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SEEKING

A PROMINENT EAST COAST COLLECTOR OPENS HIS HOME TO *AMERICAN ART COLLECTOR.*

BEAUTY

By John O'Hern | Photography by Francis Smith





Der Wanderer, 2003, by Ramiro; *The Groom*, 2005 by Daniel Graves; and *Wheat Fields*, *Sosta del Papa* 2009 by Marc Dalessio hang in the great room of the couple's Long Island home.



At left, *Still Life with Peaches* by Alfred Rouby (1849-1909), one of the first paintings the couple bought for their collection, and to the right of the doorway, a plein air painting by Bernard Corey (1914-2000) of a *Turn in the Road* in Grafton, Massachusetts.

On a trip to Philadelphia to interview for a pre-med program, this collector took a side trip to see Thomas Eakins' monumental *The Gross Clinic*. A painting of a medical scene might seem natural for a budding surgeon, but the collector's interest went beyond the subject matter. "I became hooked on Eakins and the type of art he did," he admits. Other artists of the late-19th and early-20th centuries captivated him as well. "Later, my wife and I would track down Eakins' paintings and go to visit them. When his *Wrestlers* went to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, we hopped on a plane to go to see it. We also return to the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, to see Sargent's *Fumée d'Ambre Gris* (*Smoke of Ambergris*).

Eakins was always on the couple's list of favorites but then, and today, far out of reach. "As a surgeon, I know anatomy and it's important that the artists understand it as well. Eakins insisted that his students at the Pennsylvania Academy study dissection."

Eakins had studied at l'École des Beaux-Arts in Paris under Jean-Léon Gérôme.

Collector: We began collecting in 1982 when we were in Paris. The Felix Tisot landscape *Le mas de tante Rose* captivated us. We love it—a sweet, warm, post-impressionist view of Provence on a stormy spring day.

John O'Hern: I understand you also like the stories behind the pieces as well as the artists' histories.

C: Yes. Tisot, for instance, was the father of

a successful French comedian who made his reputation satirizing Charles de Gaulle in the '60s through the '90s. In the '80s, his son, Henri, tried to use his political and societal presence to bring his struggling artist father notoriety. He was somewhat successful and there is now a book of Felix's paintings.

JO: With a love for the type of realism you admire in Eakins and Sargent and the students of Gérôme, how did you become interested in contemporary work?

C: We've always enjoyed what we call "pretty things" and had the romantic idea that someday we would like to collect art that would lead us back to the Orientalists like Gérôme. We didn't realize that paintings in that spirit were being made today.

Urban Larsson's *Pots and Melon*, 2002, and
Ramiro's *25 Piazzale Donatello*, 2007.





Morning on the Irrawaddy, 2009, by Marc Dalessio.

One day in 2000 we were walking by Laura Grenning's gallery, The Grenning Gallery, in Sag Harbor and saw a painting by Ramiro in the window. We fell in love with how he dealt with light. His whites were like those in Sargent's *Smoke of Amberggris*. We met Ramiro and had him out to our house and became friends. He painted a portrait of my wife and, over the years, we've watched him grow.

We like his intellectual curiosity and his passion for making big paintings. We have one of his biggest paintings in our Long Island home, *25 Piazzale Donatello*, which is the address of the studio he had in Florence. It's as if the artist has come down from having a snack to discover his model stretched out on the floor looking at a book, calmly waiting for the next modeling session. I believe the

model is looking at a book of illustrations of Michelangelo's architecture in Florence.

JO: How did you learn about other contemporary painters?

C: After meeting Ramiro we went to Florence to visit him at Daniel Graves' Florence Academy where he is Senior Painting Instructor. We met Graves and fell in love



Ramiro's *Ulysses*, 2004, and his *Mashomack Point*, 2006, flank a doorway. An ancient Palestinian wine pitcher and sculptures of water buffalo from Upper Volta in West Africa, adorn the tables.

with how they are teaching young people.

JO: I know the Florence Academy is based on the traditional teaching of draftsmanship and study of the Old Masters—the basics that had become lost in art education. Daniel Graves also said, “To seek beauty and meaning in our lives is to bring it into our art.” Where do you find artists who echo that philosophy?

C: With an apartment in New York and our home on Long Island, we don't have to go far to see good art. We've looked at other artists, but none are as good as the students coming out of the Florence Academy. We like these young artists' views of their lives in the 21st century, using the techniques of the past.

We also have a large painting by Daniel Graves, *The Groom*, which is his contemporary

take on a slave market. Ramiro's *Ulysses* is also a contemporary take on what a god should look like. We like the subject's attitude.

The artist has to have an idea that is unique. It's the genius that catches my eye.

Marc Dalessio's *Morning on the Irrawaddy*, for instance, captures the moist and misty landscape of Myanmar. I can almost feel the heat when I walk up to it.





The collector's home, which rests on 5 acres, features a lush yard and breathtaking views.

JO: Please tell me about the setting you've made for your collection.

C: When we built the house, we only had a few pieces.

We've always liked the country and the ocean and wanted to be near the water. We weren't excited at available houses, so I visited with landowners and asked them to pick out pieces of land at 220 to 270 feet above sea level, which is the top of the glacial moraine.

We settled on 5 acres and set up a ladder to find the best views. We had been searching for that type of light that occurs out here when the sun comes through the clouds and there are reds, purples, greens and blues. It's romantic all year-round. At sunset we can look across the view of the North Fork to Old Saybrook in Connecticut.

When we finished the house we knew we had to fill up the great room with art. We scrimped, saved and viewed the best art of the year. Some years we bought and some years we

didn't. Many of the pieces we've bought in the last four or five years.

Our children love the art and have paintings in their rooms. There is art everywhere including the guest rooms. It's not uncommon to come down at night and see someone sitting there with a light on looking at a painting.

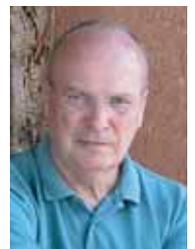
JO: You took your time putting your collection together. What advice do you have for other collectors?

C: Getting to know the artists is also a part of what we do—getting to know that the artist is a real person who is struggling with new concepts for big paintings every day. Big studio work is what artists are about, but they don't often get the chance to paint them. We like to find out what the artist is reading, what he's thinking about. Bouncing ideas off the artist is fascinating.

Continue to refine your taste by visiting

museums and galleries. Hand-in-hand with that, spend time reading about the period you're interested in. Start small, live with them awhile, and then buy more and more. ●

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.



Opposite Page:

Top left: *Still a Work in Progress*, self-portrait by Ramiro (Angel Ramiro Sanchez) and other works by Ramiro, his wife Melissa Franklin Sanchez, and a still life by Mark Anthony Gucciardi. **Top right:** Thomas Scott's *Universal, Walnuts, and Water* hangs above a walnut dresser in the couple's son's room. The two elephant sculptures are from Upper Volta, West Africa. **Bottom:** One of the couple's first purchases was this French landscape, *Le mas de tante Rose*, by Felix Tisot (1909-1979), which they found in Paris in 1982. It is flanked by two paintings by Stan Moeller, *The Great Bay*, left, and *Afternoon Shadows*.