

150 Years CAHN - The Company History 1863-2013



Four generations of numismatists, art historians and archaeologists have contributed to make “Cahn” one of the leading names in the art trade.

The Cahn dynasty was founded by Adolph Emil Cahn (1840-1918). At the age of thirty-four, he opened his numismatic firm at Zeil 17 in Frankfurt am Main, and in the same year, 1874, he published his first catalogue. According to family tradition, Adolph Cahn had been active in the numismatic trade since 1863. As his wife was née Baer, it is possible that he learned the trade in Frankfurt’s oldest numismatic firm, “Leopold Hamburger und Baer”, established in 1863.

Left: Adolf E. Cahn (1840-1918) as a 17-year-old youth. Mainz, 1857



Right: Adolph E. Cahn’s second catalogue, published in 1876.

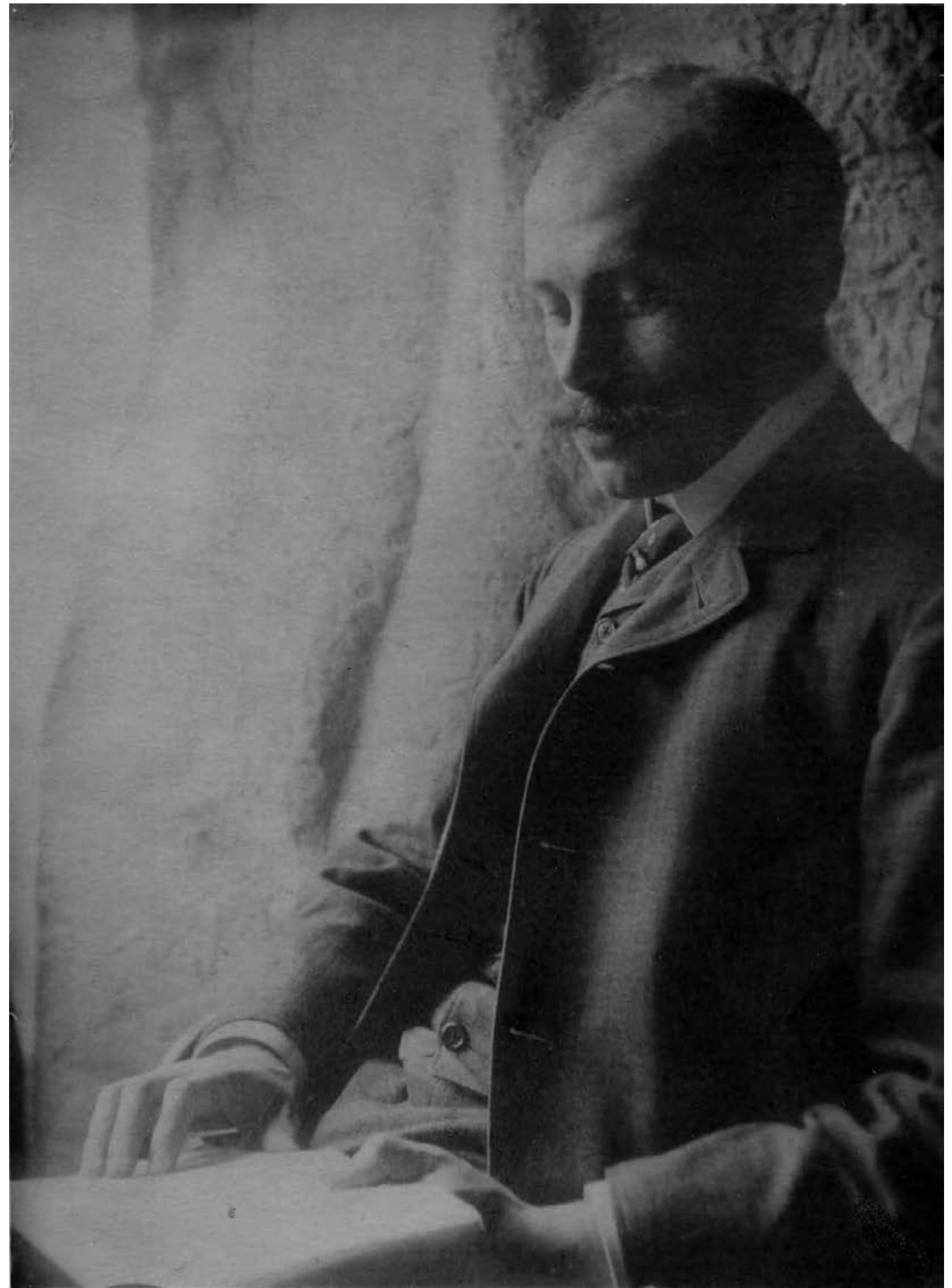
Adolph's sons **Julius** (1871-1936) and **Ludwig Theodor** (1877-1924) joined the company, and, after Ludwig's untimely death, his widow, **Johanna Cahn**, née Neuberger (1881-1963), also played an important role in managing the family business. Despite the ravages of the First World War, and the havoc inflicted by massive inflation, business was good and many first-rate collections were sold at auction.

Erich Bernhard (1913-1993) and **Herbert Adolph** (1915-2002), the sons of Ludwig and Johanna Cahn, were involved in the trade from an early age, as the minutiae of daily business were eagerly discussed over lunch, and the boys soon joined the business meetings held in the evenings.



Left: Johanna Cahn
(1881-1963)

Right: Ludwig T. Cahn
(1877-1924)



With the rise of Hitler and increasingly aggressive anti-Semitism, the Cahns decided to emigrate. In 1934, the twenty-one year old Erich Cahn was recalled from his studies at the University of Vienna and sent to Basle, where, together with his nineteen-year-old brother, Herbert, he founded the Münzhandlung Basel with the generous support of the art dealer Christoph Bernoulli and numerous collector-friends.

Their mother Johanna joined them in 1937, after the Frankfurt firm had been Aryanised. Julius had died in 1936, and his wife, Emma emigrated to London, where she handled Seaby's foreign coin department.

In the five years preceding 1938, when the company was forced to close, the two brothers held ten auctions, selling many important collections, including the Cabinet of Prinz Waldeck.

Assisted by the same group of friends and collectors, Münzen und Medaillen AG was founded in 1941, and the brothers were nominated as directors. Erich was responsible for modern coins and Herbert for ancient coins. Parallel to his activities for the company, Herbert resumed his studies, specialising in Classical Archaeology, and earning his doctorate with his dissertation on the coins of Naxos, which was published in 1944.



Erich B. Cahn (1913-1993) with his son, ca. 1954



Herbert A. Cahn (1915-2002) with a client, 1940's

Herbert A. Cahn became increasingly interested in ancient art, and, from 1958 onwards, when the domain of ancient coins had been assigned to Pierre Strauss, Herbert devoted himself entirely to the ancient art trade. The meticulous, scholarly descriptions and the high quality of the illustrations of his auction catalogues set international standards and played a major role in establishing Basle as one of the leading centres of the market in classical antiquities.

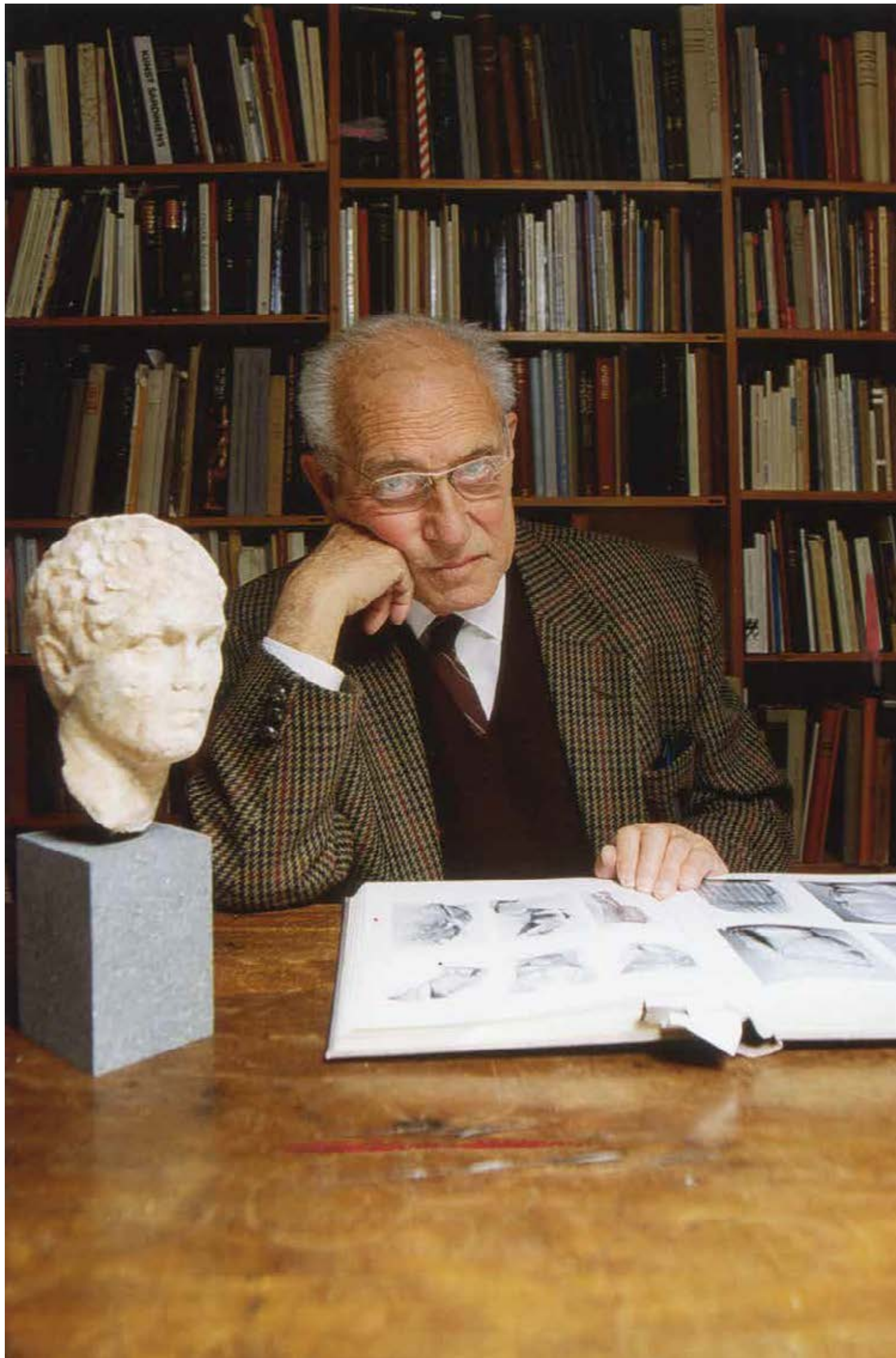
Herbert A. Cahn also retained a strong interest in numismatics, focusing on scholarly research and teaching at the University of Heidelberg, where he was honorary professor of numismatics, and at the Universities of Freiburg im Breisgau, and Freiburg in Switzerland.



Herbert A. Cahn (front), surrounded by students after a performance of “The Clouds” by Aristophanes, on the occasion of the 60th birthday of Karl Schefold, 1965



Amphora by the Berlin Painter, which was sold to the then president of Ciba, Robert Käppeli, by Herbert A. Cahn in the late 1950's. Currently on display in the Antikenmuseum Basel und Sammlung Ludwig



At the great age of 73, after almost 50 years in the service of Münzen und Medaillen AG, Herbert A. Cahn decided, in 1988, to found his own company, H.A.C. – Kunst der Antike. For the next decade, he continued to write auction catalogues, and exhibit at art fairs with unflagging energy and great enthusiasm, retiring only in 1998.

Left: Herbert A. Cahn in his office at Malzgasse 23, Basle, 1990
Below: Herbert A. Cahn at KAM Basle, 1970's-80's



In 1999, following the dissolution of H.A.C. – Kunst der Antike, Herbert's son, the classical archaeologist **Jean-David Cahn**, founded Jean-David Cahn AG. The companies Cahn International AG and Cahn Auktionen AG were established in 2006 and 2007. With these three companies, Jean-David Cahn continues the proud family tradition of expertise and excellence in the ancient art trade.

Right: Jean-David Cahn (*1961)

Bottom left: Jean-David Cahn at the opening of an exhibition at Malzgasse 23, Basle, 2012

Bottom right: Exhibition at Nauenstrasse 71, Basle, 2010



Memories of Erich B. Cahn from the 1920s

The Clients

The customer file contained around a thousand addresses. However, “only about two thirds could be regarded as actual buyers. Compared to today, this is about a tenth of the customer base of a numismatic company of a similar size. However, the low number of clients was more than compensated for by their quality. The collectors were often highly knowledgeable in the field numismatics and no less international than today (French, English and even Italian correspondence was a matter of course, as were visits from foreign customers). The USA was more strongly represented than today; there were some very potent general collectors there, for example the Chicago brewer Vigil Brand, without whom practically no auction took place [...]. Ernst Lejeune was the main figure in Frankfurt. All numismatists of our generation learnt from him. He made the rounds of the Frankfurt coin dealers almost daily to see what was new.”

Hospitality

“My mother [Johanna Cahn née Neuberger] had a remarkable talent for dealing with people which she combined with boundless hospitality. Indeed, hospitality played a role in business relations that should not be underestimated. Every important client was invited to dinner, sometimes even to stay overnight, something that was actually just as much a matter of course in those days as it was not customary to invite customers or colleagues to dine in a restaurant.”

Auctions

“Major foreign collectors did not usually attend auctions in person, preferring to place written orders. [...] Lists with estimates were only available from around 1926 onwards; before then, the auctioneer had to be contacted for such information. There was no ‘auction timetable’: usually only the first day of the auction (without a specific time) ‘and the following days’ is stated. [...] The auctions themselves took place exclusively in the business premises of the companies and were, by today’s standards, very small in scale. It was not uncommon for only four to five bidders to be present; more than ten was considered a high turnout. To sell 40 to 50 per cent of the auctioned items was considered normal, 60 per cent – which was the maximum – was considered an excellent result.”

The “Consortium”

The most important coin dealers in Frankfurt, Hamburger and Helbing (since 1921), Cahn (since 1923) and Hess and Rosenberg (since 1924), joined forces to form a “consortium”. Hamburger soon left, but the other four remained together until the early 1930s. “The term ‘consortium’ is quite an understatement. In truth it was a cartel, or in fact a single business, which practically dominated most of the German coin trade, unnoticed from the outside, because it managed to keep the secret of this company’s existence strictly confidential. [...] Thanks to this union, it was possible to make ends meet in the difficult times of economic crisis around 1930. Each item was entered in a joint account (as noted on the coin labels) and the proceeds were divided exactly into four parts, except for a quarter of the amount sold, which remained with the selling company alone, as did the proceeds from goods sold on commission. Important events, guidelines and future developments were discussed in regular weekly meetings, which usually took place in the evenings at our house, Niedenau 55. I can still vaguely remember such meetings. The atmosphere was pleasant and friendly, something to which the character of each individual contributed not insignificantly. [...] The fact that the ‘Du’ was unusual at the time didn’t affect the mood at all. Certainly, every now and again one person liked to tell the other how much better business he had just done, especially after a successful auction, but there was never a really serious rift, and when dealing with the outside world cohesion was absolute.”

Art Dealers as Scholars

Trade and scholarship have always been closely linked in the Cahn family. Many of the catalogues were pioneering achievements in the academic study of coins and antiquities and set new international standards. Parallel to their business activities, Julius, Erich Bernhard and Herbert Adolph Cahn in particular were highly respected scholars and active participants in the current academic discourse.

Julius Cahn (1871-1936)

Julius Cahn was one of the best-known numismatists around 1900 and a pioneer in the study of medieval numismatics. He was in close contact with the important numismatists Ferdinand Friedenburg (1858-1930), Heinrich Buchenau (1862-1931) and Arnold Luschin von Ebengreuth (1841-1932). He completed his doctorate at the University of Strasbourg on the “Münz- und Geldgeschichte der Stadt Strassburg im Mittelalter” (1895). His most important works are “Der Rappenmünzbund: Eine Studie zur Münz- und Geldgeschichte des oberen Rheintaler” (1901) and “Münz- und Geldgeschichte von Konstanz und des Bodenseegebietes im Mittelalter bis zum Reichsmünzgesetz von 1559” (1911). These books were still indispensable reference works in the 1980s.

Erich B. Cahn described his uncle Julius as follows: “Uncle Julius worked in this room [a small but cosy room in the main building at Niedenau 55, Frankfurt am Main, where the the Cahn’s coin auctions were held], puffing heavy cigars almost continuously. As a special favour, my brother and I, who already as high-school students occasionally worked in the office in the afternoons, were allowed to sit at the window in the same room. This man combined an unusual pedagogical talent with a lot of kindness, so that learning from him was a pleasure, but we were still too young to realise what an immense fountain of knowledge – and by no means only in the field of numismatics – was available to us. Of course, customers and important colleagues were also always received in this room, which often became a place of scholarly discussions and discoveries.”

Erich B. Cahn (1913-1993)

Erich B. Cahn, who was responsible for the modern coin section of the business, received his doctorate from the University of Basel in 1966 with the thesis “Münzgeschichte und Münzkatalog des Herzogtums und Kurfürstentums Bayern: von der Münzreform des Jahres 1506 bis zum Tode des Kurfürsten Ferdinand Maria 1679” (published in 1968). He was specialized in the medieval and modern coinage of southern Germany, Switzerland and Bavaria and his numerous publications in these fields earned Erich Cahn “a certain reputation” in specialist circles, as he modestly put it. His extensive knowledge was appreciated by both the Historical Museum in Bern and the Swiss National Museum in Zurich, and when Erich Cahn left the family company at the age of 67, he was immediately hired by these museums as a numismatic specialist.

Herbert A. Cahn (1915-2002)

Already as a teenager, Herbert A. Cahn was highly interested in antiquity. Throughout his life, he remembered with pride that in 1933, at the age of 18, he wrote the auction catalogue featuring the Councillor of Justice Ernst Justus Haeberlin’s important collection of Roman Republican coins. This catalogue is still often quoted today. Herbert A. Cahn studied classical archaeology and philology at the University of Frankfurt under Ernst Langlotz. Following his emigration to Switzerland, he completed his studies under Ernst Pfuh at the University of Basel with his dissertation “Münzen der sizilischen Stadt Naxos” (published in 1944). In the family company he was responsible for ancient coins, and he became increasingly interested in other objects from classical antiquity. From 1958 onwards, Herbert A. Cahn devoted himself entirely to the trade in ancient artefacts.

In his obituary for Herbert A. Cahn (2002), Hans Vögtli wrote: “He developed this line of business into a fully-fledged and globally respected pillar of the company. The auction catalogues set standards with respect to the quality of the illustrations and the meticulous, scholarly analysis of the objects. It is not least these catalogues that carried the name of the company out into the whole world and earned Switzerland, and Basel in particular, a reputation as the centre of the classical antiquities trade. It is fair to say that for international specialists Herbert Cahn, with his Münzen und Medaillen AG and its catalogues, was a symbol of the Basel of the late 1960s, for which the Antikenmuseum is now synonymous and a successor.”

Herbert A. Cahn remained loyal to numismatics in the academic fields of teaching and research. From 1949-1964 he was editor of the “Schweizer Münzblätter” and from 1981-1987 editor of the “Schweizerische Numismatische Rundschau”. In 1956, together with the Basel Professor of Classical Archaeology Karl Schefold (1905-1999) and the German archaeologist Otto Rubensohn (1867-1964), he founded the “Vereinigung der Freunde antiker Kunst” and the journal “Antike Kunst”. In 1960, he co-curated the exhibition “Masterpieces of Greek Art”, which led to the foundation of the Antikenmuseum Basel. 1970 saw the publication of his important work “Knidos. Die Münzen des 6. und 5. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.”

Herbert Cahn was also in close contact with Sir John Beazley (1885-1970) and Sir John Boardman (1927-2024), both professors of classical archaeology at Oxford University, as well as with Roland Hampe (1908-1981), professor of classical archaeology at Heidelberg University. From 1975 onwards he published the renowned specialist book series “Kerameus” together with Sir John Boardman et al. The series focused on fundamental research on Greek vase painting and ceramics and the individual volumes generally became acclaimed reference works. In 1984, together with Annemarie Kaufmann-Heinimann, he published the important monograph “Der spätrömische Silberschatz von Kaiseraugst”.

From 1971-1986 Herbert Cahn was Honorary Professor of Numismatics at the University of Heidelberg and from 1983 he also taught at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau. In 1999 Herbert A. Cahn held the “Robinson Visiting Scholarship (Heberden Coin Room) in association with the Kraay Visitorship (Wolfson College)” in Oxford.

Herbert A. Cahn and Sir John D. Beazley

Herbert A. Cahn was on friendly terms with Sir John D. Beazley (1885-1970). Sir John D. Beazley was Lincoln Professor of Classical Art and Archaeology at Oxford University from 1925-1956 and is regarded as the most important scholar in the field of Greek vase painting. His method of attribution to vase painters has retained its validity to this day. Beazley's letter refers to his visit to the Cahns in Basel in 1956.



Left: Sir John D. Beazley (1885-1970).

Below: Letter from Sir John D. Beazley to Herbert A. Cahn, 1956.

100 Holywell,
Oxford.
November 14 1956.

Dear Dr. Cahn

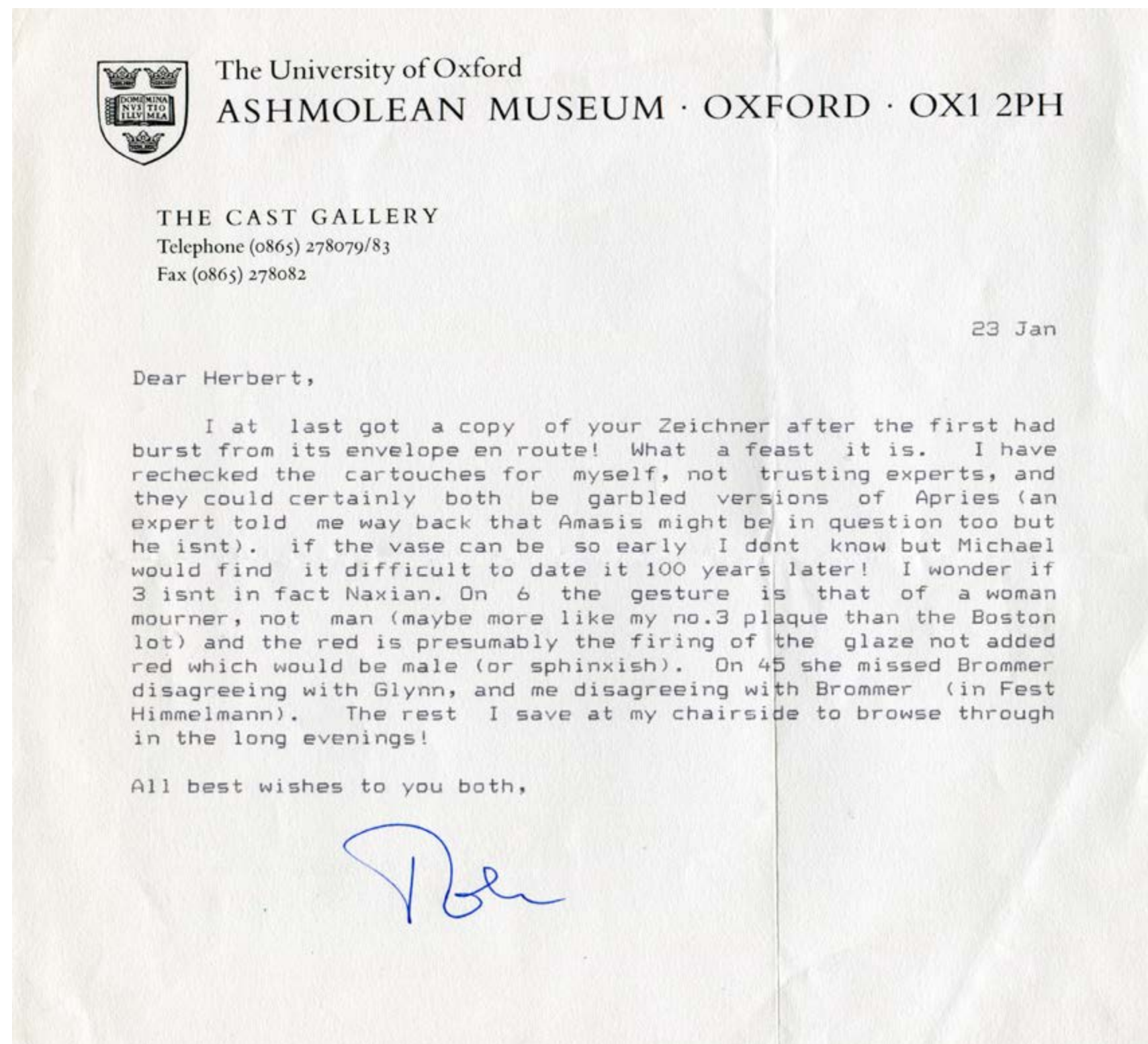
Please accept my sincere thanks for the very kind and able way in which you planned and arranged our visit to Basel. It was a rare pleasure to meet so many charming people and to see so many beautiful things. My wife and I enjoyed every moment of

our stay, and feel truly the better for the change and the experience. My wife will be writing. With kindest regards to you and Mrs. Cahn from us both,

Yours sincerely
J.D. Beazley.

Herbert A. Cahn and Sir John Boardman

Herbert A. Cahn and Sir John Boardman (1927-2024) formed a lasting friendship. Sir John Boardman was Sir John D. Beazley's successor as Lincoln Professor of Classical Art and Archaeology at Oxford University (from 1956-1994) and was closely associated with the Ashmolean Museum. As of 1975, Herbert A. Cahn and Sir John Boardman published the renowned specialist book series "Kerameus". Boardman's letter refers to the catalogue "Frühe Zeichner: 1500-500 vor Chr. Ägyptische, griechische und etruskische Vasenfragmente der Sammlung H. A. Cahn, Basel" (Early Draughtsmen: 1500-500 B.C. Egyptian, Greek and Etruscan Vase Fragments from the H. A. Cahn Collection, Basel), published in 1992.



Left: Letter from Sir John Boardman to Herbert A. Cahn, 1993.

Below: Sir John Boardman (1927-2024).



The Location of Cahn Family's Companies

In 1874, at the age of 34, Adolf E. Cahn opened a coin shop at Zeil 17 in Frankfurt am Main.

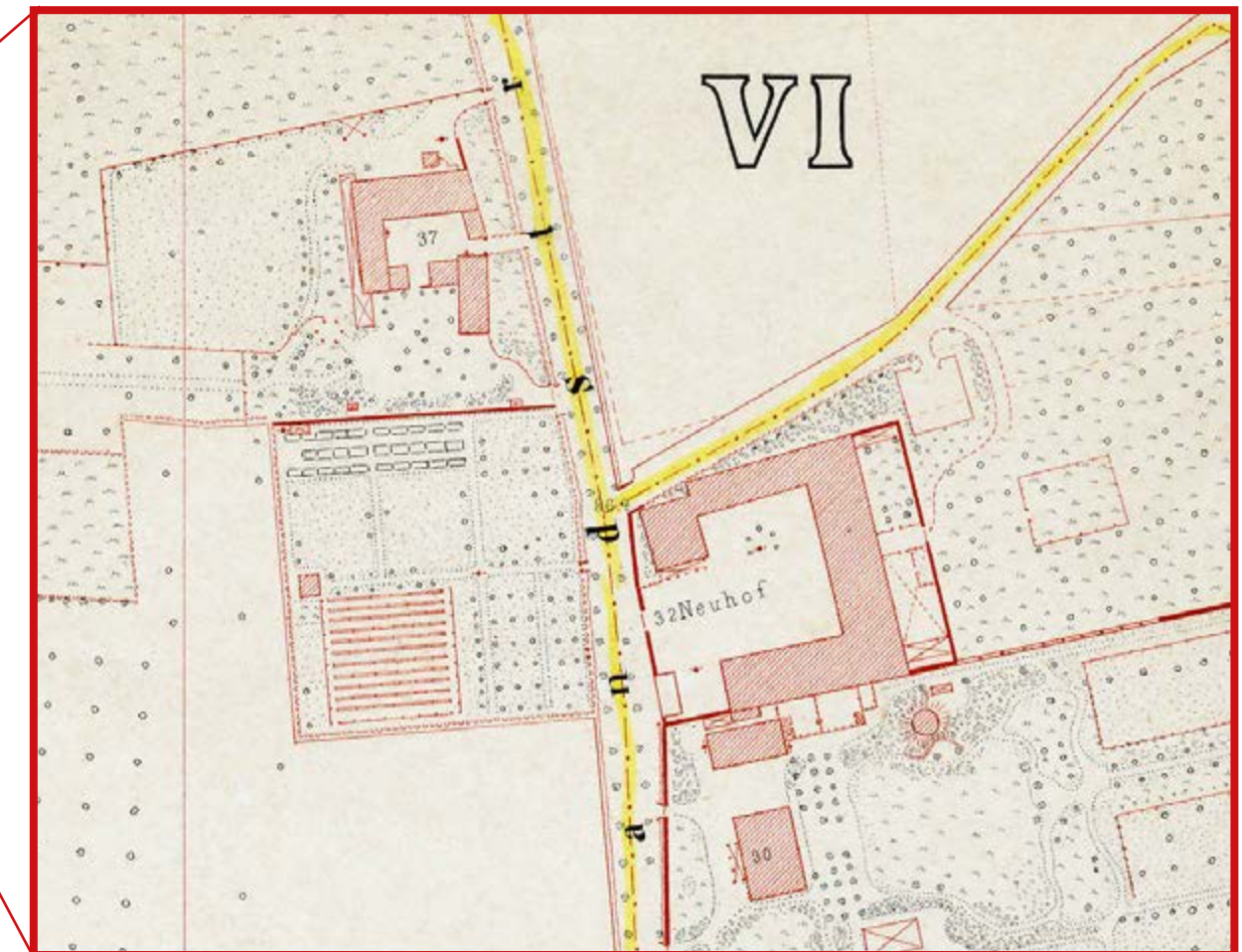
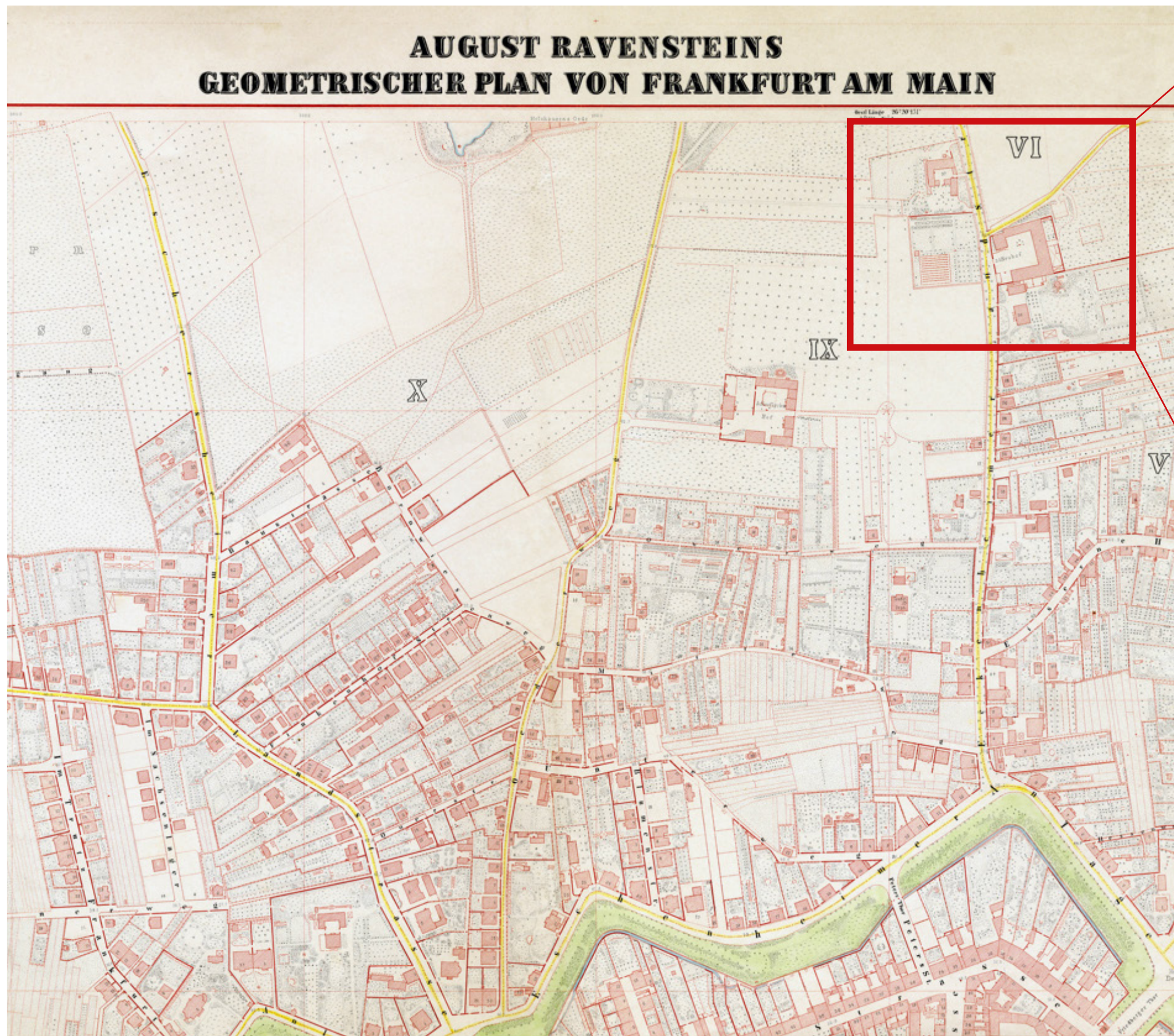
The Zeil is a street in the northern city centre of Frankfurt am Main. Since the end of the 19th century, it numbers amongst the best-known shopping streets in Germany boasting a high turnover. Before that, it was primarily famous for its magnificent inns and palaces from the Baroque and Classicist periods.



The Zeil towards the East,
Frankfurt am Main, 1898.

From around 1878 onwards, the Münzhandlung Cahn was located on the Eschersheimer Landstrasse 36, Frankfurt am Main.

The Eschersheimer Landstrasse is an important road leading to the North. It starts at Eschenheimer Turm and passes through the city districts of Nordend, Westend, Dornbusch and Ginnheim before reaching Eschersheim. Until the end of the 19th century, the Eschersheimer Landstrasse was virtually undeveloped.



On August Ravenstein's "Geometrischer Plan" of Frankfurt am Main dating from 1862 lot 36 seems to be vacant.

The Cahn family probably moved to **Niedenau 55** in **Frankfurt am Main**, in around 1890. These premises which also served as company headquarters were affectionately called “**der Stammsitz**”. The building from the Wilhelminian era still stands today.

Johanna Cahn (1881-1963), the mother of Erich and Herbert, ran the company together with her brother-in-law Julius after the death of her husband Ludwig in 1924.



Niedenau 55,
Frankfurt am Main





The dramatic events of 1934 forced the Cahn family to emigrate to Switzerland. Mother Johanna, with her sons Erich and Herbert as managing directors, founded the Münzhandlung Basel in April of the same year. Its office was located at Aeschenvorstadt 37 in Basel.

Left: Aeschenvorstadt 37, Basel 1936
Below: Aeschenvorstadt, Basel 1908.



After the dissolution of the old company, **Münzen und Medaillen AG** was founded in December 1941. It moved into premises at **Freie Strasse 103, Basel**.

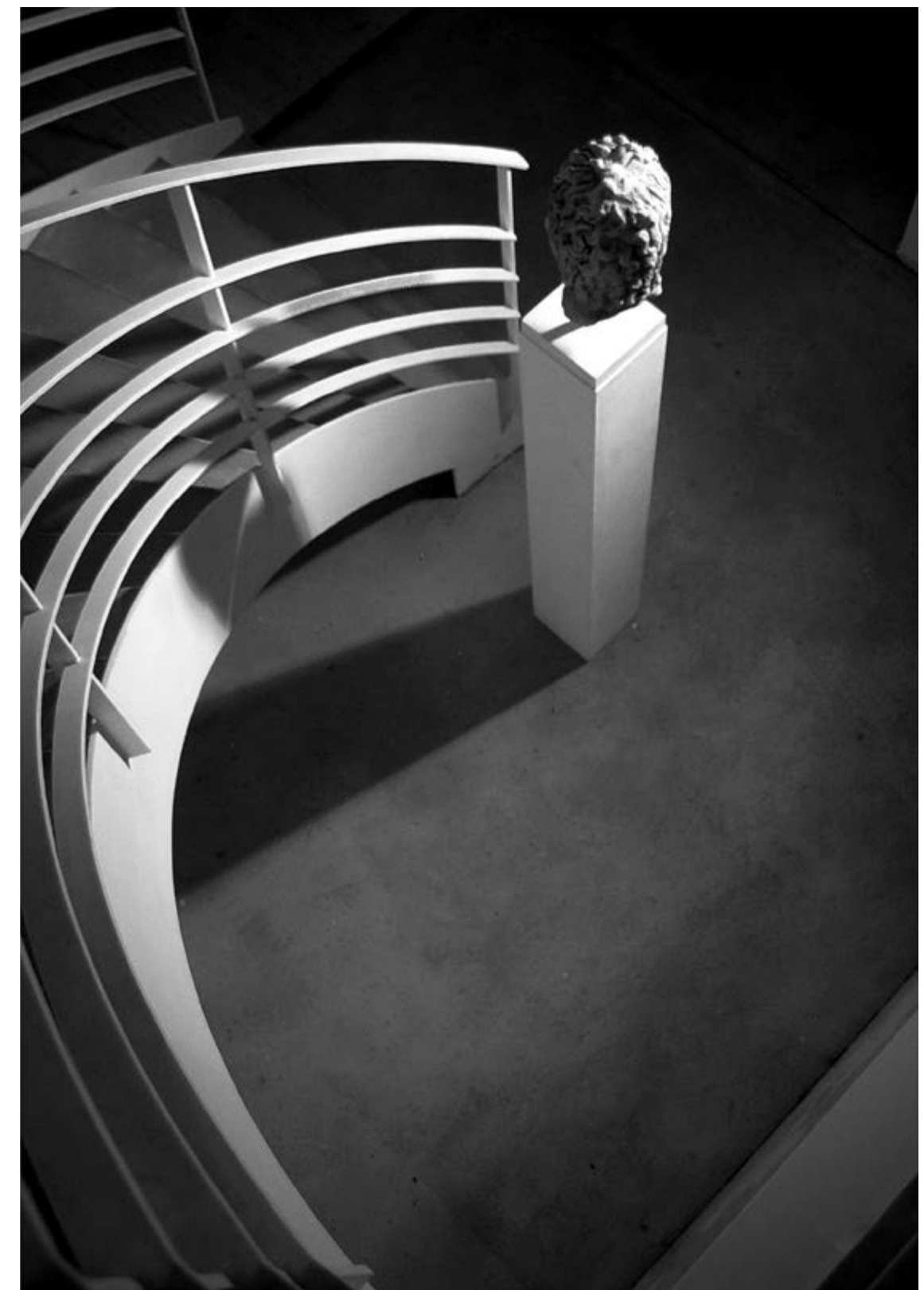
Right: Freie Strasse 103, Basel, 1936.

Below: Herbert Cahn (right) in the office at Freie Strasse 103.



In April 1950, the company moved to Malzgasse 25, Basel, where it remained for over 50 years. When Herbert Cahn founded his company HAC Kunst der Antike in 1988, he moved to the neighbouring building at Malzgasse 23, where Pierre Strauss of Münzen und Medaillen AG already had his office. The successor company to Münzen und Medaillen AG, ACAMA Antike Münzkunst, took over the premises at Malzgasse 25, but Jean-David Cahn was able to rent them again for Galerie Cahn from 2011-2018.

Die Jean-David Cahn AG, Malzgasse 23, Basel



Die Jean-David Cahn AG

Via Maistra 11, St. Moritz

The exhibition space in St. Moritz was open to the public from 2006-2018. In the winter and summer, exhibitions featuring ancient art were shown.

