

THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF THE LEGENDARY PRAGUE COLLECTOR, RUDOLF JUST

By Sebastian Kuhn
Lecturer and Sotheby's Director

The last work by the English writer Bruce Chatwin, published shortly before his death in 1989, was a short novel about an obsessive collector of Meissen porcelain in Prague. "Utz" is a lyrical account of the life of the eponymous collector and his obsession with 18th century Meissen porcelain figures, of which he amasses a huge collection that fills his tiny apartment. The Meissen manufactory - the first in Europe to discover the Chinese secret of the manufacture of true porcelain - was founded in 1710 by Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland. His legendary appetites found expression in many ways, not least through the magnificence of his court and his Residence, but also in an almost insatiable craving for porcelain. Meissen porcelain was an important symbol for Augustus: its rarity and value were such that it was known as "white gold", and he used it to decorate his palaces on a hitherto unprecedented scale, to demonstrate the wealth and magnificence of his court, and as an emblem of his political power and aspirations. The narrator of the novel "Utz" observes: *"the porcelain sickness of Augustus the Strong so warped his vision, and that of his ministers, that their delirious schemes for ceramics got confused with real political power."*

Even when the secret of porcelain manufacturing spread to other European centres, Meissen remained the leader in taste, at least until the middle of the 18th century. Its beautiful figures and table wares embodied and reflected the sophisticated tastes of European court culture of the 18th century, and it is *this* that fascinates the collector Utz. The novel charts Utz's obsession from childhood, to his collecting as a young man in the 1920s and 30s, and the struggle to protect his collection first from the Germans, and then from the post-war communist regime, from whom he comes

under increasing pressure to relinquish his precious collection to the state. Chatwin explores the psychology of the collector: how Utz's collection becomes his refuge. The beautiful pieces of porcelain and the noble and sophisticated culture they embody, are an escape from the ugliness and repression with which Utz finds himself surrounded. It is the story of how this refuge also becomes a prison.

A young American antiques dealer who is trying to discover the fate of this legendary collection after Utz's death narrates the story. Has the State seized the collection as threatened? Was Utz able to spirit it away? Or were the fragile figures destroyed and secretly disposed of in the garbage bins of Prague? This is the central mystery of the novel, which is also a brilliant psychological portrait of a collector, skilfully interwoven with the history of Prague and countless legends and characters of its past, as well as being a love story. Until recently, only a few people were aware that Chatwin's novel was inspired by a real collector in Prague whom he met in 1967: Rudolf Just.

The story of Rudolf Just's life has a number of parallels with its fictional counterpart, though in parts it is both more adventurous and more tragic.¹ He was by all accounts an enigmatic character, and many aspects of his life remain a mystery. This elusiveness is also central to Chatwin's collector, Utz: *"His face was immediately forgettable...a face so featureless it gave the impression of not being there. Did he have a moustache? I forget."* This accords with accounts by the few people who knew Rudolf Just towards the end of his life - of somebody wilfully non-descript, of a face in a crowd immediately forgotten. Kate Foster, a specialist in the European Ceramics Department at Sotheby's, and one of the few people in the West to have met Just, described him as "a small man, rather colourless, thin featured, who



Figure 1, Rudolf Just, circa 1930

undeniably lived off his nerves a lot.”

Rudolf Just was born a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Weisskirchen in Moravia on 6th January 1895. His family was apparently well off; occupying a substantial house on one of the town squares, and by 1914, Just began studying Law at the Imperial University in Vienna. He broke off his studies in 1915, however, and was commissioned as a cavalry officer in the Imperial Army, in whose service he remained until the end of the war. Little is known of his activities in the early days of the first Czechoslovak Republic. He apparently worked for a time as a manager for the Bata shoe company, before founding his own textile business with a retail outlet on one of the principal shopping streets in Prague.

From the late 1920s he seems to have been quite prosperous, and he travelled extensively throughout Europe until the mid 1930s, especially to the Swiss Alps and lakes, but also further afield to Italy, the spa towns of the Black Forest and elsewhere. The German annexation of the Sudetenland and the rest of Czechoslovakia brought this idyllic lifestyle to an abrupt end. Just was mobilised on the 1st September 1938 and stood down three months later. On 7th June 1939, Just

married Marketa Wahle in Prague. Little is known of the early years of their marriage, beyond that Rudolf Just was arrested - apparently in late 1944 - and sent to a work camp at Kleinstein run by the Nazi labour organisation Todt. Marketa Just, who was Jewish, was arrested at the beginning of 1945 and sent to the concentration camp at Theresienstadt. She was the only member of her family to survive. According to his family, when the Gestapo came to Just's flat following his arrest, a family friend, Ludmilla Ottomanska, who was later to become Just's second wife, dissuaded them from entering, thereby saving not only Just's young son, but also the collection which was hidden in the flat.

At the beginning of April 1945, Just escaped from the camp together with three other inmates using forged official passes. They survived for several days hiding in a forest, before making their way back to Prague. Just narrowly avoided recapture and went into hiding until the uprising began. According to family anecdote, he risked his life at this time by approaching retreating German soldiers about to detonate an arms depot in a square near his flat. He succeeded in convincing them not to blow up the church and square, and thereby also saved his collection, which would have been destroyed by the blast.

The peace was, however, short-lived. In 1948 Just's business was nationalised by the communist regime and his holdings in other companies were rendered worthless. Not surprisingly, Just remained opposed to the communists throughout his life, and he was in turn regarded as a "class enemy" by the regime. He and his family were not permitted to travel abroad, and in early 1962, he was denounced to the authorities by the caretaker of his building as a "speculator", and for "hoarding" antiques in order to sell them at a profit. In mid-April he was placed under investigation and the police visited his apartment, where they made an inventory of the collection and officially sealed the glass cabinets in which it was housed. Just appealed for help from his friend Otto Walcha, the archivist at the Meissen manufactory, and through him, the director of the manufactory. In the end, Just escaped formal charges, but his collection had attracted the attention of the authorities and the possibility of its confiscation was never far away. His health was gradually failing, however, and on 3rd September 1972, Rudolf Just died in Prague at the age of 77.

Rudolf Just's collection was largely formed between the early 1920s and 1949, when he made his last important purchases, and at its height consisted of



Figure 2, Rudolf Just in his Prague apartment, circa 1940

around 420 pieces.² It will come as something of a surprise to fans of "Utz" that the collection could hardly have been less like its fictional counterpart. It encompassed an astonishing variety of materials, ranging in date from the 16th to the 19th century. It's tempting to describe Just's collection as a sort of *Kunstkammer*: a cabinet of curiosities encompassing many branches of the decorative arts. This is at least more accurate than the fictional Utz and his collection of Meissen figures. But while *Kunstkammer* conveys a sense of the varied and eclectic nature of the collection, it is also misleading. Rudolf Just was, above all, a scholarly collector in the 19th century tradition and a citizen of Central Europe, whose self-professed motto

was "*Wissen ist Macht*" or "knowledge is power". This is the key to Just's collection: he tended to shun the obvious and decorative in favour of pieces that challenged him with problems of attribution, and he also sought to "rescue" the decorative arts of Bohemia and Central Europe. He was the last in a great tradition of such collectors, which in Bohemia began with the famous Prague collector, Adalbert von Lanna, whose collecting interests Just shared, and whose collection undoubtedly inspired him.

Like Lanna and many subsequent Bohemian collectors, Just was most interested in glass. His collection of 187 pieces of glass - about 45% of his entire collection - represented a thorough survey of Bohemian, Austrian and South German glass ranging from the early 17th century to the middle of the 19th century. Just kept a

scholarly catalogue of his collection in eleven volumes, of which four were devoted to glass and divided into the following categories. Volume one included Saxon, Bohemian and Silesian enamelled glass of the 17th and 18th centuries - including *Milchglas* - as well as a handful of examples of Bohemian *Schwarzlot* decoration. The second volume consists mostly of 18th century Bohemian glass with *Zwischengold* decoration as well as some late 17th century and early 18th century ruby-twist goblets and earlier German *Passglases*. The second two volumes span the great age of Biedermeier glass production in Austria and Bohemia from the early 1800s, of which Just owned 107 examples. One volume was devoted to transparent enamelled glass, in particular the workshop of Anton Kothgasser, of which Just owned fourteen examples, as well as Bohemian engraved and cut glass by such prominent makers as Dominik Biemann. The final volume included over fifty examples of coloured Hyalith, Lythialin and overlay glasses produced in the workshops of Graf Buquoy and Friedrich Egermann in Bohemia in the 1830s.

Just's wide-ranging interests are reflected in the volume of his catalogue titled "Various Materials", which includes a breathtaking variety of over 50 objects which might conveniently be classified as a *Kunstkammer* of sorts: ivory medallions, serpentine and Herrengrund copper vessels, wooden relief panels, boxes made of bone, horn, tortoiseshell, mother of pearl, gold, brass and papier maché, a few small pieces of silver, Saxon miners' axes and powder horns made of ivory, an early 17th century German intarsia gaming board, and several pieces of amber including a rosary and chess pieces. These may have been simply occasional or opportune acquisitions, however, as Just usually explored his chosen collecting fields in rather more depth. Thus, his scholarly interest in metalwork, and vessels in particular, is reflected by his especially fine group of over thirty examples of Bohemian, Silesian and South German pewter of the 17th and 18th centuries, as well as twenty-one brass alms dishes, mostly made in Nuremberg in Southern Germany during the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

After glass, European ceramics formed the second largest part of Just's collection, and it rivalled the glass as an area of detailed and specific interest for the collector. One volume of his catalogue was devoted to German stoneware, of which he owned 43 examples from the principle centres of production in the late 16th and 17th centuries: Siegburg, Raeren, Westerwald and Saxony. Turning to European faience, the collec-

tion becomes less of an overview of the field, as in the case of German stoneware, metalwork and glass, and more of a reflection of Just's specific taste and geographical and historical interests. For while Just assembled a varied selection of 67 pieces of European tin-glazed pottery, mostly consisting of German, Dutch Delft, Austrian and Bohemian faience of the 16th to the 19th centuries, it was by no means representative, and he was actually most interested in pottery from his part of Central Europe. He assembled a particularly fine group of pottery made by Anabaptist potters in Southern Bohemia and Moravia during the 17th century, a type known as Haban or Habaner pottery, which he also researched in particular detail. He concentrated similar attention on a later faience maker in the same part of the world, the Holitsch manufactory, which was founded in 1743 on the border of Moravia and Slovakia under the patronage of Francis of Lorraine, the Empress Maria Theresia's consort.

Just's interest in European porcelain was, if anything, even more specific, and was mostly confined to the first two European hard-paste manufactories of Meissen and Vienna. He was particularly interested in the porcelain produced in Vienna by Claudius Innocentius Du Paquier, whose manufactory was founded in 1719. The fifteen examples of Du Paquier porcelain owned by Just are certainly a more representative selection, and in a way, more significant group than his Meissen porcelain. The products of this factory, which was taken over by the State in 1744, are in any case uncommon, but Just was able to assemble a group of particularly rare types of decoration executed both in the factory and by outside workshops, known as *Hausmaler*. He did not own any figures, though this may simply be a reflection of their extreme rarity. Just was also interested in the State period at Vienna, and both figures and tablewares of the second half of the 18th century were represented in his collection. In parallel to his glass collection, he also had a particular interest in the stylistically related Vienna porcelain of the early 19th century, when the factory was one of the leaders in Europe in terms of quality and taste. The cabinet cups he assembled from this period, typically painted with classical or topographical scenes by artists of the calibre of Kothgasser, are of exceptional quality. Surprisingly, given his glass collection, Just appears not to have been particularly interested in 19th century Bohemian porcelain, given the many makers and his otherwise keen interest in the decorative arts of his region. He only owned about ten pieces of anecdotal



Figure 3, Three Meissen Kakiemon-style vases, circa 1730

interest, and may have found it derivative and lacking in quality, compared to the glass and earlier pottery of the region.

The fact that some of the most important and valuable pieces in Rudolf Just's collection have proved to be Meissen has helped to reinforce the idea, created by Chatwin's "Utz", that he was a major collector of Meissen porcelain. In fact, Just owned a total of only 38 pieces of Meissen porcelain over his whole collecting career, less than one-tenth of the whole collection. He couldn't have been less like Utz: he owned only three Meissen figures. The selection of 18th century Meissen porcelain reveals no particular pattern of collecting, other than a taste for unusually decorated, early and *Hausmaler* pieces, which is typical of Just's interest in solving problems of attribution. There were also two

important groups of Meissen porcelain, which, ironically, were opportunistic acquisitions at the end of his collecting career, and uncharacteristic of his collection as a whole.

Both groups came from one of the largest historic collections of European ceramics in Bohemia, which belonged to the Counts von Waldstein (or Wallenstein). It was formed in the 18th century and housed at their country seat of Schloss Dux (now called Duchov). The collection remained in the family's possession until 1946, when, as German citizens, all their collections and property were confiscated in accordance with the Benes Decrees. Most of the collections remain to this



Figure 4, Three Meissen busts of the Emperors Mathias, Joseph and Ferdinand II, from the series modelled by J.J. Kändler and P. Reinicke, circa 1745

day the property of the Czech State, but some items were disposed of in 1948 and 1949, when Just, recognising their great importance, made his last great purchases. At these auctions, Just acquired five rare and early Meissen vases. All are decorated in *Kakiemon* style, inspired by Japanese porcelain, and date to around 1730, when the fashion for such decoration at Meissen was at its peak. These vases - the largest is 26 inches high - would have been very expensive at the time, and were most likely destined for one of Augustus the Strong's palaces. Indeed, two of the vases are even marked with the "AR" monogram, for Augustus Rex. While researching this group of vases, Just discovered that the Prime Minister of Saxony, Count Brühl, made payments or gifts of porcelain (Just calls them "bribes") to Count Waldstein in 1741, which may explain how such valuable and rare pieces came into the possession of the Waldstein family in the first place.

The second important group of Meissen porcelain acquired by Just from the Waldstein collections was a set of six white portrait busts from a series depicting the Habsburg emperors, modelled in the mid 1740s by J.J. Kändler and P. Reinicke. The series was commis-

sioned by the Electress Maria Josepha of Saxony, who was herself a Habsburg and fiercely proud of her heritage. It included 17 emperors ranging from Rudolf I, who died in 1292, to the last Habsburg emperor, Charles VI (d. 1740), and his Bavarian successor, Charles VII (r. 1742-45). The only large group of these busts to survive anywhere was the twenty-two in Schloss Dux, which included several duplicates. Just speculated that they may have been a gift from the Saxon court - the Electoral couple were godparents of Count Waldstein's twin sons who were born in 1738 - or they may have been given in part payment for a collection of 268 paintings which Friedrich Augustus II, that great collector of paintings, apparently purchased from Count Waldstein in 1741. Twenty of the busts were sold at auction in Prague in May 1949. Twelve were acquired by the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, six were purchased by Rudolf Just and two by another collector.

Rudolf Just once wrote: "I am far more interested in

objects which pose not easily resolved problems than in those which everyone knows, and most wish to possess, only because they are desirable and cost a lot of money." He was a scholar/collector of wide-ranging interests whose taste was typical of the great pre-War generation of Central European collectors of the decorative arts. Indeed, he was probably the last of that tradition, and for many years his fate, and that of his collection, remained shrouded in mystery.

In 1966, Kate Foster, then a junior member of the European Ceramics Department at Sotheby's, was sent on a two-month trip to Germany and Austria to improve her German and to study the major ceramics collections in those countries. From Vienna she drove to Prague, for she had secured an introduction to Rudolf Just, who by this time was known personally by only a handful of the international collecting community. He had stopped collecting in 1949 and had devoted himself to research, though he didn't risk publication after he came under pressure from the authorities in 1962. Nevertheless, he maintained contact with old friends in Switzerland and elsewhere, and Kate Foster was able to meet him in 1966: "My

month's informal learning of German was tested then and in the ensuing four days of endless talk with this fascinating collector. He naturally wanted to know everything that had been going on in the auction world recently - what wonderful objects? And for what exorbitant prices? Which of his many friends or acquaintances had bought them? For whom? The collection was all displayed in mirror-backed floor to ceiling cases. I was introduced to the concept of the *Cabinet of Curiosities*." Just's family has described how the collection was always kept in one shuttered, inner room of the apartment, to which only the most trusted friends were admitted. Kate Foster noted: "They had listed his entire collection and he lived in permanent fear. He was sure his flat was bugged. In order to do our real talking, we had to drive out to the mountains where we were untroubled by bugging devices. There we discussed the topicalities of the world situation. He had a voracious appetite to know what was happening in the glass, porcelain, political and cultural world. He was starved of knowledge."

Upon her return to London, Kate related her experience of meeting this remarkable man to her friend and colleague, Bruce Chatwin. He had been a precocious star at Sotheby's, starting in the European

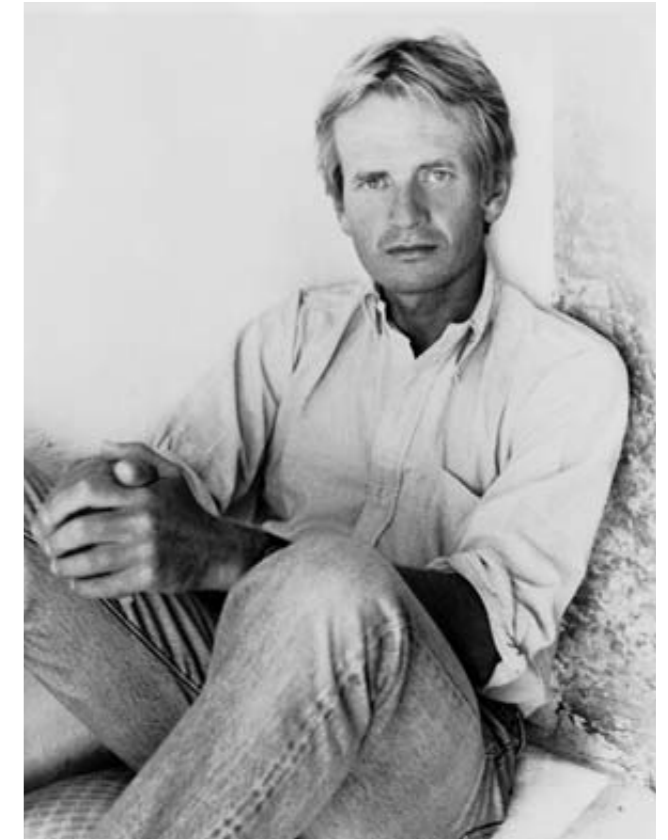


Figure 5, Bruce Chatwin

Ceramics department, progressing quickly to Antiquities, and finally to Impressionist Art, before resigning to become a full-time writer. Chatwin was already interested in the psychology of collectors, and this hidden and obsessive collector seized his imagination. He secured an introduction from Kate and travelled to Prague the following year. Unfortunately, no record has survived of the meeting between Rudolf Just and Bruce Chatwin, though Chatwin returned determined to write a book about the collector. Out of concern for Just and his family, however, Kate Foster dissuaded him from doing so, and it was only many years later, when Chatwin was ill, that he returned to the project. In the event, Kate need not have worried: "Utz" is largely fictional, though the psychology of the main character is clearly based on Rudolf Just, as are some incidents. The nature of the collection is changed too; tailored to underpin Chatwin's exploration of the nature of a truly obsessive collector.

Bruce Chatwin told one interviewer in 1988: "It's a

memoir of things that happened to me in Prague in 1967. I met a character who was a great collector of Meissen porcelain. He had shrunk his horizons down to those of his best friends, who were all porcelain figures seven inches high. He lived like a monk. It is, of course, a fantasy of people like myself to sit in a cell and never move again. That's what this man did." Chatwin had grasped the essence of Just's character as a collector, but freely altered the details of the collection to suit his fictional ends. Just owned very few figures, but Chatwin's story requires them: Utz has to be able to identify on an almost literal level with his collection. By the time Chatwin made these remarks, he may even have believed in his own mind that was what he saw that day in Prague. In fact, Chatwin probably based the fictional collection on two of the great porcelain collections of the 20th century, the Blohm and Fribourg collections, both of which were sold during his time at Sotheby's. Chatwin died the year after "Utz" was published, and for many years, only a handful of people knew the truth behind his last novel.

In late 1990, when I began work at Sotheby's in Zürich, a colleague told me an anecdote which would lead, ten years later, to the reemergence of the collection from obscurity. Seven or eight years earlier, an elderly woman had come unannounced to Sotheby's Zürich office from Prague, as she wished to sell some gold coins to purchase presents for her grandchildren. My colleague offered to assist her, and accompanied her to a nearby Bank vault, from which the coins were extracted. The incident stuck in his mind, he told me, because in conversation she mentioned that she was the owner of an important collection in Prague, which included several Augustus Rex vases. I knew nothing of Prague then, let alone any collections there, and rather frustratingly, my colleague couldn't remember the lady's name.

But for Rudolf Just's scholarship, this might have remained an intriguing anecdote. As I became familiar with the articles Just had published in the 1950s, including one on Augustus Rex vases, I began to assume that the lady must have been a relation. Kate Foster also told me once how Just had inspired Chatwin's final novel, and together we would wonder what had become of the collection. The answer only began to emerge in early 1999, when in Prague I met an elderly lady who had known Just decades earlier. Collectors had to be extremely secretive, she explained, for fear of attracting the attention of the authorities, as Just found to his cost. The head of Sotheby's Prague office,

Filip Marco, and I then resolved to discover at least the fate of the collection. Just's old friends in Switzerland remembered him, of course, and even supplied the address. But inquiries at Lodecka Street proved fruitless, and the more we inquired, the more mysterious it all became. Nobody at all seemed to know what had become either of the family or the collection. Nor was there any evidence of a sale, and the collection certainly wasn't in the museum, as Chatwin had already discovered when he revisited Prague in 1982.

Again, the story might have ended there, were it not for a chance remark by a dealer at the Prague Antiques Fair that Autumn. The day before, a certain person from Bratislava had offered him some pieces from the Just collection. Was he a family member or their agent? Again, nobody knew, or was prepared to tell us. Filip persevered with his inquiries, this time in Slovakia, and eventually discovered the address of Just's son, who lived in Bratislava. His letter of introduction remained unanswered for one month, and just as we began to give up hope for the last time, two members of the Just family arrived unannounced in our office in Prague. We arranged to meet them one month later, in April 2000, in Bratislava, and they led us to a small apartment on the 12th floor of one of the many tower blocks on the outskirts of the city. There they told us the story of Rudolf Just's life; how, after his death the authorities had not sought to claim his collection as the "property of the people", how his widow had remained with the collection in their Prague apartment, and how their eldest grandson moved in when he began his studies at Prague University. At the beginning of the 1990s, a series of tragedies struck the family: Just's widow and their son died, and his grandson was murdered in Prague by criminals who had heard rumours of a valuable collection hidden in Lodecka Street.

As a consequence of this tragedy, Just's remaining family moved the collection to their house in Bratislava in great secrecy, and following a series of break-ins there, to the relative safety of the top floor of this tower block. Although the flat was quite small, I couldn't see anything which might have belonged to Just, and felt sure that they were about to relate how they had disposed of the collection. Instead, to my amazement, Just's surviving grandson pulled a cardboard box from under the sofa in which was hidden a rare Du Paquier vase wrapped in newspapers. And so it began: he next hauled in a wicker washing basket in which was hidden, wrapped like a corpse in old clothes, a massive Meissen vase. For the next days

they showed me how they had hidden over 300 objects in this small flat, in boxes, under beds, in suitcases and behind the bookshelf. I hadn't expected to find anything there, but it turned out to be the bulk of the collection which had been hidden and protected by Rudolf Just and his heirs, at unimaginable cost, for over fifty years.

There was one more surprise, however. Just's grandson showed me a key he had discovered among his grandmother's effects. He didn't know what it was for, but I recalled the anecdote my Zürich colleague had told me ten years earlier, and one month later, it proved to be the key to the safety-deposit box in the vaults of the Swiss Bank Corporation in Zürich. To everybody's surprise, it contained a collection of over 90

Bohemian gold coins of the 17th century, worth around \$450,000, the final and most secret part of Rudolf Just's collection. His family quickly resolved to sell the collection. They had known nothing of Bruce Chatwin and "Utz", and while they had sought to protect Just's legacy in great secrecy, it had brought tragedy upon them and become a terrible burden. They also felt that Just would have been the first to wish for its dispersal, so that new collectors would have the opportunity to own and study the pieces as he had done. In a neat closing of the circle, of which Bruce Chatwin would have no doubt approved, the collection was sold by Sotheby's in London in December 2001.³



Figure 6, A selection of multiple ducats of the Holy Roman Empire struck during the 17th century.

NOTES

1. This account is largely based upon information supplied by Rudolf Just's family, who also made his correspondence and collection notes available for study. I am also most grateful to Lady Kate Davson, who generously shared her recollections of meeting Rudolf Just and of his collection.
2. The following account of Rudolf Just's collection is based his own unpublished eleven-volume catalogue. I am most grateful to the Just family for making this available for study.
3. "The Rudolf Just Collection", Sotheby's London, 11th December 2001