

Interview between ArtTable Executive Director Ada Ciniglio and ArtTable Honoree Marguerite Steed Hoffman

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Ada Ciniglio: In conversation, you've described to me the joy you take in collecting art. Can you tell us about how all this started, what motivates you as a collector, and what collecting means to you today?

Marguerite Steed Hoffman: When I think about myself as a collector and measure my contributions in this area against some of your past award recipients or other incredible collectors that I am privileged to know, I become rather humbled and self-conscious. I am not the most studious or rigorous collector nor am I adding to the overall field of knowledge in any kind of real way. Neither could I claim connoisseurship in any area. Collecting for me is completely personal and almost exclusively a private action during the acquisition stage. My interests have always sprung from a deep curiosity about the human creative impulse, manifested in various guises and at various times and places. While I would like to believe that this approach has general validity, it remains primarily an exercise in finding meaning for myself through these choices. I am a self-described joyful collector, and an amateur at that, so I am glad that feeling of exuberance came through when we spoke about this subject.

As a young person growing up in a small town in Oklahoma, my experiences with art were limited. But every summer I would visit my grandparents in Washington, DC, and because my grandmother grew tired of shepherding me around, once she realized that I loved the National Gallery of Art, that is where she took me every day. She packed me a lunch and dropped me off, and I was left on my own to wander the galleries for hours. To this day, I can walk those spaces and still feel the pull of wanting to know everything about the remarkable works of art assembled there. Another aspect of that early experience was the beginning of an awareness of how private collections can form the nucleus of great museums and how important it is for individuals to have access to significant works of art via public institutions. Those lessons were formative for me in determining how I view the ultimate mission of art collecting.

AC: You have assembled collections of wonderful and memorable work. What pieces that you have chosen over the years have a particular resonance for you and why? Do you still have them? Or have you given them away?

MSH: In a sense, all the work that I collect has the future possibility of being "given away" because of the bequest that my late husband, Robert, and I made in collaboration with our friends the Rachofskys and the Roses to the Dallas Museum of Art (DMA). The nature of the bequest allows the collector lifetime control over each object and the freedom to modify the collection, but it also clearly spells out that should the proverbial bus hit me when I leave this

luncheon, everything that comprises my contemporary collection at this moment, goes to the DMA. I am thrilled to have that part of my life figured out and it helps to make the activity of collecting more peaceful for me. That understood, there are pieces that I have already given or promised to the museum for various reasons and those “real time” gifts have a special place in my heart. My hope is that most of the major works in the collection will ultimately go to the museum in honor of a specific person that I associate with a particular piece of art. I have been so fortunate to share my art journey with very special people, and this is one way I have to say thank-you to them for their lifetime of generosity to me.

I find that one’s need for certain works of art varies depending on the particular circumstances of our lives. There are times when I absolutely must see Richter’s *Double Candles*, so I hang it where I see it daily. Or there are moments when I benefit from looking more closely at an early work by Jasper Johns or Cy Twombly. There are messages embedded in these works that I value. I have experienced other periods when I am drawn in a deep and profound way to art produced by women, and I install works that demonstrate the balance of strength and vulnerability that comes across so beautifully in many pieces done by women artists. Finally, I had an incredible love affair with my husband and fellow collector, Robert, and there have been years when I just needed to hang out with works that he and I acquired together or, conversely, with pieces that I purchased after his death that I felt honored our time together like Robert Gober’s *Two Doors*. I view the privilege of living with art akin to walking into a visual diary and that concern for personal revelation trumps everything else in terms of selection, installation, and enjoyment.

I am particularly energized and enthusiastic about life right now. It will be interesting to see how the collection reflects that in terms of acquisitions and installations. It will be fun to see what emerges from this hard won contentment!

AC: Your personal collection is described as including contemporary, postwar-American, and European art as well as Chinese monochromes and now illuminated medieval manuscripts. How has this come about?

MSH: The manuscripts are like returning home in a way. I studied medieval art in graduate school and have always enjoyed the art and architecture of that period, but it wasn’t until I went to Maastricht a few years ago that I became deeply engaged in appreciating the artistic qualities of Books of Hours from the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. These handheld works of art are so intimate and private and provide a real foil to the larger and more robust contemporary art that I also live with.

AC: You have made gifts of various kinds—two recent examples include an endowment fund for acquisitions at the Dallas Museum of Art for European art prior to 1700 and support for the newly designed study center at the soon-to-be-

reopened Harvard Art Museums. How do you choose your focus as a philanthropist?

MSH: I think some people would suggest that I am more than a bit unfocused! But, I do think there is a madcap method to my philanthropic efforts, and I should stress that the cultural dimension of my giving is hopefully complemented by my efforts in the fields of global health, public media, and women's reproductive rights. It is all part of the same soup, the same impulse, which is about trying to leverage the things I have and know for the benefit of humanity, or a tiny subset of humanity. My desire to participate in various causes and concerns vastly outstrips my resources, so a bit of discernment is helpful in making decisions. I pay attention to areas where the playing field is inherently uneven and try to smooth out the bumps where possible. Making a connection through our shared humanity, our plights and our opportunities, is compelling to me. Moreover, I find it is important to at least pretend as if my gift will be strategic and accomplish something larger than the gift itself. Finally, I love to invest with my friends in areas of mutual concern, and I am almost always seduced by big minds and big hearts. I love to help people I admire accomplish things that they feel strongly about. Doesn't get much better than that for me.

AC: What is your view of the widely held belief that art journalism is increasingly focused on the art market—investment, spectacle, trends, and celebrity—as opposed to the art itself?

MSH: Generally, and sadly, I concur with this characterization about the quality of art journalism. It is not surprising to me that there is lots of interest regarding the art market; the price levels for blue-chip art in every collecting category make that too tantalizing to forgo for most reporters. The personalities and proclivities of the collectors are often too captivating to escape the reporters' comments as well. But this type of coverage has nothing to do with art itself and should never be confused with art criticism. One has to understand the purpose of what is being written and the audience it is intended for, and the reader must use his or her discretion on weighing the information offered. Some of it is interesting or useful; much of it is flabby and inaccurate. More often than we like, it can actually be destructive.

All that aside, there are many people who write beautifully about objects of art and when I get a glimpse of that perspective, it is exhilarating. The other day I received a short text describing an ancient wine vessel recently seen at auction from a person whose eyes and mind I pay attention to. He commented that the object, which dated from the eleventh century BCE, was "still spitting energy after all those years" and I immediately sensed what the writer was feeling as he stood in awe in front of this bronze masterpiece. Of course, those observations come from a lifetime of looking closely and carefully, a practice that we should all cultivate if we want to communicate more clearly what we are thinking about art

in general. And that practice requires slowing down, which is the hardest part for most of us.

AC: What do you see as the civic responsibility of a collector?

MSH: In my mind, being a collector is a private activity, while being a person concerned with the social fabric of our interconnected world is quite another. Ideally, a large overlap exists between the two realms and powerful things happen. In Dallas, my dearest “art” friends are also intimately engaged in thinking and working towards a better community for all of the citizens of our city. Much of this has to do with making sure our cultural institutions are as strong as possible for as long as possible for as many as possible. This is engagement that is visionary and critical for our society. To the extent that any of us as collectors can enhance our communities by sharing our collections with a broader public in a meaningful way, I salute that and encourage us to do so. But that is quite a different exercise from collecting, per se. Collecting is an activity that I believe should have a niche all its own—a series of moments where the enjoyment of a single work of art is relieved of any other demand.

AC: You collaborated with your late husband in the areas of collecting and philanthropy. How would you describe this new phase of your life as a collector on your own?

MSH: Hopefully the values that we identified as a couple regarding quality as well as our mutual desire to live with objects that transcend place and time and that provide more questions than answers, are still ones that resonate with my solo collecting activities. But, if I were looking for areas of difference, I would suggest that I probably take more risks in terms of acquisitions, am excited to push the boundaries of the collection a bit more, and certainly am more willing to be financially uncomfortable because of a “must have” acquisition. Robert was very disciplined; I am not disciplined enough. He came at collecting through his capacious mind; I stumble around being led by my eyes and heart. We had a great partnership and our time together gave me the building blocks, the courage and the desire to continue participating in the world of art appreciation and art markets. I will be forever grateful for those years, as I am extraordinarily grateful for this moment and the opportunity to contribute on my own, pointing my bow in a slightly different direction.