

a PASSION for ART

Everyone collects. It's human nature. But how to begin?

by Ron Shipmon

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Art collectors are as diverse as the objects of their desire. Some amass cookie jars, others Old Master drawings. What and how people procure depends upon personal taste and situation in life. Many follow their instincts and independently pursue their interests; many more turn to connoisseurs for guidance. Here, a cross section of New York's distinguished purveyors of art and antiques share inside information about the nuances of collecting, including how several of them made the leap from lay people to respected professionals.

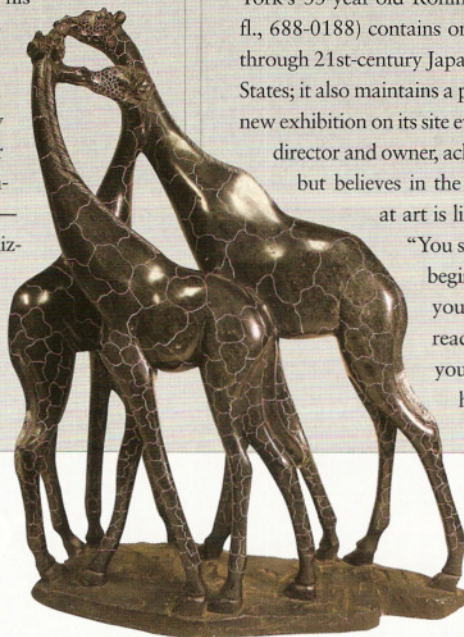
"In my case, running a gallery happened by accident," states South African-born Brian Gaisford, owner of Hemingway African Gallery, housed in the Manhattan Art & Antiques Center (Galleries 96 & 97, 1050 Second Ave., 838-3650), a complex containing more than 100 dealers. "Thirty years ago, Gregory Hemingway, a son of Ernest Hemingway, asked me to arrange a party to celebrate the release of his book about his father, *Papa: A Personal Memoir*. We filled a space with paintings by an artist from Soweto. By the end of the evening, all the paintings had been sold, and Hemingway African Gallery was born. I have great love for my native country as well as my adopted country of America. Choosing my gallery's mission—importing original art from Africa and organizing safaris there—was an easy decision."

Jean Schaefer, co-owner of Flying Cranes Antiques, also located in the Manhattan Art & Antiques Center (Galleries 55, 56 & 58, 223-4600), agrees: "Passion makes

choosing a gallery's mission simple." How she became a leading specialist in Meiji period artworks from the golden age of Japan (1880-1912) is a fascinating story. "Many years ago, my husband, Clifford, and I were strolling through shops looking for items to furnish our recently purchased country house. We spied a Japanese vase and bought it for \$22. Once home, Cliff cleaned the vase and discovered that the brilliant surface under all the dust was cloisonné. Curious about the material, we embarked on a journey of detailed research about Asian art. We've been on that journey for more than 30 years, as collectors and gallery owners. And, yes, we still have the vase."

Thanks to the Internet, the "business" of collecting has changed dramatically. Speed is of the essence, with objects being bought and dispatched with the click of a mouse. However, surfing the Web is a poor substitute for a visit to a gallery. New York's 33-year-old Ronin Gallery (425 Madison Ave., 10th fl., 688-0188) contains one of the largest gatherings of 17th-through 21st-century Japanese woodblock prints in the United States; it also maintains a presence on the Web, where it posts a new exhibition on its site every two weeks. Roni Neuer, Ronin's director and owner, acknowledges her firm's online success, but believes in the personal approach, too. "Looking at art is like looking at gemstones," she says.

"You see a diamond, then another and you begin to make comparisons. That's what you do in a gallery. You can learn by reading a book, but if you come here, you'll learn even more when you hold hundreds of prints up close."



RIGHT: THIS BLACK SERPENTINE STONE SCULPTURE OF A TRIO OF GIRAFFES, CRAFTED BY THE SHONA TRIBE IN ZIMBABWE, IS REPRESENTATIVE OF THE ART SOLD AT MIDTOWN'S HEMINGWAY AFRICAN GALLERY.

FACING PAGE: AN ECCENTRIC ROOTWOOD SCULPTURE OF A TREE, DATING FROM THE 18TH-19TH CENTURY, STANDS OUT AMONG THE MANY EXQUISITE CHINESE SCHOLAR'S OBJECTS AT CHINA 2000 FINE ART.



To make the learning experience as seductive as possible, Axelle Fine Arts (547 W. 20th St., 226-2262), which recently moved from SoHo to Chelsea—where there are more than 370 galleries—has created an inviting ambience. “We want to encourage people to come in,” says gallery manager Timothy Smith. That’s why Axelle has outfitted its new space with couches, chairs, flowers and background music. “It’s almost like a lounge,” Smith says—a lounge appointed with painterly realistic works by contemporary European, American and especially French artists, who reflect Owner Bertrand Delacroix’s nationality as well as his personal taste.

Other establishments attract clients by the sheer breadth of their offerings. At The Showplace Antique Center (40 W. 25th St., 633-6063), seasoned and new collectors are exposed to three floors of collectibles, priced from a few dollars up to \$50,000. “It’s a good place to catch the collecting bug and get a foothold in the field,” says Max Wolf, director of auctions and marketing. Antiques and decorative arts, from high end to low end, from antiquities to vintage purses, are displayed in room settings throughout the building.

Mid-20th-century furniture sells well at the encyclopedic Showplace. It is a discipline that Sanford Smith, whose firm produces and manages several boutique art and antiques fairs throughout the year, has pioneered. Smith’s personal collection embraces works by Reginald Marsh, George Bellows, Charles Burchfield and Thomas Hart Benton; this month, his two fairs—Art 20 (Nov. 9-12) and Modernism (Nov. 16-19)—turn the spotlight on museum-quality pieces of the last century, from Arts and Crafts pottery to a one-of-a-kind 1981 Chanel bracelet. Dozens of international dealers show at each, and both are held at the Park Avenue Armory (Park Ave., at E. 67th St., 777-5218). “The best source of information is talking to a dealer,” Smith contends. “Dealers are passionate about what they do, and that passion translates into a willingness to educate.”

Educating its client base is essential to a gallery’s success. “Our collectors really like abstract work,” says Jason Bowman, director of the Fountain Gallery (702 Ninth Ave., 262-2756), which represents self-taught artists living and working with mental illness. “The raw, emotional, fragmented and very personal nature of the work is what appeals to them.”

BORN IN LISIEUX, FRANCE, AND CLASSICALLY TRAINED AT THE LONDON ACADEMY OF DRAWING AND THE ÉCOLE SUPÉRIEURE DES BEAUX-ARTS IN PARIS, PHILIPPE VASSEUR IS AMONG THE SHINING LIGHTS AT AXELLE FINE ARTS, WHERE HIS OIL ON CANVAS, “DEUX BARQUES” (ABOVE), IS ON VIEW.



Anastasia Starr, artistic director of the Coda Gallery (472 Broome St., 334-0407), also recognizes that one of the hottest trends today is the fragmented painting, a single work composed of a multitude of separate elements. "Coda appeals to the eclectic collector because it presents a great variety of styles under one roof," says Starr. "If we can inspire people to create their own art once they have visited us, so much the better."

While some galleries foster trends, others, such as CFM (112 Greene St., 966-3864), refute them. "CFM pays no attention to what is 'hot.' Rather, we sell and promote art that we believe in," says director and owner Neil Zukerman. That means original paintings, sculpture and graphics by dead artists Leonor Fini and Salvador Dali, in addition to works by living artists Anne Bachelier, Michael Parkes and others. "We discourage the sale and purchase of computer- and photo-generated multiples," Zukerman insists.

Just as a real-estate broker considers "location, location, location" above all else, a rare book dealer's mantra is "condition, condition, condition." When determining a book's value,

Erik DuRon, gallery manager of Bauman Rare Books (535 Madison Ave., 751-0011), explains that there are strict industry guidelines for accurately defining the condition of a book. "Prices of the same book may vary because there are rarely two copies of it in identical condition," he says. "The most valuable copy of a particular title is generally the one closest to its original state: clean, crisp, possibly even unopened and unread."

Karen and Leon Wender of China 2000 Fine Art (5 E. 57th St., 588-1198), a repository of ancient and modern Chinese painting, calligraphy and furniture, advise collectors to purchase "the best quality within their price range and always with an open heart and mind." Authenticity, rarity, condition, provenance and value are their golden rules of thumb.

When the subject of art as an investment is mentioned, Howard Rehs, director of Rehs Galleries (5 E. 57th St., 355-5710), whose inventory includes 19th- and early-20th-century European and British academic paintings, smiles. "Great original art is always a wise investment," he says. "But living with beautiful things yields the passionate collector even greater returns."



ABOVE: "LET YOUR PASSION GUIDE YOU," ADVISES HOWARD REHS OF REHS GALLERIES; HIS PASSION FOR ACADEMIC ART HAS LED HIM TO JEAN B.C. COROT'S "VILLE D'AVRAY," C. 1855-60. RIGHT: MEIJI-PERIOD MASTERWORKS AT FLYING CRANES INCLUDE THIS BRONZE KORO.