Patricia Naatz on plans for a gallery which may see the city eclipse other art centres

Cologne is catapulted to the top

Last November, the arts world in Germany was thrown into turmoil. Cologne, the cultural metropolis of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, had clinched a controversial deal.

Peter Ludwig, the world-renowned art collector, who originally made his fortune manufacturing chocolate, gave the city of Cologne 90 Picasso paintings and more than 80 works by other top 20th century artists. These complemented a large number of Mr Ludwig's pictures already on permanent loan.

The news turned Cologne's art rivals in Germany and across the world green with envy. However, museum directors and art galleries in Cologne turned pale at the conditions attached to the gift.

Mr Ludwig insists that the Picassos and associated loans should occupy the entire space of what is now a combined museum, the Wallraf-Richartz Museum/Museum Ludwig, a modern gallery next to Cologne's medieval cathedral. The museum would then be called the Ludwig Museum.

This means a new home must be built for the Wallraf-Richartz collection – priceless works ranging from the Renaissance to the Impressionists – that will be displaced by Mr Ludwig's collection. To receive Mr Ludwig's gift, building work on the new museum must be under way by 1997.

The request stunned the city authorities – Cologne's financial coffers are almost empty – nevertheless, the offer was too good to turn down.

After heated debate, and promises by the state of North Rhine-Westphalia of financial support, agreement to build the museum was secured. By the end of June it is to be decided where the new museum will be located.

The new building is expected to take a large slice out of the city's cultural budget for museums.

The city is well endowed with arts institutions. With a population of 1m, Cologne, has eight museums, 120 art galleries and one exhibition hall. The latter is used by the museums to organise big art shows.

This rich variety of exhibition venues and museums has catapulted Cologne into the ranks of the world's top art centres, together with New York and Paris. Indeed, today Cologne is renowned mainly for its collections and exhibitions of modern art.

Private collectors have played a large part in this. Ferdinand Franz Wallraf donated his entire collection to Cologne in 1824, again under the condition that a museum be built for it. Thirty years later, Johann Heinrich Richartz, another art collector, financed Cologne's biggest museum which was named the Wallraf-Richartz Museum.

In 1978, Mr Ludwig donated a collection of modern art to the city, but it was not until 1986 that Cologne completed a new museum, combining his collection with the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in the adjoining Ludwig Museum.

Aside from the high cost of building the new museum Mr Ludwig's gift has provoked much controversy. Critics accuse Mr Ludwig, who has amassed one of the biggest private collections in the world, of megalomania and cultural imperialism and say the influence that he has extracted from the deal exceeds its market value.

But others believe the project complements Cologne's reputation as an art centre. "It has not deflected from Cologne's status as a city with a cosmopolitan and tolerant atmosphere which gives an artist total freedom to work," says Peter Krueger, an artist who a few years ago moved to the city from Berlin.

Mr Krueger also finds the public is receptive to experimental arts. This may explain why Cologne has attracted about 2,000 artists who work and live in the city. Officials at the city council's cultural department try and support young artists by seeking cheap studios and workshops for them.

Another gallery owner who moved from Munich to Cologne was Diana Hohenthal. She runs the Hohenthal and Berger gallery which specialises in avant-garde and less well-known, or unknown talent, and which makes a point of participating in the annual week-long Cologne art fair.

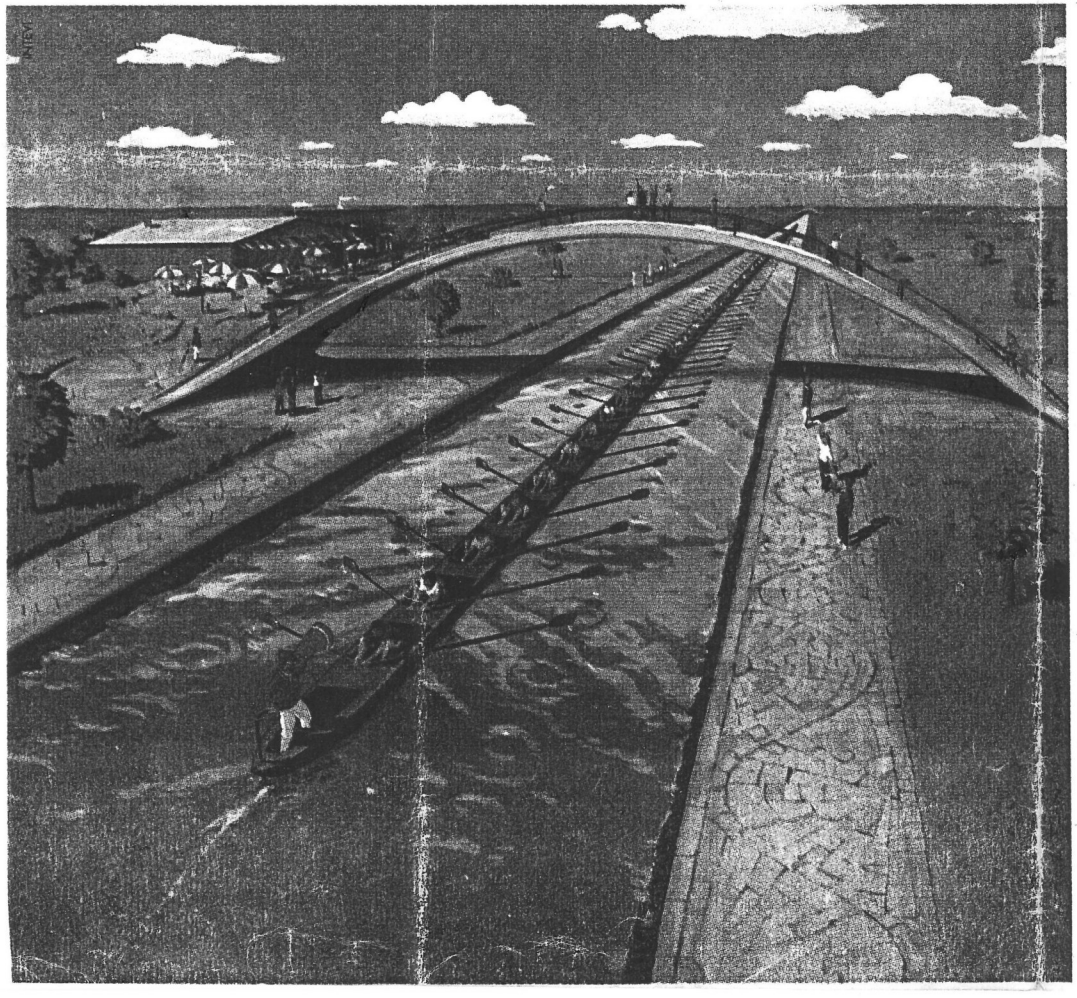
These fairs have a long tradition in Cologne. The first was held in 1967 by Hein Stünke, owner of the Der Spiegel gallery, at the Gürzenich, an historic hall in the old part of the city.

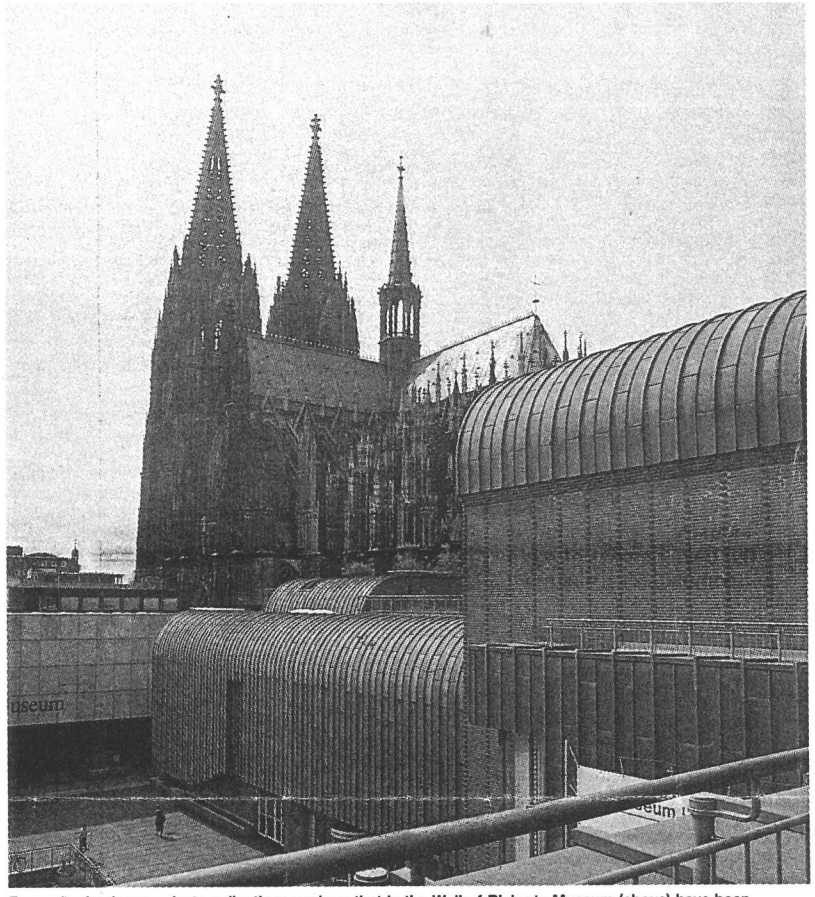
Mr Stünke was joined by gallery owners Rudolf Zwirner and Rudolf Springer who founded the Association of German Art Dealers.

After the first successful fair at the Gürzenich hall, it was moved to the Cologne Exhibition Hall. At the same time, the goals of the fair were clearly defined. Priority should always be given to quality from yesterday and a careful selection of the best contemporary art.

As the interest in the city's arts fair increased, so, too, did the demand for space. In 1974, the fair moved to the Cologne Fair Centre and 14 non-German galleries participated. A year later, the Düsseldorf and Cologne arts fairs merged, each alternating the venue until 1983, when the Association of German Art Dealers chose Cologne as the permanent location for the fair, along with a new name for it: Art Cologne.

The fair has since become the most important art fair in the German-speaking world after that of Basle. Last year, 323 galleries from 22 countries participated. One gallery sold an Oskar Schlemmer for DM1.6m. While dealers saw this as a sign that the art market was picking up again, the sale also reaffirmed Cologne's position at the centre of the international art world.





Expensive business: private collections such as that in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum (above) have been donated on the condition that museums be built specially to house them *Sarah Murray*