a career. Yet the pressure of these expectations became unbearable to Helene Jr., who felt forced to pursue every dream her mother had missed out on. At the age of 18 she decided not to go to university, but to marry and raise a family. Helene's profound disappointment in her daughter's decision would mark the emotional break with her children.

Interestingly enough, it is around this time (1909) that Helene met Sam van Deventer, a man 20 years her junior, who applied for a job at Müller & Co. They developed a close relationship that resulted in thousands of intimate letters written over the course of 30 years. Although Van Deventer declared his love several times, Helene—drawing on all her mental strength to restrain her feelings—insisted that he was like a son to her, the soulmate she had hoped to find in one of her offspring. Even though their liaison remained platonic, it caused much speculation and further damaged Helene's relationship with her children.

5. Envy and Admiration

Inspiration for uncertain times

Vincent van Gogh, Four sunflowers gone to seed, 1887. © Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

Early in 1911, Anton and Helene decided to move out of the city. They bought a beautiful estate outside The Hague, where they planned to build a new home. This would not be a

regular villa, but one designed according to the same aesthetically elevated ideas that underlay Helene's art collection. The couple traveled to Berlin, where they met with Peter Behrens, a renowned architect with modern views. He advised Anton and Helene to visit a small city in the Ruhr area named Hagen on their return trip, where he had designed several houses and the interior of a museum built by art patron Karl Ernst Osthaus. In this museum, Helene encountered a completely new way of handling a personal collection of modern art. Instead of keeping the pieces to himself, Osthaus had built a museum so that the community could enjoy them as well. Helene admired this philanthropic attitude, but simultaneously felt envious; as a woman, she believed she was not powerful enough to pursue such an ambition. Her envy was revealed in her many comments on Osthaus' museum, yet she did contract Behrens to build her new house.

The working relationship with the architect did not go smoothly, as Helene demanded absolute dedication. The design of the house led to heated discussions with her husband as well as with Bremmer. These tensions mixed with painful arguments between Helene and her daughter, who demanded that Sam van Deventer no longer visit when she was around. Helene found some respite at the farm she had bought in eastern Holland. She and Anton had acquired over 7,000 acres of land intended for hunting parties in that rural part of the country, which they called the Hoge Veluwe. Anton had the land completely fenced in to prevent the red deer, boars and even imported kangaroos from escaping. Despite the peaceful surroundings, Helene could not enjoy her stay. Excruciating pain and fatigue forced her to stay in bed all day. A physician called in to examine her advised that Helene should be taken to hospital as quickly as possible.

6. Life and Death

Collecting for the future

Vincent van Gogh, The Sower, 1888. © Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

At the hospital, lumps were found in Helene's abdomen. The doctor told her that she would die if they were not removed, but also that the surgery itself was dangerous. This diagnosis made all the troubles of her previous few months disappear. The lack of power she had felt in Hagen gave way to a firm conviction: she decided that, should she survive the surgery, she would dedicate her life to founding a museum of modern art. It would be a "monument of culture," which she would donate to the Dutch nation. Her new goal changed her criteria for purchasing art. She wanted her collection to show that an evolution was taking place in modern art, from "the concrete to the abstract, the Absolute." From that point on, Helene saw herself as a collector for the future, adding to her collection only if she felt that the artwork would stand the test of time.

From 1912 onwards, Helene bought art at a dizzying pace. The first major purchase took place in April of that year in Paris. Anton and Helene traveled there with Bremmer to spend "a few more tens of thousands of guilders" on van Goghs. After three days, they returned home with 15 paintings by the little-known artist. Such large-scale purchases had repercussions, in that they aroused the curiosity of international collectors and dealers. A few weeks later, at the auction of the Hoogendijk Collection in May 1912 in Amsterdam, a large number of modern masters were offered for sale. It was the first time that interest centered on work by Van Gogh, certainly due in large part to the purchases Helene had made in Paris, which she added to at this auction. Her readiness to

pay sizable sums for his work drove up demand considerably. However, it was not just the prices that she paid, but also her reputation as a serious collector—assisted by Bremmer, the authority on Van Gogh—that enhanced Van Gogh's reputation among a growing group of art buyers.

Ongoing conflicts in her personal life cast a shadow over Helene's increasing success as a collector. The absolute low point was the letter she received from her son-in-law, accusing her in no uncertain terms of adultery with Sam van Deventer. It would mean the end of any contact between Helene and her daughter for many years.

7. Private and Public

A museum of one's own

Peter Behrens, full scale model of the museum house, 1912.

Helene's newly formulated plans also influenced her thoughts on her new house. She plunged into collaborating with Behrens with renewed energy. She asked the architect to produce a full-scale model of the house, so he erected a structure of wood and linen where the villa was to be built. That wasn't all; the colossus was placed on a moveable base in order to pinpoint the perfect position. Despite all efforts, the working relationship ended in argument, and Behrens was discharged. Helene felt little remorse, as she already had another architect in mind: Behrens's talented young assistant, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, whom she also asked to build a full scale model. In the end however, she chose yet someone else to design her museum, the experienced Dutch architect H.P. Berlage.

Her decision was influenced by a trip to Florence, where she was inspired by the Palazzo Vecchio. It reminded Helene of the tower of the Amsterdam stock exchange, which was designed by Berlage. After her return from Italy, she offered him a 10-year

contract with Müller & Co., and a more than generous salary. She had the authority to do so, as she had recently been appointed head of the company's building department by her husband. Through cunning tactics, she and Anton had sidelined her family members from the company's management; they became the sole managing partners, which gave them absolute power and even more wealth.

Helene's collection expanded by hundreds of artworks per year, and soon her villa was not large enough to house it. Therefore, in 1913 Anton purchased the building next to the company's head office in The Hague, where paintings and sculptures soon filled every nook and cranny. The ground floor was devoted to Van Gogh's colorful French work, his earlier Dutch paintings, and his drawings, as well as works by Pointillist painters, such as Seurat and Signac. The first floor housed Cubist art by Picasso and Gris, and abstract work by Piet Mondrian. An intimate space on the same floor was completely devoted to the mysterious work of Odilon Redon.

Initially, the exhibition rooms were open only to family members and business partners, but soon Helene realized that this could be the first step towards establishing her cultural monument. For a long time, her collection was the only one in the world containing so many works by Van Gogh, and it shaped the artist's image for years, well beyond the country's borders. Other modern artists, such as Picasso and Mondrian, were introduced to a broad public as well, thanks to what was referred to as "the Kröller Museum." It became one of the few venues in Europe where visitors could see such a large number of modern works, and retained this exceptional position well into the 1930s.

One of Helene's exhibition rooms in The Hague, 1933. © Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

8. War and Resistance

Becoming German again

The emergency hospital in Liège, 1914. © Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

For Helene, the summer of 1914 was at first defined by the letters of Van Gogh, which had just been published. To her, they were "like a true mirror of the human soul." She realized the important role they could play in raising the general appreciation of Van Gogh's work. They explained his intentions, why he chose to paint certain aspects of life, and why he had no other choice.

The outbreak of war in August suddenly caused Helene's reality to tilt. Germany's brutal occupation of neighboring Belgium led to growing anti-German sentiment in The Netherlands. Although Helene had reinvented herself as a Dutch woman many years previously, the hatred of her home country made her aware of her German roots again. This, combined with the feeling that she was standing by helplessly while a worldwide disaster took place, aroused her need to leave the Netherlands and make herself useful. She drove to Liège, where she started working in a German emergency hospital. By the end of the year, the hospital was dismantled and Helene had to go home. It was difficult, if not impossible, for her to readapt to the Netherlands. To a friend, she wrote, "this war, or rather all these spiteful remarks I hear, the rejection and inflamed hatred towards my old fatherland, has turned me into a German woman again." Paradoxically, she did not once consider moving her museum to Germany. By founding her museum in the Netherlands and donating it to the Dutch people, she wanted to show that she, or at least

her work, exceeded the petty prejudices and excesses of the era.

Back in The Hague, she devoted even more time to her museum plans. She ordered Berlage not to design a relatively modest museum house, as she had originally intended, but a monumental museum, which she wished to erect on her estate, the Hoge Veluwe. Through ongoing purchases, this property had increased to 16,000 acres. She felt that this natural reserve, rather than a crowded city, would offer the tranquility necessary to properly view abstract art. Despite the princely plans presented by Berlage, their working relationship ended before one brick was laid, mainly due to a character clash and Helene's extensive interference.

9. Profit and Loss

The sorrow that is named Helene

Georges Seurat, Le Chahut, 1890. © Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

World War I brought not only sorrow. As a shipper of coal, iron and grain Müller & Co. flourished during the war and brought incredible wealth to the Kröller family. The collection took its final shape during these years, as Helene added hundreds of paintings and sculptures. These ranged from small figurines, to large canvases like *Le Chahut* by Georges Seurat, to the purchase of more than 20 Cubist paintings by Picasso, Braque and Severini. During the war she also added paintings by Millet, Monet, Van Gogh and

Renoir to her collection, as well as several exquisite Renaissance paintings.

When she had trouble falling asleep, Helene wrote an imaginary book about how the plans for her museum had developed over the years. The first sentence of this book was always the same: “This museum is born of sorrow, and this sorrow is named Helene.” Yet she was not exclusively driven by grief over the troubled relationship with her daughter. The war, in particular, had shown her that despite all the horror, there was perhaps even more goodness and beauty in the world; her museum would testify to that.

Due to the rapid growth of Müller & Co., in 1917 Anton decided to issue preferred shares; this meant that officially, it was no longer a family firm. Yet company capital was still being withdrawn to finance private projects, such as the construction of a hunting lodge at the Hoge Veluwe, and a renovation of the Kröller home. Anton’s overconfidence also resulted in many risky investments. Despite losses running into the millions, he remained able to pay the shareholders’ returns via substantial loans from the Rotterdam Bank. Since the returns were considerable during the first few years, neither the shareholders nor the bank fostered any suspicion. In fact, no one had ever suspected that a trustworthy and profitable company like Müller & Co. was being undermined from within. Before it occurred to anyone that something could be seriously wrong, Helene’s building department drove up expenses even further.

10. Idealism and Realism

Building a museum on bankruptcy

Construction of the “grand museum”, 1922. © Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

When the war economy ceased to exist in 1918 and the Versailles Treaty paralyzed the German economy, Müller & Co. experienced great financial losses. In order to meet debts, Anton took out ever-larger loans from the Rotterdam Bank and issued another ten

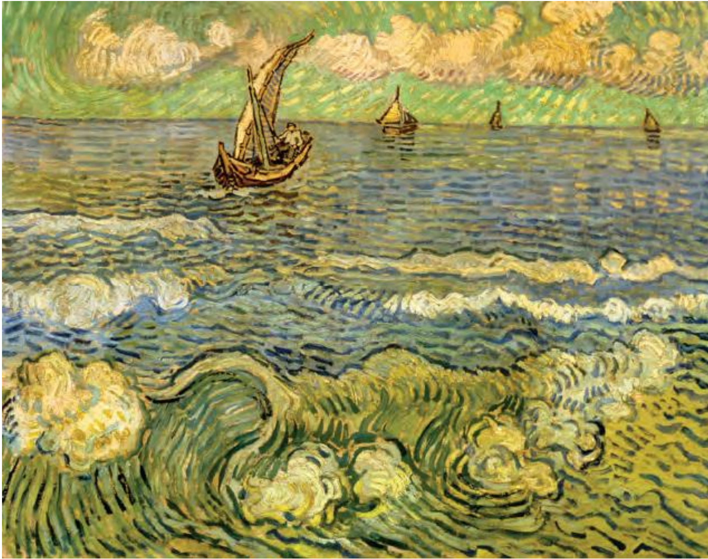
million guilders worth of shares. It seemed as if he barely recognized the perilous financial state of his company, nor the potential consequences to him and Helene as managing partners. In fact, he kept encouraging Helene to build a museum and expand her collection. As a result, her purchases reached an impressive climax around 1920. Between 1918 and 1920, she spent tens of thousands of guilders on individual masterpieces, among them Millet's *Paysanne enfournant son pain¸ The Clown* by Renoir, and Van Gogh's *Sower* and *Pink Peach Trees (Souvenir de Mauve).*

Her most talked-about acquisitions came from the collection of Lodewijk Enthoven, who was said to have been friends with Van Gogh and had received many of the painter's earliest works in exchange for financial support. Helene caused quite an uproar by purchasing no fewer than 26 Van Goghs, spending more than 100,000 guilders. By doing so she yet again put his work in the spotlight and send a message to the art world that this artist should be valued both artistically as financially.

She exercised as little economy when it came to her museum. After she had discharged Berlage, she contracted the Belgian artist and architect Henry van de Velde. This time, Helene left nothing to chance; as soon as Van de Velde presented his first sketches of a majestic museum, Helene—or more precisely, Müller & Co.'s building department—built a railway to the Hoge Veluwe and ordered custom-cut stone from Germany. Construction began in 1921, and soon Helene saw her "grand museum" begin to take shape. After one year, however, construction suddenly halted. The Rotterdam Bank had reclaimed its loans, which meant an immediate threat of bankruptcy to Müller & Co., and to its managing partners. Seeing her dream vanish into thin air just when it was finally materializing was a devastating blow to Helene; she had herself admitted to a spa in Baden-Baden for several months to regain her strength. There she reread Van Gogh's letters to find solace and remind herself that she as well could surpass her sorrow.

11. Decay and Salvation

Persistence at any cost



Anonymous, Seaside at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. © Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

While Helene's financial situation remained troubled, the international fame of her collection grew. Countless guests from around the world visited her exhibits. The American avant-garde artist Katherine Dreier saw the collection in 1919, which introduced her to the work of Piet Mondrian, who was completely unknown in the U.S. at that time. Alfred Barr, the future director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, was impressed when he first saw Helene's collection, and complimented her on the boldness of her vision.

This collection's growing fame also led to many requests to borrow paintings. Van Gogh's work was in special demand, as the artist had become famous in the interim, and Helene owned the largest collection of his work outside of the Van Gogh family. Helene agreed to exhibitions in several European countries to give his work the international public it deserved. Her paintings created a great stir in Berlin. Around this time, art dealer Otto Wacker had been accused of deliberately selling forged Van Goghs. Helene added to the controversy by buying *Seaside at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer* from him, and demanding that it be exhibited with the rest of her collection. Several years later it was proven that she had bought a forgery—a fact she never accepted.

Helene feared that Müller & Co.'s financial troubles might lead creditors to

demand the sale of her paintings, so in 1928 she and Anton decided to establish the Kröller-Müller Foundation. In yet another cunning move, they first sold the collection to Anton's sister Marie, who donated it to the foundation one day later. In this way, the Kröllers could not be accused of diminishing their assets and harming their creditors or children. The relief at having secured the collection spurred another round of purchases. The most notable was that of 100 drawings by Van Gogh from the collection of Hidde Nijland. It was the last spectacular purchase of the artist's work that Helene could permit herself, and the one that gave final shape to the heart of her collection.

12. Democracy and Dictatorship

The perils of politics

Hunting lodge at the Hoge Veluwe, designed by H.P. Berlage. © Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

Despite these difficult times, Helene did not give up her plan to build a museum. Thanks to a complete overhaul, Müller & Co. had survived and seemed to have regained its original solid footing. However, with the Wall Street Crash in 1929, all hope perished that the company would be able to finance Helene's dream. To make matters worse, her Hoge Veluwe estate was now in danger of being sold. Anton and Helene grew more and more desperate, and their ideas for solutions became wilder. At one point Anton even considered having a racetrack built on the Hoge Veluwe, which horrified Helene so much that she decided to take matters in her own hands.

She invited the Minister of Culture, Henri Marchant, to the estate, where she gave him a tour while telling him about her unfulfilled passion to leave a monument of culture. She again offered her collection to the Dutch state if the government would help her preserve the parkland. Marchant understood the cultural value of Helene's collection, which he considered of national importance. In 1935, in the middle of the worldwide recession, Marchant managed to convince the Dutch government to grant a loan with which the Hoge Veluwe could be purchased and thus remain intact. In turn, the state received the art collection worth millions of guilders, on the condition that it would be housed in a museum on the estate designed by Henry Van de Velde.

These same years saw the rise of National Socialism in Germany. Through newspapers and the radio, Helene kept close track of political developments in her native country. At first she abhorred Adolf Hitler, whom she considered a demagogue. However, after he came to power in 1933, her worries slowly shifted into a belief that the National Socialist Party was the only force that could stand up to Bolshevism.

13. Alpha and Omega

A temporary museum for eternity

Helene Kröller-Müller placed before her favorite paintings, 1939. © Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

In 1935, Helene received a request from Alfred Barr, then the director of MoMA, to lend her Van Gogh collection to a traveling exhibition in the U.S. Unlike the European tour in

the 1920s, this exhibition would include paintings from other Van Gogh collectors, notably from the Van Gogh family. Despite the risks attached to sending her beloved paintings overseas, Helene agreed to provide 33 paintings and 35 drawings. The exhibition was a resounding success. It opened in New York, where, for the first time ever, it was necessary to deploy "police protection against crowds trying to pay money to get into an art gallery," as a newspaper reported. In Philadelphia, Boston, Cleveland, Minneapolis, Detroit and Toronto, the show drew thousands of visitors every day.

Barr again asked for Helene's cooperation when he was preparing his trendsetting exhibition "Cubism and Abstract Art." As a result, several works by Mondrian and Picasso traveled across the Atlantic Ocean in 1936 to meet a new international audience. In this way, Helene increased not only the appreciation of Van Gogh (and to a lesser extent that of Picasso and Mondrian) in the U.S. and Canada, but also the fame of her own collection, which helped her to convince the Dutch state to join in making her museum a reality.

Helene did not attend the openings of any of these international exhibitions; she was occupied with her museum, which was finally set to materialize. Henry van de Velde had made new sketches—not for a monumental museum, but for what Helene called a "temporary museum" that would offer proper and elegant housing until the economic tide changed and her original plans could be fulfilled. In 1937, she was able to break ground. At 68 years of age, she visited the construction site daily and ordered people around from her wheelchair. A year later, in July of 1938, she opened the Kröller-Müller Museum and was appointed its first director. Although this was not the enormous museum she'd had in mind, Helene was satisfied with the knowledge that she had succeeded in her mission.

It all came together just in time. Since the mid-1930s, Helene's health had been declining rapidly, and she had been confined to her sickbed more and more often. During these periods she spent her time listening to the radio, or to Anton reading her the newspaper. She remained keenly interested in the political developments in Germany. In July of 1939, despite her fragile health, she traveled to Munich to attend the *Tag der Deutschen Kunst [Festival of German Art]*, where she was introduced to Hitler.

Germany's invasion of Poland shocked Helene, as her highly idealistic views had not prepared her for the possibility that her fatherland would start another war. Having

served as an important diplomat during World War I, Anton tried once again to influence Germany to reach a peaceful solution. Helene would not live to see the disappointing outcome of his efforts. On December 14, 1939, she died at age 70. She was buried in the Hoge Veluwe, on a hillside overlooking the grounds where she had originally planned her giant museum.

Epilogue

Jardin d'Émail by Jean Dubuffet in the sculpture garden. © Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

After Helene's death, Sam van Deventer replaced her as museum director. A bunker was built at the outbreak of World War II to keep the paintings and sculptures safe. The museum itself was used as a hospital. Shortly after the war, an auditorium and a spectacular glass sculpture room were added to the museum, both designed by Henry van de Velde. In the 1960s, a sculpture garden was opened behind the museum, faithful to Helene's view that modern art and nature are best appreciated in one another's presence. Despite its remote location, the museum grew in popularity, resulting in a final expansion in the 1970s that added a wing devoted to conceptual and Minimalist art. With these additions, the museum continues to show the development of modern art, as Helene intended.

The Kröller-Müller Museum is a permanent reminder of the importance of private collectors, who helped lay the foundations of numerous significant museums throughout the world. Helene's importance lay not so much in her expensive purchases as in her willingness to share her collection from 1913 onwards, and to guarantee its accessibility by founding a museum.

The modest temporary museum proved very capable of resisting the vagaries of time. To this day, the Kröller-Müller Museum draws visitors from around the world and provides them with an overview of one of the most creative and innovative periods in art

history. Helene succeeded in her goal to leave a monument of culture to future generations. This monument was a crown on her personal development from ‘merchant’s wife’ to an independent woman and visionary collector who shook up the male-dominated art world. Even more her museum is a tribute to modern art, and the work of Van Gogh in particular. Thanks to her efforts both received the ever-increasing and appreciative audience they deserve.

SAMPLE CHAPTER

6. Life and Death
Collecting for the future

The two months between Helene's examination in Amsterdam and the surgery were anything but quiet. She took the promised trip to Zeeland with her son Bob, and then busily got back to planning the house in Ellenwoude. At the beginning of September, Behrens was in The Hague to discuss his new design with her, Anton and Bremmer.[1] The house, which from this point on Helene increasingly began calling the museum-house in her letters to Sam, began to resemble more closely what she had imagined. The new design had become "esthetically much more beautiful."[2] She agreed more than before with the generous proportions that the architect had in mind. There were many details she still wanted to discuss with Behrens, but now that she had clearly formulated the purpose of her house, she felt more confident that she could explain her ideas to him.

In the late summer of 1911, Helene also often spent time at her farm, De Harscamp, in the eastern part of the country. She reveled in the summer splendor of the Veluwe. She and Anton had put the estate's management in the hands of the Moorland Society, the organization they had commissioned to prepare a report on the estate one year earlier. For several days she joined Johan Memelink, the society's overseer, in a horse-drawn cart to map the grounds of the Veluwe.[3] Memelink assigned separate colors and codes to moorland, forest, meadow and arable land so that he could calculate the number of hectares of each type of terrain, and how the Kröllers would best be able to use and develop the land in the future. Helene was delighted with the precision of Memelink's work, something that her son Toon could learn much from. If possible, she wanted her oldest son to apprentice with the society. She would later ask Memelink himself to become the steward of their estate. During a walk in the Veluwe estate, Helene asked him what he thought of their property. When he said that that he found it "incredibly beautiful," Helene told him that this was only the beginning.[4] Things were going well with Müller & Co., which meant that she and Anton had hatched a plan to expand their Veluwe territory southward. That would create a lot of work, especially for an estate steward. Helene offered him the independent management of the farm and estate, but Memelink doubted whether it was a good idea to work for this—as he put it—

"unpredictable, fickle lady." Aware that her demanding nature was preventing the man from accepting her offer, she brought up the subject herself: "You enjoy the work and would love to take it on permanently, but you are afraid of me." In her severe yet forthcoming manner, she decreed: "Set up the employment contract for 25 years, and arrange it so that you will not be dependent on my whims or those of my husband." And so Memelink accepted the offer.

There were always quite a few guests at De Harscamp. At the end of September 1911, Mies van Stolk announced her visit. She'd been a close friend of Helene Jr. for years, ever since they had been in elementary school together. Mies was no stranger to Helene. Their relationship changed, however, after Toon had fallen in love with her in the spring, and announced that he would become engaged to her. Mies was, in fact, an outstanding choice. The Van Stolk family had belonged to the business elite of Rotterdam for generations.[5] Her father, Cornelis van Stolk, was a prosperous grain merchant and former chairman of the Rotterdam Art Society. Helene's concerns were not so much about Mies' background than the couple's relative youth, and she shared her thoughts with the Van Stolks. She urged her eldest son to take things slowly, to find his place in the world before settling down.[6] Toon had decided to become a farmer after finishing his military service, but hadn't yet undertaken much in that field. He still owed his status entirely to his father, and Helene didn't believe that was good enough for a Van Stolk daughter. She also feared that Mies wasn't decisive enough for life on a farm. She thought that the girl only looked at the bright side of De Harscamp and didn't realize how much hard work it would require.[7]

Given Toon's planned engagement, Helene wanted to get to know his girlfriend better and open her eyes to the "burdens and cares" of running a farm. She hoped to make Mies understand the kind of future she could expect. She was surprised when Toon's girlfriend informed her that she would not be coming to the Veluwe after all, because of a cold. At about the same time, Helene received a telegram from her daughter, asking if she could visit De Harscamp. This time around, she had no difficulty with the spontaneous message, and let Helene Jr. know that she was welcome. The visit was good for her; it was as if she were reliving the days when she still felt close to her daughter. Together they looked

forward to a meeting with Behrens about the new house, to lessons with Bremmer, and to an outing the next day to Amsterdam to buy furniture for the nursery Helene Jr. was setting up for the child she would soon bear.

Despite all the conviviality, Helene still felt unsettled, as if something in her was standing still, "anxious, scared & yet hopeful."[8] The next day, as she was arranging flowers in the servant's room, one of the maids asked her if she could throw away the pile of papers lying there. As she looked through the papers, her eyes fell on the words, "Helene says that she can no longer see anything in a pure and natural way," "unhappy" and "complicated soul."[9] She immediately recognized Mies van Stolk's handwriting, but it took a while for her to realize these words were about herself. Without thinking about it, she read the rest of the letter, which was indeed from Mies and addressed to Toon. She wrote that Helene Jr. had given her an urgent warning about their mother; at one time, she had apparently done everything in her power to drive apart Helene Jr. and Paul, and now she was planning to do the same with them.[10] In her letter, Mies advised Toon to behave as amicably and normally as possible towards his mother. Mothers loved it when their sons behaved a little bit like friends, and besides, it was the only way to gain control over De Harscamp. If he went against Helene, Mies predicted, she would never sign the farm over to him. She also suspected that his mother's influence was so great that she would "never let you go your own way & that's why it's a good idea to always keep her in hand, always win her over to your ideas, otherwise you'll never have a life."[11] This wily advice hurt Helene most. "If this is the way a son treats his mother, then I don't want to be a mother," she wrote to Sam, to whom she poured out her heart.[12] She was still writing the letter when Toon came home. He was "friendly and kind, but God, aren't they all! Helene too, no?" She felt hurt that her children behaved differently towards her than they evidently felt. She saw the whole situation as a comedy of deceit, and the insincerity offended her most. When Toon came in, she decided to join in the act. To her surprise, she discovered something "snaky" in herself, regaining her outward calm by pretending nothing had happened. With her "insides torn apart & a deadly calm, sweet face," she drank a cup of tea with him. Then she cleaned up and got dressed, all without thinking about it. To Sam, she wrote that she could no longer see herself as anything but the

“ghastly specter” that her children saw. It felt as if, on that day, “something had been led to its death.”

After reading the letter as well, Anton was beside himself with rage and turned his daughter out of the house.[13] His anger brought Helene to her senses, and she was able to put the situation in some kind of perspective. Yet she could not let go of what had happened, and did not feel at peace in the following days. The thought disturbed her that Helene Jr. was now alone in the big, empty house that she was only supposed to have moved into after giving birth.[14] She would have preferred to help her settle in an attempt to feel closer again. But before that was possible, her daughter would, “of course, first have to bend her head.”[15]

Helene Jr., however, had inherited her mother’s obstinacy and pride. One week after Anton had shown her the door, she came to her parents’ house to make up, but refused to admit that she had done anything wrong.[16] She might have been more obliging, had she known how seriously ill her mother was. But Helene had not yet told anyone about the danger of her upcoming surgery. She, too, had too much pride to embrace Helene Jr. again. Even knowing that she might not survive the operation, she was unsatisfied with her daughter’s weak attempt to reconcile. And yet she could not bring herself to send her pregnant daughter away again. Helene Jr. was to keep living by herself, but could come to her parents’ house during the day, so that Helene could take care of her. This displeased Anton, who was less able to hide his disappointment and anger than his wife.

In the meantime, the day of the operation was coming closer. Helene continued to send breezy reports about it to Sam. She let him know that she was entering the hospital full of confidence. “Full of joy, wanting to be healthy for you, to take away all your worry. That actually makes it a triumph for me – strange, but true.”[17] She pushed away the concern she did feel by focusing on what needed to happen before her departure. First, she confided in Bremmer about the gravity of her illness, and asked him whether her collection was significant enough to potentially be given to a Dutch museum.[18] He felt certain that it was, and promised to see to it that the collection would find an appropriate home, should her surgery unexpectedly take a bad turn.

Next, she handed control of the De Harscamp farm over to Memelink, imploring him to manage the estate as if it were his own.[19] To her relief, the Moorland Society had agreed to provide Toon with a one-year internship starting in late October, which was one worry less. To keep Bob company during her hospital stay, she asked Clifford Pownall to stay at her house.[20] The young man was a friend of Helene Jr., and Helene knew him from the field-hockey club. She knew that Bob looked up to older boys and surmised that Clifford was happy to do her and Anton a favor.

Other than Anton, Sam, Bremmer and Clifford, everyone assumed that Helene was going to De Harscamp for a few days. In an effort not to upset her children, she had told them that she would only have the operation one week later. And so they said goodbye to her as if she would only be away for a few days, not knowing that it might be the last time they saw their mother. On Saturday, October 21, 1911, Helene was readmitted to the Deaconesses' Hospital to undergo the surgery on the Monday. She had learned from her last visit, and come to Amsterdam well prepared. The first thing she did on arrival was to make her room cozy. Her calendar featuring quotations, her books, and a vase with flowers found a place on the writing desk, and she hung a number of Van Gogh reproductions on the big, blank wall across from her bed. On Sunday, the day before the surgery, she wrote her letters of farewell. She had already composed a letter to Sam one month earlier, telling him about the success of the operation. He had just visited her for a few days at De Harscamp. Her knowledge that it might have been their last time together motivated Helene to write him the letter in that moment; she would only have it sent to him one month later via a nurse, should she survive the operation. In this letter, she confessed that she had kept a secret from him for the first time, but that she had chosen to do so to spare him weeks of worry.

Now that she was really lying in the hospital in late October, knowing that these might be her last hours of life, she wrote him another letter. This sealed missive was a will, in which she left him the entire contents of her boudoir, her desk, and the painting *Sower (after Millet)* by Van Gogh.[21] She also expressed the wish that Sam, at a later point in his life, return these heirlooms to the rest of her collection so that he could then donate everything "for the benefit of all." In a separately written and sealed letter, she agreed to a wish he had once strongly expressed: to be buried next to her. She hoped that, by the end

of his life, a family of his own would surround him and push this wish out of his mind. Nevertheless, she gave him the permission he'd asked for: "You may be buried where you lived your intellectual life: in our midst and next to me, because I always felt that you were one of us."[22]

She also wrote a testamentary letter to Anton, in which she bequeathed her fortune according to the law, but urged that her children not be given their share until age 25.[23] She believed that "early, unearned means would make their lives too easy and prevent them from developing their capacities to the fullest." Furthermore, she hoped that Anton would agree to spend the portion of her fortune that she could freely distribute after the deductions for her children on art. These artworks should then be added to the collection as it stood, to ultimately be donated to the community. She also wished that the whole collection would one day be housed in a building that would embody the same spirit she had wanted to give the new house. She emphasized, however, that Anton should keep the collection around him for as long as he wanted. After all, they had bought everything together, and she had never considered the artworks to be her "exclusive property," but "a piece of that spiritual house that I sought to build around us all."

She wanted to leave the summer cottage Het Klaverblad to Toon, but only once Anton no longer wanted to use it. To Bob she left a portrait of him painted by Thorn Prikker, and to Helene Jr. two portraits of her favorite artists, Henri Fantin-Latour and Vincent van Gogh. Wim could choose whatever reminded him most of her. Helene also left something to her son-in-law and future daughters-in-law: a little painting of Avercamp to Paul, and jewelry or Delftware to the others. Furthermore, she asked Anton to arrange a pension or some other form of financial reward for her permanent staff. She wrote him her personal farewell in another letter, which unfortunately has not been preserved.

The operation went well, and on Tuesday Helene secretly wrote a letter to Sam (because she wasn't actually allowed to move)—a small sheet filled with chicken scratches, due to the lingering anesthetic—to let him know that things were going well.[24] Her wound was tightly swathed with a bandage, which made movement almost impossible. This is why she wrote the letter lying flat on her back, arms up in the air, hoping that the nurse wouldn't come in. She pretended to be stronger than she was in front of the hospital staff

and visitors because she didn't want anyone to see her weakness. Her hospital stay had to be "a triumph" that she could offer Sam.[25]

And a triumph it was. When Helene was discharged from the hospital, the marveling doctors paid her the compliment that they had never experienced a patient as calm in the days before surgery, someone who also faced everything alone in order not to worry her friends and family. To which Helene answered that not everyone was Mrs. Kröller, and that Mrs. Kröller also didn't wish to be like everyone else. Privately, she had a very different explanation for the strength she had tapped. By thinking about Sam during every single minute she spent in the hospital, and by wanting to protect him from the grief that her death would cause him, she had transcended her pain and been able to muster the determination—cost what it might—to get through her operation and recovery with flying colors.

The four weeks she needed to remain in hospital to heal from the operation gave her plenty of time to think. Especially about the future, with once again clearly stretched ahead of her. She longed to begin her "new life of action."[26] No more passive living, but a life of deeds that would give "a helping hand to the many who come after us." She had the feeling of standing at the beginning of a new life, "because I had settled my account with the old one."[27] At least, that's what she wished for, but even now, visits from Helene Jr. did not pass without criticism. She still found her daughter to be sloppy and hasty. On top of that, she resented the fact that she had to hear from third parties that Helene Jr. was planning to give art-appreciation classes "à la Bremmer."[28] Helene sighed bitterly to Sam that she found it difficult "to feel that your child is not your own flesh and blood and intimate—sometimes quite the opposite."[29] Despite the strength Helene had found to turn her surgery into a triumph, she was still unsuccessful in recognizing accomplishment in her children, which, according to her own worldview, ought to be discernible in every aspect of life.

Ten years later she would write to Bob that her sorrow over Helene Jr. had forced her to seek a new foundation for her life, one that was more resistant to adversity.[30] She needed a goal for which to live. Through her conflict with Helene Jr., she realized that her children could no longer serve as that goal. Her children would never be able to carry out what she wanted to leave behind. She became more and more convinced that the

intellectual legacy of her collection, and the future museum-house, "would be more fruitful than the physical legacy she could pass on through her children."[31]

Halfway through November of 1911, Helene was allowed to go home to continue regaining her strength there. Anton came to Amsterdam to pick her up and take her to The Hague, where a cheerfully decorated dining room and lunch awaited her. Before they departed, the bill still needed to be paid. After Helene's latest conversation with Dr. Brongersma, Anton stood ready with "checkbook in hand."[32] Besides covering the costs of the surgery, he added a significant donation, given with "enormous gratitude" to the hospital.

Although Helene was recovering and had been advised by the doctor to rest, she barely allowed herself to. She was determined to begin her life of action, as she called it. She discussed the future of her collection with Bremmer, which from now on had to be shaped to serve a higher purpose.[33] If she wanted to give her collection to the Dutch state, and if it was to provide added value to the country's artistic capital, then, according to her advisor, she would have to focus on spiritual (i.e. modern) art and not on "realistic" art.[34] "Our museums are already full of the latter and they continue to make purchases in the same vein." He also proposed that she concentrate mainly on foreign artists, since these were hardly present in Dutch museums. These were two golden tips, because Bremmer was absolutely right. Dutch art museums were full of landscapes and portraits from the 17th and 18th centuries. Occasionally there was modern art, but only in the context of exhibitions by artists' associations, not from the museums' own collections. International modern art was completely absent from the dusty halls of Dutch art institutions. Change would only come in the 1930s, an even then only in small measure.[35] The biggest reason for this unprogressive policy was a lack of money. And that was something Helene did not suffer from. If she wanted to found her own museum, then international modern art was an excellent niche.

Convinced of her mission, she accompanied Bremmer to auctions and exhibits more and more often. If she wasn't in the mood to leave her boudoir for a trek through the winter chill to an exhibition, she would think about her museum and decide that she couldn't afford to miss anything when it came to her collection, and thus pull on her

jacket.[36] Four days after her return from the hospital, she therefore had a meeting with Behrens to discuss the construction plans. Just a few days later she accompanied Bremmer to the auction house of Frederik Muller in Amsterdam, where preview days were being held for the big autumn auction. During the same period she also bought twelve drawings by Vincent van Gogh from the Amsterdam art dealership C.M. van Gogh. It seemed as if she still imagined that death was lurking around the corner, and didn't want to lose a single day when it came to realizing her life's new goal.

Besides the renewed energy with which she approached discussions with Behrens, and her greater involvement in making purchases, Helene's plans for the museum-house also increased her interest in art appreciation. She relished her lessons with Bremmer more than ever, which took place every Friday night at her home. She invariably had his lectures taken down in shorthand so that she could send them to Sam and Wim in Bremen, sometimes accompanied by reproductions, so that they wouldn't miss anything.[37]

After her operation, Helene's particular interest in Van Gogh increased. From Bremmer's classes she knew all too well how the artist had struggled to overcome suffering. Bremmer believed that Van Gogh's power lay in his capacity to channel his life struggle into his artwork.[38] This thought appealed strongly to Helene. In early 1912 she thus read Bremmer's book *Vincent van Gogh: An Introduction*, which had been published one year earlier.[39] In this introduction, her adviser provided a minute analysis of a large number of Van Gogh's paintings and drawings, emphasizing style as an instrument of personal expression. He placed the work in the context of what, to his eyes, was Van Gogh's biggest accomplishment: spiritual elevation via the transcendence of hardship.

Bremmer didn't think that Helene needed to read the book, since she was already familiar with its contents. This was probably the reason why she didn't pick it up until one year after its publication. Indeed, she discovered little that was new in it, and found the book "no pleasant read, no literary pleasure, the style is so bad," but she nevertheless thought Bremmer's immersion in Van Gogh's work to be "deeply considered."[40] The ingenuity and recognition that she sought in the artist's conquest of suffering led her to wholly adopt Bremmer's interpretation of Van Gogh's work. Helene felt that even Van Gogh's earliest work proved that he experienced the suffering of humanity. His Dutch

work as well as the lithograph *At Eternity's Gate*—the "man suffering with his fists covering his face"—showed the deep compassion with which Van Gogh captured his subjects.[41] This compassion proved to her how "totally modern" his work was; it was a sign of the modern age that human beings, especially artists and writers, showed more sympathy for their fellows than in previous centuries.

In the 10 years that Van Gogh attempted to convey mankind in all its psychological complexity, he succeeded—at least, according to Helene—in rising above suffering. This was the reason why his French work differed so much from his Dutch work, even when the subject matter was the same. If one compared the lithograph from 1882 with *At Eternity's Gate*, the painting he developed from it eight years later, it became clear that in France, Van Gogh painted suffering as something he had overcome. "If one paints sorrow in such a way, one doesn't really feel it as sorrow anymore, one doesn't suffer from it anymore in that moment, but knows that it is necessary & this recognition brings peace."[42]

To Helene, Van Gogh's importance was not so much based on the work he had produced, but on his humanity. He was the first "to let us feel & through all time our common humanity & he painted because he was first a human being and then a painter."[43] She was convinced that one day it would be proven that Van Gogh "will have touched the strings of mankind that human beings could subconsciously feel vibrating, but of which they were not yet consciously aware. […] And so later on, when all people will be more accustomed to his language and forms, they will begin to understand something of the psyche of mankind in its great variety, which is not yet known."

Helene's intent to build a museum-house and to give it to the community justified the large-scale purchases she would henceforth be making. To Sam she wrote that she would hold back if she were only embellishing her own environment. But that was no longer her goal. She wanted to give to the future what "seems to me the best in life."[44] Her house and collection needed to present the human optimum in all its variety. She did not hesitate to present the very best of mind or of material—i.e. many expensive and large artworks in an imposing house.

During this period she read “Art and Artists,” an article by the German art historian Alfred Lichtwark, about the importance of collectors in keeping artistic treasures within national boundaries.[45] “There are such thoughtful things in it & it struck me that collecting is a phenomenon that is growing & in such different ways.”[46] But there was one type of collector that Lichtwark didn’t mention: “the collectors of the future, to which I belong.”

Since Helene had decided to leave behind a monument of culture, she—in her own words—no longer allowed herself to be led by her own taste, but by the question of whether the works “can survive the test of time.” From now on, she would pay attention only “to the aesthetic value, without considering her personal taste.”[47] She seems to have been partly aware that this was a fiction. Eventually she wrote to Sam that she wanted to give to the future what *seemed* best to her, which acknowledged the subjectivity underlying every acquisition. Nevertheless, her intention meant that she launched into the extensive and remarkable series of purchases that would characterize the development of her collection. In 1912 alone she is said to have spent 280,000 guilders on new artwork.[48] She regularly snapped up pieces from existing collections that went under the hammer. Some examples are the purchase of modern masters from the collection of Cornelis Hoogendijk in May of 1912; dozens of Renaissance bowls, jugs and tiles from the collection of the Berlin collector Adolf von Beckerath in May of 1916; almost 30 artworks and antique utensils from Carel Henny in 1917; the figurines of, among others, Joseph Mendes da Costa from her sister-in-law Anne Müller’s collection in 1920; and the 26 (!) paintings by Vincent van Gogh from the collection of Lodewijk Enthoven in the spring of that same year.

The exceptional growth of Helene’s collection gave the impression that she was driven by competitive urges and a need to take over. She was a proud woman who demanded much of herself and of her surroundings. Everything Helene undertook, she did with a perfectionist’s zeal. Whether it was arranging flowers, raising her children or managing architects, she did nothing in a halfhearted or nonchalant manner. If she started a collection, then this collection had to be serious, not just some near-dilettantish doings. She made large-scale and expensive purchases partly to gain status, but mostly because they enhanced the quality of her collection.

The thorough efficiency with which Helene approached collecting revealed her working style, but little about her motives. These went further than perfectionism, and had little to do with competitive urges. In a moment of great openness, she wrote to Sam, "I believe in a greater continuation of myself through my intellectual life than through the physical legacy I have left behind […] via my children."[49] She did not expect her children to cherish and conserve her intellectual legacy, so she relied more on her intellectual children, namely her collection and the museum she would build.

There is also the question to what extent Helene really was a collector. Her contributions to the collection weren't driven by an "unbridled passion for collecting," as is sometimes suggested.[50] Collecting is a passionate activity best compared with romantic love, and is associated with a recurrent, uncontrollable need to own something.[51] It is an "free-floating desire that attaches and re-attaches itself—it is a succession of desire."[52] Helene provided very little evidence for any of that. Bremmer was the one who went on the hunt, and could leave an art dealer "trembling like a leaf" with excitement after managing to acquire a long-sought-after work—even on behalf of someone else's collection.[53] Even Anton could get more caught up in impulsive buys than Helene. He decided to strike immediately when more than 100 drawings by Van Gogh from Hidde Nijland's collection came on the market in 1928. Helene had let opportunity pass because she found the price too high, but, at the last moment, Anton secured this remarkable set for their own collection.

That's not to say that Helene wasn't thrilled with every new work she added to her collection, but she always stayed in control and refused to be tempted by badly considered deals. She didn't turn herself inside out to seize specific works, but seems to have been more guided by what became available by chance. The thrill of the hunt so typical of true collectors, and which Bremmer and Anton shared, was foreign to her.[54]

It wasn't the hunt that counted for Helene, but the catch. For her, the main thing wasn't the next new purchase, but the collection as a whole. It gave her a goal in life and the opportunity to develop her own identity, independent from her role as wife and mother. Instead of passion, she was driven by a calculated pursuit of a clearly stated purpose: to leave behind a museum-house that presented the development of modern art, thereby securing her intellectual legacy.

The first great opportunity Helene seized as a collector for the future was in April of 1912 in Paris; in fact, her previous series of purchases paled in comparison. Anton had gone to the French capital for business, and Helene followed him with Bremmer to "spend a few more tens of thousands of guilders" on Van Goghs.[55] Not only did Anton feel strongly about his wife's collection, he was also as convinced as she was that it should be of great importance for the future. He therefore directed Bremmer to "seek out all the best Van Goghs."

Remarkably enough, Helene was more cautious. "The Van Goghs don't draw me too much," she wrote to Sam just before her departure.[56] She didn't need more Van Goghs—that's not what it was all about for her. Only if a painting made "a special impact & conveyed something powerful and profound" did she wish to add it to her collection. She didn't seem to realize that this would add a subjective signature to the objective test of time.

Bremmer did an excellent job of carrying out his mission. On the very first evening in Paris, the trio found *La Berceuse (Portrait of Madam Roulin)* (1889) at the art dealership Bernheim-Jeune—"the woman that the French sailor dreams of, sitting evenings and nights at the bow of his ship, to whom he entrusts his secrets. Van Gogh painted her not as a sea nymph, not as a subterranean or unearthly creature, but as a familiar old woman who holds the cradle's rope in her hands, who makes him think that she rocks the ship back & forth while he confesses his innermost thoughts to her. And she understands it, has understood them all, those who still speak to her, you feel it from the core of her inner life that reveals itself as a rare sense of peace."[57] It was this peace with which the artist "faced the complexity of things," and which, according to Helene, showed "the actual greatness of Van Gogh in his French period." To her, this sense of peace was the most important effect an artwork could have; if a work was able to calm the soul, it possessed the mystique she sought.

It is remarkable that Helene referred to Van Gogh's analogy with shipping even before his letters were published in 1914. In a letter to his brother Theo in January of 1889, Van Gogh wrote how he had come up with the idea to create a painting "that seafarers—as both children and martyrs—in seeing the ship's cabin, would feel a swell that would

remind them of their lullabies."[58] Helene had probably heard of this purport from a publication by Van Gogh's friend, the artist Émile Bernard. Her formulation "a subterranean or unearthly creature" suggests that she had read the article Bernard published in *Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui*, or had heard about its contents from Bremmer.[59] In the article, Bernard discussed *La Berceuse* and quoted a letter of Van Gogh's, in which he wrote about a fishing legend. In it, a supernatural woman at the bow of a ship sings lullabies to bring comfort to the difficult lives of fishermen.[60]

Before lunchtime the next day, Helene had added seven paintings and two drawings by Van Gogh to her treasures. From Eugène Druet, the trio purchased *Basket of Apples* (1887); *Olive Grove* (1889); *Portrait of Joseph-Michel Ginoux* (1888); *The Ravine (Les Peiroulets)* (1889); and *Loom with Weaver* (1884).[61] The selection had been overwhelming, "but Bremmer found only these paintings better than or equal to ours & bought them in a single bid—at one-third of the asking price."[62] Bremmer then went alone to Bernheim-Jeune, where, apart from *La Berceuse*, he also bought *Landscape with Wheat Sheaves and Rising Moon* (1889), plus the drawings *Peasant Woman Gleaning* and *Prayer Before the Meal*.

The Parisian purchases weren't limited to Van Gogh. During a walk along the many antique shops, Helene found a wooden head of Jesus, which she named a "Spinoza Christ," because she saw a person as well as a philosopher in the carving. She was especially happy with the find, because to her the carving was once again, "a chunk of the ultimate in art and in life."[63] Together with Bremmer, she also visited the painter Paul Signac and his wife. Bremmer knew that the couple owned a painting by the late Georges Seurat, which he knew only from a reproduction and wanted to see in the original. Immediately upon arrival Helene found herself charmed by the two people, who lived in an "elegant, well-appointed" loft that she could barely recognize as an attic.[64] She explained to Sam that Seurat had developed Pointillism "as a means of spiritualizing art," and Signac had followed suit. She bought harbor scenes by both painters from their Pointillist periods during that time, enriching her collection with Seurat's *Harbor Entrance at Honfleur* (1886) and Signac's *View of Collioure* (1887).[65]

During this stay in Paris, Bremmer and Anton also visited the art dealer Amédée Schuffenecker, who lived just outside the capital in Meudon.[66] At his home they came across a room in which Van Gogh paintings leaned against the walls several rows deep.[67] From this tremendous selection they chose what they considered the eight best pieces, for which Anton paid 63,000 guilders without hesitation.[68] Helene was aware that the purchases she and Anton were making in Paris were exceptional for their quantity alone, but it was "much in the right direction," and why should she keep her husband from doing something he enjoyed so much?[69] Whereas she'd had doubts about buying more Van Goghs before their departure, Anton had apparently developed a taste for them. Just like Helene, he was gripped by the work, and as a businessman he also viewed it as a distinctive investment. Incidentally, it was an investment in self-image, since neither he nor Helene ever intended to resell the works.

In total, the Kröllers spent more than 115,000 guilders on Van Goghs in April of 1912. It was quite a bit more than the tens of thousands they initially had in mind. These major purchases weren't without effect; they raised the interest of a number of international collectors and dealers in modern art. This was noticeable during the auction of the Hoogendijk collection in Amsterdam a few weeks later, on May 21, 1912, where many modern masters were on offer.[70] It was the first time that Van Gogh's work attracted the most attention at an auction. This was not least due to Helene's "raid" of Paris, a momentum she maintained at the Hoogendijk auction.[71]

On that day, she'd been excited to leave for Amsterdam with her advisor. "Bremmer was allowed to buy, because my husband had done the accounts & it was possible. It was good to buy in such good conscience"—and that's precisely what they did.[72] Helene acquired no less than 15 paintings that day, among them two Corots; work by Jan Toorop, Odilon Redon and Honoré Daumier; and four paintings by Van Gogh. The duo caused the biggest sensation with their purchase of *Bridge at Arles (Pont de Langlois)*, for which Bremmer bid almost 16,000 guilders on behalf of the Kröllers—more than five times its estimated value. Helene called the work one of the "most beautiful, powerful and crystal-clear" Van Goghs that she owned.

Helene's purchases at the Hoogendijk auction were so sensational because, in 1912, there was no hint of the mythical proportions that Van Gogh's fame would later achieve, nor of the financial ramifications thereof. For comparison, her purchase of *Bridge at Arles* for 16,000 guilders was by far the highest amount that had been paid for a Van Gogh that day, while at the same auction, Willem Maris' *Landscape with Cows* had sold for 22,000 guilders, which was not an especially high price for such a piece. Top prices weren't being paid for early modern art but for old masters, as had been the case during the auction of the Weber collection in Berlin; for example, in 1907, Vermeer's *The Milkmaid* (ca. 1658) was valued at 400,000 guilders.[73]

Still, Van Gogh was no longer an unknown in the art world, and Helene certainly wasn't the only one collecting his work. The first Dutch collector to add several Van Goghs to his collection was Hidde Nijland, a rentier and then-director of the South African Museum in Dordrecht. As early as 1892—two years after Van Gogh's death—he acquired two drawings from the Rotterdam art dealership Oldenzeel. After that he steadily expanded his collection, owning about 100 drawings by the artist by 1904.

Another early collector was Cornelis Hoogendijk himself. The memoirs of the art dealer Ambroise Vollard tell how the 32-year-old Hoogendijk bought several special Van Goghs and a large number of Cézanne canvases from him in about 1898–1899.[74] Upon returning to the Netherlands, his family, startled by the many strange paintings, had experts look at his purchases. They came to the conclusion that an insane person must have created them, and Hoogendijk was placed under guardianship. It would take about seven years before the appreciation of Van Gogh's work had increased to the point that the Rijksmuseum would accept several of his paintings from the Hoogendijk collection on loan.

During the years 1908 to 1914, when Helene was laying the foundations of her Van Gogh collection, a small but driven group of aficionados was buying the work of the Dutch painter. The market was largely determined by collectors and art dealers from the Netherlands, France and Germany, of which Jo van Gogh-Bonger was by far the most important. She managed the estate, and decided when and how much of her late brother-in-law's work went on sale. At the same time, Bremmer played a significant role in the Netherlands due to his own collection of drawings and paintings by Van Gogh, and due to

the boundless energy he expended in encouraging his students to buy the artist's work. The artist was so well-collected by the "Bremmerians" that, in 1921, the German art historian Huebner devoted a separate chapter to them, titled "Smaller Van-Gogh Collections," in his book about private collections in the Netherlands [75] In most cases, however, Bremmer's students bought only one or a few works, which couldn't be called a specific Van Gogh collection.

Outside of the Netherlands, most of the collectors were in Germany, where the Jewish elite bought Van Goghs relatively often.[76] In 1914, 240 Van Gogh works were in Germany, divided among 64 private collections. The most important German collector and dealer was undoubtedly Paul Cassirer. He organized various exhibitions and managed to interest a number of wealthy collectors in Van Gogh. French buyers of the work in this period were mainly dealers, especially Josse and Gaston Bernheim of the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery in Paris, and the brothers Émile and Amédée Schuffenecker. Another important French player was Philippe Alexandre Berthier, better known as the Prince of Wagram, who bought about 27 paintings by Van Gogh between 1905 and 1912—and often resold them.[77]

Interest in Van Gogh also began to sprout in Russia, England and America in the early 1910s, albeit more gradually than on the western European continent. The Russian collectors Sergei Shchukin and Iwan Morosow together owned 10 paintings.[78] That was a good number for that period, especially as they were the only owners of Van Goghs in their country. Before World War I, two Van Goghs were in the U.S., both owned by the great collector Albert C. Barnes. It is even more striking that in Great Britain, only two of the painter's works could be found in private collections. It wasn't until 1923 that an English exhibition was exclusively dedicated to Van Gogh.[79]

Before World War I, then, a limited but lively trade in Van Goghs took place mainly in the Netherlands, Germany and France, which came to a head at the auction of the Hoogendijk collection in 1912. Until that time, prices were determined by the above-named art dealers and the Van Gogh-Bonger family. With her lightening visit to Paris and her purchases at the Hoogendijk auction, Helene introduced herself as a new and significant factor in this segment of the art market. Not only did she buy more Van Goghs at the auction than, for example, Vollard and Cassirer (one and two paintings,

respectively), she let Bremmer make remarkably high bids. The prices she paid ensured that the Van Gogh paintings on offer suddenly belonged to the most valuable works of modern art, which quickly pushed up demand.[80] Besides the amounts she spent, her reputation as a serious collector—assisted by Van Gogh-authority Bremmer—contributed to Van Gogh's recognition in an ever-widening circle of art buyers.

The increasing attention paid to Van Gogh also seems to have motivated Jo van Gogh-Bonger to set higher prices and release fewer works onto the market. In 1905, she charged an average of 1,000 guilders per painting, which slowly rose to about 2,700 guilders by 1911. As of June 1912, a sharp increase to 5,000 guilders is documented.[81] She also continued to implement the limit, established in 1910, on the number of paintings she was prepared to sell.

Increasing prices could not only be attributed to the Kröllers' buying frenzy, of course. As of the second half of 1912, the general interest in Van Gogh increased significantly. To a large extent this was due to the international *Sonderbund* exhibit of modern art in Cologne, which opened on May 25.[82] Just as in the previous three years, this exhibition featured work by contemporary German artists, next to—and this was unusual in Germany—much modern French work, ranging from post-Impressionists to Fauvists.[83] Friendly private collectors and art dealers lent the French artwork to the organizers. It was notable how many Van Gogh paintings were shown at the 1912 exhibition; compared with 24 paintings by Cézanne and 21 by Gaugin, the no fewer than 125 paintings by Van Gogh made him the most prominently represented artist there. The largest number of his works was lent by Helene and Anton, who provided about 30. Whether deliberately or not, this meant that they outdid the only other authority, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, who lent 16 works.[84]

One year after their trip to Paris, Anton gave Helene two significant presents in honor of their silver wedding anniversary: the splendid, untouchable *Portrait of Eva Callimachi-Catargi* (1881) by Fantin-Latour, and Van Gogh's *At Eternity's Gate* (1890). It has been suggested that, with these two paintings, Anton gave his wife an ironic portrait of their marriage.[85] This humorous interpretation undoubtedly played a role in Anton's deliberations on the purchase. But above all, it seems that he wanted to show his love for

his wife, and his appreciation for her collection, by giving her two masterpieces by the painters she most admired. She was deeply touched by the gift: "Had you given me the most beautiful and precious pearl necklace, I would not have been as happy with it."[86]

She considered *At Eternity's Gate* one of Van Gogh's most magnificent works, and would have liked to devote a separate room for it in her new house.[87] But as deep as her admiration went, she was happier still with the lady's portrait by Fantin-Latour. Given the sense of serenity conveyed by the artwork, the qualities of the artist that emerged, and its subtlety, Helene felt that the painting approached perfection. She actually regarded this work as the cornerstone of her collection, because "what could possibly top it?"

Anton had bought *At Eternity's Gate* in 1912—one year before their anniversary—at the *Sonderbund* exhibition in Cologne.[88] He needed to travel to that city for business and urged Helene to come along, so that they could see the exhibition together. Helene wasn't in the mood after the hectic preview and auction days of the Hoogendijk collection in Amsterdam, but Anton's enthusiasm convinced her to travel to Germany after all.[89] During a couple of scorching days they visited the exhibition, which was taking place at the Städtische Austellungshalle (Municipal Exhibition Hall). At Anton's request, Bremmer came for a day to advise them on potential purchases.[90] Due to the heat, Helene had difficulty concentrating on all the beauty. Moreover, she resented Bremmer, who was far too rushed for her taste and "jumped this way & that […] to discover something" to buy, even though it wasn't about that for her—through probably it was for Anton. She had hoped Bremmer would tell them a thing or two about the exhibits, because only making discoveries that would lead to purchases disagreed with her, she grumbled to Sam.

She returned on a cooler day in only Anton's company, and this time could appreciate the exhibition more, at least when it came to Van Gogh. In the showrooms she once again experienced his greatness, whereas most of the other featured artists were "nothing."[91] In general, Helene found it "frightening what [was hanging] there, common and false," and it made her fear for the modern era. Despite her aversion, which the many Expressionist nudes and Fauvist primitivism had undoubtedly prompted, she added a number of new acquisitions from the *Sonderbund* exhibition to her collection. Besides Anton's secret purchase of Van Gogh's *At Eternity's Gate*, the Kröllers bought August Herbin's Cubist work *Roses* (1911), and a life-sized, cast-stone female figure by Wilhelm Lehmbruck

from 1910. Both were nice additions, although not representative of the exhibition's avant-garde character.

Amid all the possibilities offered by the S*onderbund* exhibition, the fact that Helene selected Lehmbruck's moderate Expressionism, and that she preferred the more formal Cubism to chaotic Fauvism, shows that for her, true art required a high degree of realism and decency. The uninhibited expressiveness and inescapable sensuality that confronted her at Cologne were altogether inconsistent with her personal lofty and serene approach to art. For her, more abstraction did not necessarily mean greater (spiritual) artistic value. As her comments on Fantin-Latour show, she preferred to look at realistic works in which the spiritual emerged without any abstraction. That was the kind of art she wanted for her museum-house.

Other than her collection, after her operation Helene focused with renewed energy on her relationship with her daughter. She tried to value Helene Jr.'s qualities and was proud that she was giving art-appreciation classes herself. In this way, she was at least using the knowledge and intelligence from which Helene had expected so much. She also slowly got used to the idea that her daughter lived alone, and had not returned to Buenos Aires with her husband. Likewise, Helene Jr. did her best to reestablish the bond. Full of love, she wrote to Paul about her mother's care.[92] But despite all their efforts, the two women still couldn't get closer. Even the birth of Helene's first grandchild did not change the situation.

Helene Jr. gave birth to her first child, Hildegard, in March of 1912 at the Kröller residence. She spent the postpartum period at her parents' house, where Helene looked after her. When her daughter lay quietly and well cared for in the big bed, she was once again the child that Helene liked to see. Then she seemed to her "such a wholly different person than in her daily life. More like my daughter."[93] Yet something had changed. Helene Jr. had become an independent person who held views different from her mother's. Helene seems to have confused this independence with detachment, and still missed "the adult with an inner life" in her daughter.[94]

Her disappointment continued to come between them and caused Helene to react to Hildegard's birth in a reserved manner. The first thought that came into her head as she

held her granddaughter was, “Oh God, will they once again ask me to love it?”[95] This was immediately followed by a deep fear that the child could die. When she looked at her granddaughter, she was convinced that Hildegard would eventually become estranged from her parents.[96] After all, this had happened with her own children. Helene did understand that her high expectations were partly to blame for the difficult relationship. She firmly determined not to repeat the mistake, and to treat her grandchild differently. This time around, she would be wiser; she wouldn’t have any illusions about her, and would let her “be and do her own thing.”[97]

The growing affection for her daughter was soon put under pressure again. At the end of August, Helene received a letter from her son-in-law that heralded the definitive rift between mother and daughter. In his letter, Paul made pointed accusations around his mother-in-law’s relationship with Sam van Deventer, with whom, he believed, she was having an adulterous affair.[98] Helene was bewildered. She knew how she felt about Sam, and didn’t think that anyone else was in a position to judge. She passed on the letter to Anton, who was outraged, and wondered where Paul found the arrogance to speak to his mother-in-law in such a way.[99] He threatened to fire him on the spot. With difficulty, Helene prevented him from doing so. She didn’t want it on her conscience that it would be her fault if the young couple fell into financial difficulty.

Despite her bewilderment, Helene understood Paul’s allegations. She knew only too well what outsiders thought about her and Sam. Her own staff buzzed with gossip, sometimes tempting her to tell them a false travel destination when she went to visit Sam in Bremen.[100] She didn’t actually want to give in to that temptation, because she didn’t think she had anything to hide. Yet she sometimes asked Sam not to place little presents from her too visibly in his office, because they were “not intended for prying eyes.”[101] In short, she couldn’t blame Paul for interpreting her relationship as he did. But she did have a problem with the morally superior tone in which he addressed her in his letter. On top of that, her son-in-law apparently had so little trust in her that he also wrote a letter to Anton. In it, he announced that he and Helene Jr. would no longer visit their home, since Helene refused to break off contact with Sam van Deventer.[102]

To Helene’s surprise, Paul did not seem to anticipate any professional consequences due to the statements in his letter to Anton. For example, he did not offer to resign. “Does

he want to continue doing business with my husband & not find his wife good enough to visit in her house?"[103] she wondered in astonishment. Despite her objections, Paul was fired two weeks later. The official reason was his responsibility for the decline of the Argentinean branch office. As a son-in-law and as a business partner he had been "weighed and found wanting," as Helene put it. Paul's attack achieved exactly the antithesis of what he'd intended. Not for one moment did Helene consider the possibility of becoming less involved with Sam. The accusations led her to make a firm decision to no longer bend to the wishes and expectations of her milieu. In the past, whenever Sam came up, she'd told half-truths and concealed things to spare her children, but this had clearly backfired. From now on she would no longer hide her dealings with him. The first thing she did after reading Paul's letter was to ask Sam again to come and spend his vacation at De Harscamp. She also wrote to him that a rapprochement with Helene Jr. would only be possible when she and Paul had expressed their conviction that Sam was a respectable person.[104] In this matter, she had Anton on her side: "I feel my husband's esteem for me & a broad-mindedness, which is miles apart from Paul's behavior. Miles apart!"[105]

Nevertheless, the blame and estrangement from her daughter hurt her deeply. Resigned, she tried to accept that Helene Jr. was no longer the child with whom she had felt a bond. The connection had only been based on apparent similarities between them, Helene sighed bitterly. As her influence on her daughter had waned, so had the mutual feelings and interests. When she allowed these gloomy thoughts to pierce her, she did not feel able to continue working on her museum-house. She wondered how she would find a new purpose to "once again drive her to act."[106] Her other children also gave her little in which to believe. She had tried to put Toon in charge of De Harscamp, but her 23-year-old son seemed to lack a professional attitude, and she was happy that he was still under the supervision of the Moorland Society. Wim, in turn, had been transferred to London. To her displeasure, she heard from Sam—who had been Wim's immediate supervisor in Bremen—that he had left behind sloppy work and had barely worked at all during the last period. This lack of ambition was a thorn in her side, as was his "endless moaning" about his departure to London, which was seemingly of greater concern to him than the import bills he ought to have checked in Bremen.[107]

And then there was Bob, who had since turned 15. Helene had the feeling that he, too, was at the point of turning away from her and going in his own direction.[108] When he came to sit by her, she felt that it was more for appearance's sake than because he really wanted to. Just as had been the case with Wim and Toon seven years earlier, Helene had difficulty understanding the need of teenagers to go their own way. She consoled herself with the thought that she would spend the rest of her life with Sam and Anton, the two people who "each in their own way" had seen "deep inside her."[109]

Helene became more and more convinced that her life's purpose did not need to be linked to her children. Since neither Helene Jr. nor Toon, Wim or Bob would preserve her memory, she would do it herself. Whenever she passed the house on Cremerweg, where she had lived for several months in 1901 during the renovation of her current home, she would see the ivy and wisteria she had once planted in passing. It was a pleasant thought that people still took pleasure in them. Who knew what could result from that enjoyment? "Can a person not live on through a small, inconspicuous act?"[110]

She realized the same thing when she arrived at De Harscamp in the summer of 1912. She saw how the orchard and plants had grown, how everything was fuller and riper than the year before. The sight reminded her that she had been the one to breathe "life & love" back into the neglected estate, which it had needed to grow into a model farm.[111] The estate's prosperity was the result of her hard work. According to her, it was through such efforts that a person lived on: "Nothing we do is without consequence."[112] She suddenly realized again that she wasn't dependent on her children to perpetuate her ideas. Her intellectual legacy in the form of De Harscamp, and her collection in the museum-house, would be her motivation to carry on her work for the future.[113]

[1] Helene Kröller-Müller (HKM) to Sam van Deventer (SvD), September 9, 1911: Kröller-Müller Museum archives, doc.nr. HA500671.
[2] HKM to SvD, September 11, 1911, HA500672.
[3] HKM to SvD, September 25, 1911, HA500681; HKM to SvD, September 27,1911, HA500682.
[4] Johannes Memelink, 'Levensbeschrijving van J.H. Memelink', 1956 (unpublished memoir), p. 57, KMM, code 201.
[5] W.F. Lichtenauer, 'Stolk, Cornelis Adriaan Pieter van (1857-1934)', in *Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland* (http://www.inghist.nl/Onderzoek/Projecten/BWN/lemmata/bwn2/stolk).
[6] HKM to SvD, March 18, 1911, HA502032.
[7] HKM to SvD, April 28, 1911, HA500546.
[8] HKM to SvD, October 6, 1911, HA500690.
[9] HKM to SvD, October 5, 1911, HA500698.
[10] HKM to SvD, October 12, 1911, HA500696; Mies van Stolk to Toon Kröller, October 1911 (letter copied by HKM), HA500697.
[11] Mies van Stolk to Toon Kröller, October 1911 (letter copied by HKM), HA500697.
[12] HKM to SvD, October 5, 1911, HA500698.
[13] HKM to SvD, October 6, 1911, HA500690.
[14] HKM to SvD, October 7, 1911, HA500693.
[15] HKM to SvD, October 6, 1911, HA500690.
[16] HKM to SvD, October 13, 1911, HA500699.
[17] HKM to SvD, October 7, 1911, HA500693.
[18] H.P. Bremmer to HKM, October 29, 1911, HA502585; Mr. Gerhard Nauta, 'Donation of the Kröller-Müller Collection to the Dutch State', April 26, 1935, HA379636.
[19] HKM to SvD, October 16, 1911, HA500704.
[20] HKM to SvD, October 1, 1911, HA500686; HKM to Clifford Pownall, October 16, 1911, HA500705.
[21] HKM to SvD, October 22, 1911, HA502098.
[22] HKM to SvD, October 21, 1911, Brückmann Family Archive.
[23] HKM to Anton Kröller, October 22, 1911, HA502097.
[24] HKM to SvD, October 24, 1911, HA500715.
[25] HKM to SvD, January, 22, 1912, HA500776.
[26] Idem.
[27] HKM to SvD andWim Kröller, October 26, 1911, HA500717.
[28] HKM to SvD, November 4, 1911, HA500721.
[29] HKM to SvD, January 30, 1912, HA500786.
[30] HKM to Bob Kröller, July 18, 1921, HA502147.
[31] HKM to SvD, November 23, 1913, HA502037.
[32] HKM to SvD, November 17, 1911, HA500742.
[33] Helene Kröller-Müller, 'The Art Collection', 1932, p. 2, HA415388.
[34] H.P. Bremmer to HKM, October 29, 1911, HA502585.
[35] Jan van Adrichem, *De ontvangst van de moderne kunst in Nederland 1910-2000. Picasso als pars pro toto*, Prometheus, Amsterdam 2001, p. 163.
[36] HKM to SvD, Februari 25, 1912, HA500806.
[37] Many packages of transcriptions of the Bremmer lessons are still lying in the Kröller-Müller Museum archives.
[38] Hildelies Balk *De kunstpaus [The Art Pope]. H.P. Bremmer 1871-1956*, Thoth, Bussum 2006, p. 129.
[39] H.P. Bremmer, *Vincent van Gogh. Inleidende beschouwingen*, Versluys, Amsterdam 1911.
[40] HKM to SvD, January 21, 1912, HA500775.
[41] HKM to SvD, February 27, 1912, HA500807. Albert Verwey, 'H.P. Bremmer: Vincent van Gogh', *De Beweging. Algemeen maandschrift voor Letteren, Kunst, Wetenschap en Staatkunde* 8(1912)2, p. 96.
[42] HKM to SvD, Februari 27, 1912, HA500807.
[43] HKM to SvD, January 21, 1912, HA500775.
[44] HKM to SvD, March 24, 1912, HA502030.
[45] Alfred Lichtwark, 'Der Sammler', *Kunst und Künstler* 10(1912)5, p. 229-241.
[46] HKM to SvD, March 24, 1912, HA502030.
[47] Helene Kröller-Müller, *Beschouwingen over problemen in de ontwikkeling der moderne schilderkunst*, U.M. Holland, Amsterdam, 1925, p. 38.
[48] H.P. Bremmer, 'Purchases1907-1915', HA379628, HA379629 and HA379630.
[49] HKM to SvD, November 23, 1913, HA502037.
[50] See for example: Wim H. Nijhof, *Anton Kröller (1862-1941),Helene Kröller-Müller (1869-1939). Miljoenen, macht en meesterwerken*, De Valkenberg, Apeldoorn 2006, p. 172.

[51] Belk defines collecting as 'the process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences'. Russell Belk, 'Collectors and collecting', in: Christopher Tilley [e.a.] (red.), *Handbook of Material Culture*, SAGE Publications, London 2006, p. 535. James Clifford writes about the origin of collecting: 'An excessive, sometimes even rapacious need to *have* is transformed into rule-governed, meaningful desire. Thus the self that must possess but cannot have it all learns to select, order, classify in hierarchies – to make "good" collections' (see chapter 10 'On collecting art and Culture in: James Clifford, *The predicament of culture. Twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge/Massachusetts/London 1988, p. 218).
[52] Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover. A Romance*, Picador, New York 1992, p. 24.
[53] HKM to SvD, April 13, 1912, HA502029.
[54] For a discussion of 'the thrill of the hunt' see: Belk (2006), p. 540; Russell Belk, 'Collecting as luxury consumption: effects on individuals and households', *Journal of economic psychology*, 16(1995)3, p. 486 and Grant McCracken, *Culture and consumption. New approaches to the symbolic character of consumer goods and activities*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1990, p. 113.
[55] Helene Brückmann-Kröller to Paul Brückmann, April 11, 1912, HA510289. 'Papa will noch ein paar Mal zehntausend Gulden dafür verwenden.'
[56] HKM to SvD, April 9, 1912, HA500834.
[57] HKM to SvD, April 13, 1912, HA502029.
[58] Letter 743, Vincent van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, January 28, 1889, in: Leo Jansen en Hans Luijten (eds.), *De brieven. [The Letters]*, Van Gogh Museum/Huygens Instituut, Amsterdam/The Hague 2009, part 4, p. 399-403.
[59] Émile Bernard, 'Vincent van Gogh', *Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui* 8(1891)390; Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, *Van Gogh in perspective*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J 1974, p. 38-40. Bernard's article was republished in: Ambroise Vollard (ed.), *Lettres de Vincent van Gogh à Émile Bernard*, [s.n.], Paris 1911, which was propbably Helene's source of information.
[60] See for example: Haruo Arikawa, '"La Berceuse". An Interpretation of Vincent van Gogh's Portraits', *Annual Bulletin of the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo*, 15(1981)1, p. 43. Today it is doubted whether Bernard used an authentic quote or whether he gave his own interpretation of two separate letters. See: Welsh-Ovcharov (1974), p. 39-40, notes 11 and 12.
[61] Purchase information is derived from: Jos ten Berge and Teio Meedendorp, *The paintings of Vincent van Gogh in the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum*, Kröller-Müller Foundation, Otterlo 2003, and: Teio Meedendorp, *Drawings and Prints By Vincent van Gogh in the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum,* Kröller-Müller Foundation, Otterlo 2007.
[62] HKM to SvD, April 13, 1912, HA502029.
[63] HKM to SvD, April 13, 1912, HA502029.
[64] HKM to SvD, April 14, 1912, HA502028.
[65] Helene named no titles, but wrote about paintings that had the same subject matter and approximately the same dimensions. It is known that she bought *View of Collioure* directly from Signac; the work by Seurat must then have been *Harbor Entrance at Honfleur*, which also depicts a harbor view and is not much larger. She did not buy the latter from Signac, however, but from the Bernheim-Jeune dealership. Franck Gribling and Paul Hefting, *Schilderijen van het Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller*, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo 1970, p. 234.
[66] This visit is not documented in the letters dating from 1912, but given that, according to Ten Berge and Meedendorp, the Kröllers purchased eight Van Gogh paintings from Schuffenecker in April of 1912, it can be assumed that this occurred during the same trip. Ten Berge and Meedendorp (2003), p. 443.
[67] HKM to Paul Fechter, February 14, 1929, HA379268. In 1928, Schuffenecker would be suspected of dealing in fake Van Goghs that had been painted by his brother Émile. Among the many Van Goghs that Bremmer and Anton saw, it is likely that a large number were fakes. See the paragraph about the Wacker affair in "Chapter 12: Decay and Salvation".
[68] Ten Berge and Meedendorp (2003), p. 443.
[69] HKM to SvD, April 13, 1912, HA502029.
[70] *Catalogue des tableaux modernes, aquarelles, dessins et pastels, dépendant des collections formées par M.-C. Hoogendijk de La Haye*, Frederik Muller, Amsterdam 1912; Herbert Henkels, 'Cézanne en Van Gogh in het Rijksmuseum voor Moderne Kunst in Amsterdam. De collectie van Cornelis Hoogendijk (1866-1911)', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum*, 41(1993)3-4, p. 254-255; 'Statgehabte Auktionen. Amsterdam II', *Der Cicerone* 4(1912)11, p. 451.
[71] Henkels (1993), p. 255.
[72] HKM to SvD, May 23, 1912, HA500884.
[73] Peter Hecht, *125 jaar openbaar kunstbezit met steun van de Vereniging Rembrandt*, Waanders, Zwolle 2008, p. 48.
[74] Ambroise Vollard, *Souvenirs d'un marchand de tableaux*, Albin Michel, Paris 1937, p. 150-152.
[75] Friedrich Markus Huebner, *Holland*, Klinkhardt & Biermann/Van Munster, Leipzig/Amsterdam 1921, p. 48-55.
[76] Veronica Grodzinski, 'The art dealer and collector as visionary. Discovering Vincent van Gogh in Wilhelmine Germany 1900–1914 ', *Journal of the history of collections*, 21(2009)2, p. 221-228.

[77] Ten Berge en Meedendorp (2003), p. 414.
[78] Walter Feilchenfeldt, 'Vincent van Gogh – verhandeld en verzameld', in: Roland Dorn (red.), *Vincent van Gogh en de moderne kunst*, Waanders, Zwolle 1990, p. 23.
[79] Carol M. Zemel, *The Formation of a Legend. Van Gogh Criticism, 1890-1920*, UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan 1980, p. 133.
[80] Henkels (1993), p. 255.
[81] Chris Stolwijk, Han Veenenbos [a.o.], *The Account Book of Theo van Gogh and Jo van Gogh-Bonger*, Van Gogh Museum/Primavera Pers, Amsterdam/Leiden 2002, p. 124-131.
[82] Richard Reiche (introduction), *Internationale Kunstausstellung des Sonderbundes westdeutscher Kunstfreunde und Künstler zu Cöln*, Dumont Schauberg, Cologne1912. The exhibition took place from May 25 until September 30, 1912.
[83] Helmut Leppien and Gert von der Osten, *Europä ische Kunst 1912. Zum 50. Jahrestag der Ausstellung des "Sonderbundes westdeutscher Kunstfreunde und Künstler" in Köln, 12 September bis 9 Dezember 1962*, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne 1962, p. 21-34.
[84] Walter Feilchenfeldt, *Vincent van Gogh & Paul Cassirer, Berlin. The Reception of Van Gogh in Germany From 1901 to 1914*, Waanders, Zwolle 1988, p. 38.
[85] Ten Berge and Meedendorp (2003), p. 354.
[86] HKM to Anton Kröller, May 17, 1913, HA502225.
[87] HKM to SvD, May 16, 1913, HA501135.
[88] He bought *Portrait of Eva Callimachi-Catargi* in the same period from art gallery Wisselingh in Amsterdam.
[89] HKM to SvD, May 23, 1912, HA500884.
[90] HKM to SvD, July 21, 1912, HA500925.
[91] Idem.
[92] See for example: Helene Brückmann-Kröller to Paul Brückmann, February 14, 1912, HA510257.
[93] HKM to SvD, March 10, 1912, HA500814.
[94] HKM to SvD, March 17, 1912, HA500823.
[95] HKM to SvD, March 10, 1912, HA500814.
[96] HKM to SvD, March 13, 1912, HA500818.
[97] HKM to SvD, March 17, 1912, HA500823.
[98] HKM to SvD, August 20, 1912, HA500957. The letter from Paul to Helene has not survived, but its scope can be reconstructed from Helene's letter to Sam from August 20, as well as from a letter that Paul wrote to the Kröllers two years later, on August 4, 1914. It clearly shows how Paul thought about the relationship between Helene and Sam van Deventer for years. This letter can be found in the Van Andel-Brückmann family archive.
[99] HKM to SvD, August 22, 1912, HA500958.
[100] HKM to SvD, October 16, 1912, HA500989.
[101] HKM to SvD, August 29, 1911, HA500650.
[102] HKM to SvD, Augustus 22, 1912, HA500958.
[103] Idem.
[104] HKM to SvD, August 25, 1912, HA500961.
[105] HKM to SvD, August 24, 1912, HA500960.
[106] HKM to SvD, August 24, 1912, HA500960.
[107] HKM to Anton Kröller, February 28, 1912, HA502198.
[108] HKM to SvD, May 30, 1912, HA500890.
[109] HKM to SvD, February 4, 1913, HA501067.
[110] HKM to SvD, May 30, 1912, HA500890.
[111] HKM to SvD, August 24, 1912, HA500960.
[112] HKM to SvD, May 30, 1912, HA500890.
[113] HA500960, HKM aan SvD, 24 augustus 1912.