

# IN PURSUIT OF THE FINER THINGS

THE ART OF COLLECTING ART  
Part 1: Private collectors

VOCATION | A personal mission

## Passion is the impetus for collectors born or made

How is an art collector born? Some inherit artworks and build on an existing collection. Some have always been art lovers and just follow their passion. Others hope it will be a good investment. One thing is sure, however: once they catch the collecting bug, few can shake it.

Nasser David Khalili is a London-based property developer, scholar and philanthropist who has five major collections, the most important being the world's largest privately owned collection of Islamic art. He grew up surrounded by art in Iran, where his parents were art and antique dealers. Collecting is his life's passion. "I wake up to follow my passion," he says, "and I go to sleep dreaming about it."

Moiz Zilberman, partner and chief executive officer of the art management company Casa Dell'Arte, is an unusually eclectic collector who buys primarily 19th-century paintings, netsukes, snuffboxes, pocket watches and Chinese porcelain, but also owns a few Old Master paintings. Recently, he has started to appreciate and buy contemporary artworks, which are now increasingly present at major art fairs like TEFAF Maastricht. Zilberman caught the collecting bug in 1991, when a friend asked him to buy an antique map for him at an auction he could not attend. Zilberman was hooked and started collecting for himself.

Michel Witmer, who like Zilberman is a volunteer TEFAF "ambassador," inherited a family collection of 18th-century French works. He focuses his own collecting on late-19th- and early-20th-century French paintings. His interest in art was awakened at a very young age while visiting auction previews with his parents, and he, too, has added works from different fields — from Old Master paintings to contemporary art — to his collection over the years. "That's one of the fun things about art fairs," he says. "You find things you never thought you would buy."

Many American collectors of contemporary art, for example, wind up buying a Dutch Old Master painting at TEFAF when they see what they can get for their money.

The Brazilian Ricard Akagawa's collecting eye was trained by roaming the flea markets of São Paulo as a teenager. He has been collecting international contemporary art and Brazilian modern and contemporary art for 35 years now, which he acquires from "the best galleries" and art fairs around the world as well as from major auction houses. Around 10 percent of his collection is on show in his home at any given time, but he also lends works to museums.

Collectors find works to fill in gaps in their collections in a variety of ways. They attend art fairs, receive catalogs from auction houses and art dealers, and rely on specialist dealers to keep them informed of what is available in their chosen fields. Some, like Zilberman, also use Web sites like Artnet to search for objects. Khalili used to buy from all the world's major auction houses, but his five major collections are now so well known that he no longer has to go out looking — sellers and dealers come to him — and he has close relationships with selected dealers

**'Intelligence in collecting is important. You have to know what is going on in the world'**

in his chosen areas.

While he knows that there is not much left in his field that would interest him, he goes to art fairs like TEFAF just to see what is out there. "Intelligence in collecting is important," he says. "You have to know what is going on in the world."

A work of art is a demanding possession that must be insured and well cared for. Restoration and cleaning may be necessary, and special conditions are often required to prevent damage from light and heat. That is why Khalili buys only works that have stood the test of time. "The best critic of art is time," he says, adding that much of today's contemporary art is "perishable."

Caring for an immense collection like Khalili's requires an in-house staff, including a photographer, a conservator and a curator for each collection, and an editorial staff for the production of the books documenting them. "We are an institution, like a museum," he says. Witmer notes the significant time investment necessary for keeping up with the records for his collection and making trips to the framer and restorer. "When the stock market sank," he says, "it was guys like me who kept the framer in business."

Rare are the art collectors who will admit to buying art as an investment, although the value of the art they own often rises after



STEPHANE MARTINELLI

they buy it. Most crucial is an in-depth knowledge of art; without it, the risks are high in this extremely complex field. "I have never bought a single art object just because I thought it was a good investment," says Zilberman, "yet art became the most successful investment in my life. Around 90 percent of what I bought increased in value significantly." The extra benefit, he adds, is that he gets to enjoy the works as well.

Witmer agrees that art is a good investment, but with a proviso: "It's not like other areas of investment. A huge number of technical elements are involved. It's a lot easier to get burned than with the stock market if you don't know what you're doing. You need

to do careful research or have honest advisers to be sure works haven't been over-restored or over-cleaned, and that they are authentic."

For Khalili, making money doesn't even enter into the equation, because he says he will never sell his collection. "One of the rules I've followed since the day I started to collect was don't ever, ever, ever mix the word investment with what you are doing as a mission in life, because the minute you do that, it's not the same anymore. People say to me, 'If you had invested that money in anything else, you would have probably made 10 times more money than you make in art,' but to me that's irrelevant." ■

Nasser David Khalili, whose Islamic artworks are being shown at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, with a Central Asian pottery ewer dating from the eighth to 10th century.

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### TEFAF Maastricht 2010

**The European Fine Art Fair (TEFAF) Maastricht 2010 at a glance:**  
● **Where:** Maastricht Exhibition and Congress Center (MECC), Forum 100, Maastricht, the Netherlands.  
[www.tefaf.com](http://www.tefaf.com)  
● **When:** Friday, March 12 to Sunday, March 21, 2010. Open March 13-21, 11 a.m.-7 p.m.; March 22, 11 a.m.-6 p.m.  
● **What:** Exhibits by 260 leading art and antique dealers from 18 countries  
● **Tourist information:** A Maastricht

guide designed especially for TEFAF is available by e-mailing [i.brommersma@mecc.nl](mailto:i.brommersma@mecc.nl)  
● **Hotel information:** Maastricht Booking Service. Tel.: (31 43) 383 83 58. [www.maastrichtbookingservice.nl](http://www.maastrichtbookingservice.nl)  
● **Getting around:** During the fair, a free shuttle bus service is available between the congress center and various hotels in Maastricht  
● **Planning ahead:** TEFAF Maastricht 2011 will take place March 18-27

FOR THE LOVE OF ART | Creating a legacy

## Art objects that conquer first the collector and then, in time, the rest of the world



The collector Michel Witmer, with Courbet's "Jura Landscape" (circa 1869), at his home in New York.

Why do people collect art? Because it is a wise investment, a compulsion, a fashionable activity, a status symbol? For some, these may be valid explanations, but for true collectors — leaving aside the legendary flash-in-the-pan hedge-fund traders who drove the prices of contemporary art into the stratosphere and then disappeared from the market when the economic crisis hit — the reason is simple: it is a love story.

Nasser David Khalili, who has amassed the world's largest privately owned collection of Islamic art as well as four other major collections, compares the feeling he has when he spots a beautiful work of art to the moment when he fell in love at first sight with his soon-to-be wife across a crowded room. The roles are reversed, however: "The pieces talk to me," he says. "They pick me up. I don't pick them up."

Once collectors have acquired artworks they love, what do they do with them? Many want to share their passion with others. From the outside, collecting art might look like a selfish activity reserved for wealthy individuals who buy beautiful works for their own personal enjoyment. While many great collections may have started that way, the truth is

that the general public often ends up as the beneficiary of an individual's urge to collect, since many large collections long outlive their collectors in the form of museums founded by them or donations to existing museums. Think of the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, D.C., to name just a few.

For Khalili, collectors who do not share the works they acquire don't even deserve the name. "If you go to a salesroom and put your hand up and buy two Picassos and a Giacometti, take them home and put them in your dining room so you can invite people over and show them that you have arrived, you are not a collector," he says. In his view, a real collector is one who buys a work of art, then conserves, researches, publishes and exhibits it. That is exactly what he has done with every single piece in his five collections, altogether numbering some 25,000 works.

Khalili, like many great collectors before him, will eventually found at least one and perhaps more museums to house his collections, the most important of which is the

20,000-piece Islamic collection. "At the end of the day," he says, "ownership is a myth. Every one of us is a temporary custodian of what we collect or 'own.' This is a legacy that I will leave behind."

Smaller-scale collectors, even though they might not have what it takes to found a museum, still often work quietly behind the scenes to make sure that others benefit from their collections.

Michel Witmer, an American who collects mostly late-19th-century and early-20th-century French paintings, often lends works to museums and buys pieces with their general benefit for art education in mind. "When I'm at the TEFAF Maastricht art fair," he says, "I'm thinking about what should be in museums or what should be studied, about where it is going to do the most good for society."

Looking around his New York apartment for examples, he cites several paintings he bought because of their crucial place in art history, including "Le Violon" by the French Impressionist Berthe Morisot, depicting a woman playing the violin, which he de-

scribes as being painted in a "progressive" way. "It was the end of the 1880s," he says, "and she was moving away from Impressionism and setting out on a new, modern course. I thought it was interesting for the history of art, especially given the role of women in society. It should be in a museum. Students should be studying it as an example of artists moving into new ground."

Witmer wants everything he buys to have a real place in the history of art. "There should be a lot to sink your teeth into," he says. "These works are not just for decorating walls. They have a deeper meaning — layers of meaning. That's what I look for, and why I lend out so many pieces."

While Witmer has no plans to found a museum, the public will continue to benefit from his collection in the future. "If I can't take it with me," he says, "I plan to leave certain pieces to those museums that need them most, to museums with outreach programs that bring in poor students. For example, my Degas would be a perfect addition to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection, since they do not have a Degas like mine. They can borrow it from me for now, but I plan to keep them waiting a long time before they can own it!" ■

CLOSE-UP | Nasser David Khalili

## Cosmopolite, scholar, author and man with a mission

Approaches to art collecting are as varied as the collectors themselves. While some stay within tightly defined niches, such as 18th-century French snuffboxes, others think more broadly. The Iranian-born Nasser David Khalili definitely falls into the latter category.

His 20,000-piece Islamic collection, part of which can currently be seen in the exhibition "Arts de l'Islam" (through March 14) at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, covers the entire Muslim world, from Spain to India, from the eighth to the 20th century. Since Khalili defines Islamic art as art made by Muslim artists for Muslim patrons, the collection has an astonishing breadth, ranging from hand-lettered Korans and illuminated manuscripts to intricately worked Moghul saddle ornaments.

Why Islamic art? "I was born in a Muslim country," says Khalili, "but I didn't buy Islamic art because it was Islamic. I bought it because it was the most beautiful and most diverse art in the world. I bought all my collections because the art was beautiful and had a statement to make."

Khalili's most recent collection, enameled of the world, was revealed to the world only when it was completed in 2009. It is also the subject of an ongoing exhibition, "Enamels of the World 1700-2000" from the Khalili Col-

lections," at the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg (through April 18). This collection of some 1,200 pieces also offers a wide range of objects, linked by the technique of their enameling and their beauty rather than by time period or geography.

The other three collections are more specific. The Japanese decorative art collection of 2,000 works is limited to the Meiji period (1868-1912), a time when long-isolated Japan was opening up to the world. The Spanish collection comprises around a hundred pieces of damascened metalwork. The Swedish textile collection, dating from the late 17th to the late 19th century, covers the full gamut of traditional Scanian marriage weavings.

A higher aim

Khalili is not interested only in collecting these works, however, but in using them to fight what he calls "the real weapon of mass destruction": ignorance. Born to a Jewish family in Iran, he studied in the United States and made his fortune in property development in Britain, where he still lives. He also has a Ph.D. in art history and considers his collections to be his mission in life.

Every piece in his five collections is researched, conserved, photographed and published in what will be a series of some

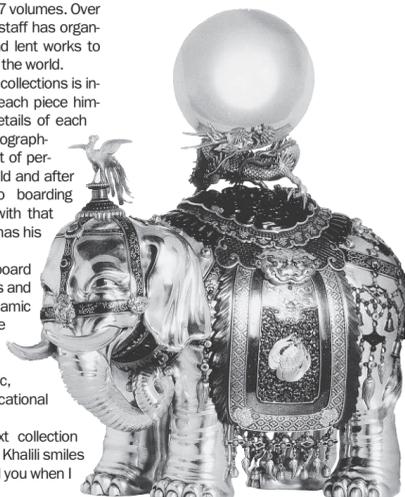
50 volumes, to be completed in the coming two years. Around 40 of these, with essays contributed by international experts in each field, have already been published. The Islamic collection alone fills 27 volumes. Over the past 25 years, Khalili's staff has organized over 40 exhibitions and lent works to some 40 museums all over the world.

His involvement with the collections is intensely personal. He buys each piece himself and remembers the details of each purchase thanks to his photographic memory. "I'm not the sort of person who gives birth to a child and after seven years sends it to boarding school," he says. "I stay with that child until he's married and has his own children."

He sits on the editorial board for each volume in the series and has written for the one on Islamic lacquer. He also wrote "The Timeline History of Islamic Art and Architecture," published in English and Arabic, and distributed free to educational institutions on request.

What form will his next collection take? The normally ebullient Khalili smiles serenely and says: "I will tell you when I finish it." ■

From the Japanese collection, an 1890 incense burner in silver and semiprecious stone.



THE NOUR FOUNDATION, COURTESY OF THE KHALILI FAMILY TRUST

### Strange chance and circumstance are buyers' allies

Strange things can happen to those who collect art, often having to do with what might be called serendipity. As the collector Nasser David Khalili puts it: "If you do something for the sake of it, things happen."

Khalili has been buying Korans and manuscripts for many years. Among them are 10 Mamluk Korans, which traditionally have two illuminated pages at the beginning and two mirror images of them at the back. One, which he had bought at auction in 1973, was missing the first illuminated page. More than 20 years later, a dealer showed him some loose calligraphic pages. Sure enough, one of them was the missing page. The dealer was incredulous. "He said, 'It's impossible,'" says Khalili. "That would be like finding a needle in a haystack." But the page belonged, and he put it back.

Luck can enter the picture in other ways. The American collector Michel Witmer once asked a major auction house to take an Impressionist painting down from the wall during the preview so he could examine the back of it. On the stretcher bar he found an expert authentication of the work that the auction house had not noticed. "I was thrilled with that," he says. "I compared it with the authentication in my files. Everything was right. I paid more than the estimate, but it was well worth it. The price later skyrocketed."



A single-volume Mamluk Koran (1329) from the Khalili collection, in ink, gold and opaque watercolor.

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