



APPRECIATIONS: REFLECTIONS ON COLLECTING



NOT ONLY is Le Veau d'Or an ideal restaurant in which to conduct a civilized conversation with others, it is also one of the few New York restaurants in which it is possible to conduct a civilized conversation with oneself, to be left alone with one's thoughts, a book or periodical or the contemplation of one's fellow diners. Not long ago, following an appointment in midtown that ended earlier than expected, and feeling no need to hurry back to Brooklyn, I strolled a block or two to "the Veau," and after exchanging pleasantries with Catherine Treboux, the restaurant's soigneur proprietor, was seated. After ordering, I found myself reflecting on a conversation I'd had with an old friend, the esteemed publisher of this magazine, a week or so earlier.

The subject was collecting. Well, buying art generally. With high-priced housing changing hands at the rate, and at the levels, it has been, we agreed there's an awful lot of premium wallspace out there begging to be filled, a multimillion-square foot tabula rasa that must have the art trade licking its lips.

Given the state of the art world today, what will likely go on these empty walls? Some will opt for minimalism—white walls, a few big paintings, perhaps a Chamberlain or Koons sculpture—while others may pursue a New World version of the Old World luxe with which the late Roberto de Balkany surrounded himself. Big money will be spent—mainly as a matter of ego—at auction on the current "must-haves":

This page: Inside the luxurious world of the passionate collector Robert Zelliger de Balkany.

Christopher Wool, Richter etc. In my view, even if I had the lucre, I wouldn't spend it on these. I couldn't get through the Richter show at MoMA a few years ago and I simply don't see the point or merit of Wool. When people ask me if I think this art merits such stratospheric prices, I generally quote a seasoned observer who, twenty-odd years ago, was asked the same question about an art boom then roaring away like Hurricane Matthew. "It's not that the art isn't worth the money," he replied. "It's that the money isn't worth the money."

So let's suppose you want to get into art—but in search of satisfactions more for the eye than the ego: if you're willing or obliged to forego being able to boast that the names on your walls are the same for which hedge-fund squillionaires and Arab sheikhs have also forked over tens of millions of dollars. Suppose what you want from the art you'll be buying, at least initially, is personal gratification rooted in yourself. There's a lot of aesthetic truth in that hoary statement, "I don't know anything about art, but I know what I like." Hell, if you know what you like, you're halfway home.

Take me. I like yellow. If a work contains a brilliant yellow passage, I'm like Proust's character Bergotte, the ailing writer who, in *La Prisonniere*, leaves his Paris home for the first time in months to visit an exhibition of Dutch painting at the Louvre, specifically to see Vermeer's *View of Delft*, which a critic has remarked contains "a little patch of yellow wall" of especial beauty. Bergotte settles himself before the picture, and focuses on the small yellow patch with such intensity that he has a stroke and dies on the spot. I'm not sure I want my own susceptibility to this particular to take me that far, but I'll chance it.

Different strokes for different folks, of course. My son Jeffrey, who has operated successful galleries in SoHo and, lately, in Portland OR, has supplied me with the following taxonomy of collectors: the Hoarder (focus on quantity); the Trophy-Hunter (focus on status climbing); the Steward (preservation of family treasure); the Patron (advocacy for the artist); the Speculector (in it to flip it); the Obsessive (goes deep with



This page: Crucifixion, painted in the late 1340s by the Sienese painter Pietro Lorenzetti.

just one artist); the Compulsive (goes for one of everything); the Churchmouse (good eye but frugal, needs layaway plan terms); the Doubledowner (buys two of the same artist: one to keep and one to sell); the Decorator (needs artwork to match the interior decor); the Miniature-ist (buys only small works of art); the Medium Maven (buys only certain kinds of media: glass, ceramic, prints).

Now, no matter which of these categories you feel you fall into—at different times in my own art-buying life, I've fitted into several—I think that all of us, if we're the least bit serious, start with the proposition that we have to like what we're thinking of acquiring. As the man says, no matter how much you can afford to pay, it's gotta look good. Only once in my life have I disregard-

ed that precept. It was close to thirty years ago, and involved a drawing by Lucian Freud. I didn't like the drawing, but I was seized by a blast of Scrooge McDuck Syndrome—the pupils of my eyes turned into dollar signs—because I smelled a Freud boom a-building and thought, here's a chance to turn a quick buck. I should add that this drawing was made early in Freud's career and that it lacked the visual characteristics that would eventually make this artist one of the most esteemed and sought-after painters of our time (deservedly so, in my judgment).

Anyway, a few years later, in consequence of a marital misadventure, I had to sell the drawing—and got for it several times what I'd originally paid (and would have gotten exponentially more



This page: Interior of the Artist's Studio by John Frederick Lewis, with its lovely yellow robe.

had I been able to hang on for a decade longer). But here's the thing: I wasn't really sorry to see it go, and I haven't missed it since.

So I urge that the beginning art-buyer start with the eye. Go with what is in tune with your preferences. I like my art neat and clean. No scumbles, please. I like landscapes, seascapes especially, and still-life. I'm a sucker for technique, collage lights me up. The way I live requires that the scale of the work be livable. I think that "mix and match" is tricky; putting a small object—a Meissen figurine, say—in front of a big, vivid abstract-impressionist canvas, may sound conceptually appealing, but visually it looks lousy, does neither work any favors—and art exists to be looked at. And here's another tip: stick to your price points. We all have certain styles and subjects and connections that we like better than others, and if you get out and about, chances are—I'm assuming that what matters most is what's on the canvas, and not the name on the label—you'll find acceptably-priced work that gives as much visual pleasure as the famous names that have the parasites oohing and aahing over plastic cups of Chardonnay at MoMA openings. And you'll have saved yourself a bunch of zeros. Of course there will always be exceptions. Nobody does Basquiat like Basquiat. I think he's a wonderful painter, the natural heir to

Dubuffet, who I also love.

If I was given the run of the city's public and private collections, allowed to select and take home a single work, I would unhesitatingly chose a small gold-ground *Crucifixion*, painted in the late 1340s by the Sienese painter Pietro Lorenzetti (active 1320-44). What a wonderful little painting! It owns whatever wall it's hanging on (which, sadly, will never be mine); the color scheme, the gold, the scarlet, the wonderful rich yellow of a cloak, is as seductive as it brilliant; it's in fabulous condition; it's the right size, intimate yet monumental; the technique is amazing; it perfectly encapsulates its era; I can read about it—and I can look at it for hours, or pass by it with barely a glance—just letting it push the visual memory button, and that's important to me, an old Yale art history major; it evokes other delectable associations: the painting belonged at one time to the French artist Paul Delaroche, who almost five hundred years later created two of the most indelible images drawn from English history: *The Princes in the Tower* and *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*. I like anything that sends me wandering through the thickets of Wikipedia. After the Lorenzetti, next in line for my Christmas stocking would be a couple of small Constellations by Joan Miro that an art-dealer friend owns in his personal collection.

Beautiful, imaginative, rhythmic. You just want to eat them!

Of course, all of this begs the question, what am I doing for myself lately?

Well, let's start with Mary Henry (1913-2009), a little-known—hell, virtually unknown!—Portland artist: a beguiling hard-edged abstractionist who studied with Moholy-Nagy in Chicago (he's just had a huge, important show at the Art Institute) but didn't herself become a serious working artist until in her mid-fifties. I was introduced to her work by Jeffrey, my son, who's representing her archive and estate, and I really liked what I saw, so I bought a small colored drawing. It's in our apartment next to a single brilliant page from an Italian illuminated manuscript that I think must have been done around 1470. Mary Henry more than holds her own; she and the manuscript page complement each other beautifully. Neither cost a lot of money – and it's fun to acquire work by an artist who's both really good and almost totally unrecognized, who hasn't yet been given the treatment I think of as "the full frontal Chelsea."

This year, it's happened with Alma Thomas; next year it could happen with Mary Henry.

Moving on: Quest readers may recall a profile in these pages of Cecily Langdale and the gallery she founded with her late husband Roy Davis. Given my resources, my taste and my age, as long as Davis & Langdale is around, I don't need another gallery to turn to. Well, they've struck again. A recent online announcement of an upcoming show of recent acquisitions offered a click-through to a few images of works from the show. One of these was *The Artist's Studio*, a small watercolor by the Victorian painter John Frederick Lewis (1804-1876), an artist principally known (and price-driven) for his oil paintings of Middle Eastern (what are also called "Orientalist") scenes. It's a small work, just my size, and its principal feature is a bright yellow robe casually tossed over the back of a chair. Moreover, it fits perfectly with two other of my happiest acquisitions. One is a glorious still-life by Antoine Vollon (1833-1900), sometimes called "the Chardin of the 19th Century, dating

COURTESY OF DAVIS & LANGDALE COMPANY

from around 1870, that remains a delight to behold even considering what a bust it's been as an investment (odd, considering that it was successively owned by the Havemeyers and Chester Dale, among the brightest jewels in the diadem of American collecting). The other is a large, fine, detailed gouache still-life of the Earl of Derby's books painted in 1888 by Benjamin Walter Spiers (1845-1894). Adding the Lewis would result in the kind of three-way I'm still capable of enjoying.

Still, I'm on tenterhooks about the Lewis. I firmly believe in what must be the collector's overriding credo: never spend on others what one can spend on oneself. But I do have a family: a devoted wife, six sons and daughters, a passel of grandkids – not to mention the need to reconcile my financial situation with the actuarial table. It's a tough call. By the time this is printed, a decision will have

to have been made. Watch this space.

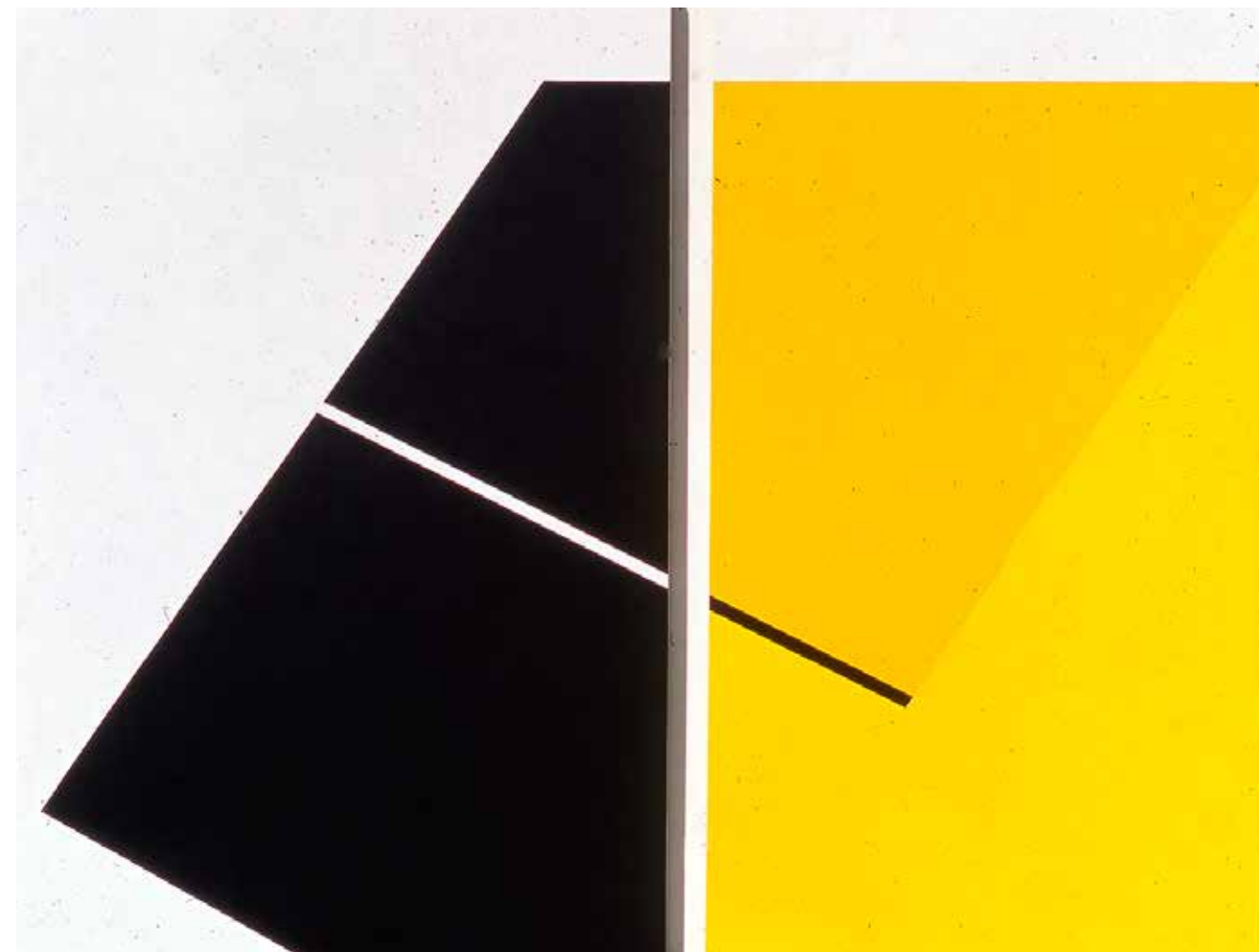
And so, as T.S.Eliot wrote, "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." Look, this art game is mainly a matter of confidence. It's a field in which expert opinions, golden or otherwise, can be bought for ready money. There are art advisors; there are galleries and art fairs at all price points (although I fear that William Drummond's Covent Garden Gallery—"art for the impecunious collector"—may no longer be around); there are auction-house smoothies. The problem is, you never really know whose hand is in which pot, who's getting paid off by whom.

Of course there are some matters where scholarly expertise is advisable, even essential: issues of authenticity, condition and provenance. Mostly, however, what you'll be told gushes

from founts of received opinion; if you're completely at sea, you'll be better off to enlist a good decorator to find you art that will work well with the carpet intended for the drawing-room.

And, finally, there are the critics, but here, fair warning! These are people by and large who look at art in terms of what they can say about it, what will burnish their own oracular standing, will establish them as king-makers (or -breakers). As I once told a leading critic, "You've got to stop looking at pictures with your mouth." The thing is to look—then see—then enjoy. Art can be a tough roommate. Demanding, insistent, intrusive. No one wants to spend time looking over their shoulder at a wall and thinking "Why the hell did I buy that?" Or worse: "Why the hell did I let myself be talked into buying that?" Bottom line: decide how much to spend and then do your own thing. ♦

This page: A piece by Mary Henry, an abstractionist painter from Portland, Oregon, whose work the author was introduced to by his son Jeffrey.



COURTESY OF JEFFREY THOMAS FINE ART