

As seen in the
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 AMERICAN
art COLLECTOR





Through the arch from the living room, *Inspiration* (2001) by Mikel Olazabal; *Summer's Music* (1998) by Ramiro, and his *Pilgrim of the Night* (2008). To the right of the doorway is *Fall Bounty* (2008) by Sarah Lamb.

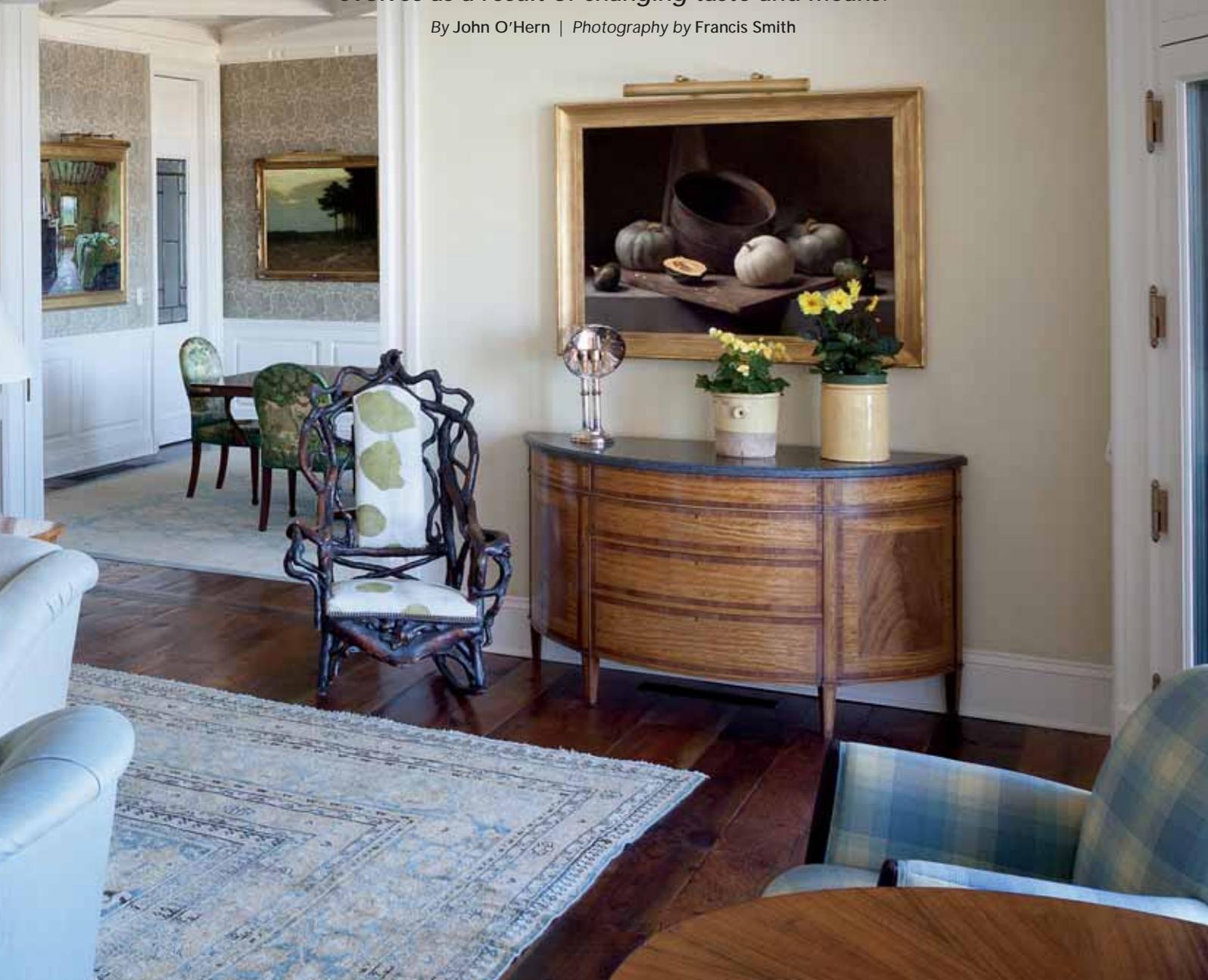


A FLUID COLLECTION



*The art collection of these Long Island residents
evolves as a result of changing taste and means.*

By John O'Hern | Photography by Francis Smith





Charles Warren Eaton's (1857-1937) *Mystic Moonlight* hangs in the dining room; *Hope* (2006) by Paul McCormack is through the doorway. To the right is Ben Fenske's *Bedroom II* (2008).

Our collector on Long Island was brought up in a family of artists but says, "I feel that I have an instinctual eye for art more than an educated eye because I have not studied it."

Laura Grenning of Grenning Gallery in Sag Harbor, New York, says, "She has an amazing eye, and is very decisive in her collecting." Her family background "explains her ability to spot the best paintings by my best artists and in other galleries. In addition to collecting, she has been instrumental in helping me to get the word out to her friends about these artists, and other aesthetic American painters from earlier periods."

The richly eclectic collection is a result of her changing taste and means. "I think it is an important lesson for my children to learn that art is fluid, that tastes change and budgets improve," she explains. "Get rid of what you get tired of or what your eye outgrows." What remains is the best of what it is. The result is that no matter how distant in time or aesthetic, it all works together. A chair made from roots sits next to a painting by Claudio Bravo and a twig chair sits next

to a painting by Sarah Lamb. A painting by Ben Fenske is reflected in a tramp art mirror.

John O'Hern: Please tell me about your parents and their influence on your interest in art.

Collector: My parents met in art school. My father went on to be a successful commercial artist and my mother a locally successful pastel portrait artist. I used to take lunch once a week at my mother's studio guild during elementary school and would sometimes pose for her at home or for her classes. She was very talented, but had four children to raise. She was compelled to do her art, but frustrated at the same time by her commitment to her home life. That dichotomy, familiar to so many artists, is one I grew up with and am familiar with, but do not share, as I am not compelled to do art. As a result, however, I do like to support artists who are gifted but may need a bit of extra support. My parents always took us to art museums on the weekends and there was always a book of great masterworks on our coffee table. The very same book is on mine now.

This past winter Ben Fenske and Leo Mancini-Hresko stayed with us in Florida.

My 90-year-old father was there as well and they had wonderful discussions with him about art. Ben and Leo felt that they were in the presence of an Old Master as my father had studied with Aldro Hibbard and others. They were enraptured! My dad was so on point! It was wonderful to see! I sought-out and bought a great Hibbard painting as a result. I felt it really filled a hole in the story of my collection. That meeting and that resulting acquisition clarified for me what the origins of my eye must be—the whole American realist movement thing. I had never put a name to it before, but it makes some sense now. I don't plan on pigeonholing myself anytime soon, but it did give me some perspective.

JO: Your collection is wonderfully eclectic (Eaton to Bravo) and your lives are eclectic. Can you tell me a bit about the breadth of your collection?

Collector: The best way to describe our collection is that it has grown with my eye. I feel that I have an instinctual eye for art more than an educated eye because I have not studied it. I feel about paintings more than



Hanging above the stairs is *Winged Self Portrait* (2007) by Toby Wright; a 19th-century American folk art painting hangs to the left.



In the living room is *Green Paper Roll* (2007) by Claudio Bravo.



Two works by Ben Fenske hang in the guest room: *What Should I Wear* (2008) and *Cook's Lane* (2008).



In the library is Ben Fenske's *American Girl* (2008) and reflected in a tramp art mirror.

I analyze them. As such, there are qualities about all different types of pieces which appeal to me: it may be a technique, a color palette, a composition, an emotion conveyed or a growth pattern (such as that you can see in the progression of Fenske's works). It is the totality of the work, whether I think it is successful, that determines whether I buy it.

JO: There are some great pieces of furniture in your home as well. Please tell me about some of the chairs.

Collector: Ah, yes. I have a friend in the city who helped me furnish my last house. We were on a big primitive artwork, *faux bois*, twig and root furniture kick. We had a lot of fun and these are two of the best pieces I kept from that period. I have some of that stuff in our Kentucky place as well. I love wacky stuff that people create from interesting wood or stone. That twig chair is really comfortable, believe it or not, and I love the hide my friend picked out to upholster it!

JO: How do you acquire pieces for your collection? Do you have a consultant?

Collector: In the past, my friend from the city and I would troll the Internet auctions for natural history auctions, folk art auctions, etc. But now I almost exclusively use Laura Grenning as my agent. Even when I find something elsewhere, I usually run it by her to check on its value, negotiate price, arrange for delivery, etc. In either case, if one of us finds something, we run it by the other. I decide if I like it, we discuss the price and value and make a decision (sometimes after a price negotiation).

I am probably a very frustrating client as I am quite independent and opinionated, but I make up for it by being decisive and loyal. I also bring Laura lots of referrals.

JO: What is it about a piece of art or an artifact that attracts you? What do you look for?

Collector: I look for something that has been captured. An emotion, a quality, a moment, a technique. I don't care about perfection.

Even if only a part of the painting is perfect, that can sometimes be good enough for me, but that part has to be really, really good. I like some humor in my paintings. I like a reverence for the past. There are centuries of masters who devised techniques for how to paint. For painters not to avail themselves of that expertise is foolish, perhaps just as foolish as not taking advantage of new technologies (such as improved glass, paper, etc.). I guess I want to feel in the presence of something that is worthy of my time. Not all of my pieces are like that, but my best ones are.

JO: Are there favorite pieces and anecdotes about collecting them that you'd like to share?

Collector: One of my favorite pieces is Ben Fenske's *American Girl*. She is a life-size piece that hangs in our family room. She is very intense and reminds me somewhat of a John Singer Sargent painting. This brings back memories of my folks bringing me to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. My mother

Ramiro's *Mashomack Point* (2011) hangs in the master bedroom.





Still Life with Blue Teapot and Knife (2012) by Ben Fenske hangs in the master bedroom with his *Break from Sailing* (2009).

adored John Singer Sargent, but this painting also has a somewhat eerie quality to it. The girl looks like she is watching you and some people find this quite disconcerting. That's just the kind of thing I like. The painting evokes a strong enough emotion (whether good or bad) that people FEEL it. People usually either love or hate this painting. Few are indifferent to it. She also has big hands. The hands are a focal point. They are well done, but they are big and prominent. When I asked Ben about why he had highlighted the hands, he said, "What do you mean?" He had no concept of having highlighted the hands. What many other people had pointed out and had discussed with me, the painter had not even noticed, and had not consciously done!

JO: Please tell me about living with art and your husband's and your children's experience of living with it.

Collector: I love living with art. It can be a bit perplexing at times because your tastes change or your eye improves and you find that you need to move on from one piece to another, especially when emotions kick in. A family member resists the change or wants to keep something because of sentiment instead of quality. In my case, I have family members who

are artists and I need to reconcile placing their art somewhere appropriate given the rest of the collection. This can be very tricky, yet I think it is an important lesson for my children to learn, that art is fluid, that tastes change and budgets improve. I also want them to appreciate (and I think they do) that while we may be able to afford big name, very expensive painters, we have chosen to collect more young, up-and-coming artists. We enjoy being a part of their growth process and hope they enjoy being a part of ours. Having the artists around our children is a huge education for them as well.

My son has quite a bit of artistic talent. He draws and sculpts compulsively. He has not chosen to go into art as a profession, but I like to think he is comfortable with his artwork as a result of having it around him all the time. Much like music, it is important that children be exposed to it throughout their lives.

I think I can safely say that my husband's interest in art has slowly started since I have started our collection.

JO: What advice do you have for other collectors?

Collector: I would advise people to not take themselves too seriously and to look at collecting as a growth process. You're not

going to know everything overnight, so why start at the top? Start collecting works you like and find a reputable dealer who can help educate your eye and not soak your pocketbook. Consider future value, but only buy what you like to live with. Get rid of what you get tired of or what your eye outgrows. Don't forget to support young artists. There are some terrific ones out there that need your support and they are usually very available to talk to. Enjoy the entire process, not just the acquisition. ●

John O'Hern, who has retired after 30 years in the museum business, specifically as the Executive Director and Curator of the Arnot Art Museum, Elmira, N.Y., is the originator of the internationally acclaimed Re-presenting Representation exhibitions which promote realism in its many guises. John was chair of the Artists Panel of the New York State Council on the Arts. He writes for gallery publications around the world, including regular monthly features on Art Market Insights and on Sculpture in Western Art Collector magazine.

