THE ART NEWSPAPER

Collectors
Archive

“I still believe in the hand of the artist”: Interview with collector Eugene Thaw

The connoisseur, dealer, collector and patron of the Morgan Library discusses the importance of emotional impact, and how the art market has transformed since the start of his career

Jason Edward Kaufman

30 September 1994

New York

Eugene Victor Thaw, one of the most highly respected dealer-connoisseurs in the field of Old Master drawings and paintings, has presided over the New York firm that bears his name since 1950, advising many of the celebrated collectors of the later twentieth century, and helping to develop the collections of America’s leading museums. His business acumen is complemented by a scholar’s command of art-historical literature, and an eye that has earned him a well deserved reputation as a connoisseur. He is co-author of the four-volume catalogue raisonné of Jackson Pollock’s oeuvre, and he has put together a 500-piece survey of American Indian art that he donated last year to the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown, New

York. But the greatest expression of his aesthetic sensibility is the renowned collection of 250 Old Master drawings that he and his wife Clare have accumulated over the years. The collection has been shown regularly by the Pierpont Morgan Library, to which Mr Thaw and his wife have promised the entire trove. No wonder the collector, a trustee of the Library since 1988, is hailed as among the institution's most generous and important benefactors. Currently on view at the Morgan are some seventy works acquired over the past nine years, and around thirty items previously included in earlier Thaw Collection shows at the Morgan. On the occasion of the exhibition, which runs until 22 January 1995, The Art Newspaper visited Mr Thaw at the 500-acre estate near Cooperstown where he and his wife have spent their summers until their recent move to Santa Fe, New Mexico.

There have been a number of books of late trying to define what makes collectors tick. As one of the great dealers of the second half of the century, and a formidable collector as well, you are uniquely positioned to offer insight on the subject. Just what is collecting all about?

To me, the most important element of collecting is the hands-on experience of the work of art. With possession - either as a dealer who owns a piece temporarily, or as a collector who keeps it long-term—you can get to know an object in an entirely different way than you can from photographs, slides or books. This experience flies in the face of everything that is happening in the current age, in which people are looking forward to museums with nothing in them except television monitors where you can dial the Louvre, or dial the Metropolitan, and get some kind of holograph. We seem to be satisfied with images of things, with multiples and reproductions. Even artists "make" things without using their hands. I still believe in the hand of the artist, and the only way to experience that is to experience an original.

The motivation comes from the need for aesthetic eye satisfaction and the need to order the resulting accumulations. People whose eye must be aesthetically satisfied begin to surround themselves with things that have that effect on them. That causes accumulation, and once you have several things that aesthetically please you, you have another problem of making some sort of order out of them. That becomes an intellectual process. All true collectors have this ordering drive, whether they're collecting butterflies or shells or Old Master drawings. They want to have a group that reflects their own taste and judgement of what's best.

There are psychologists who say that it's compensating for an unhappy childhood or it's bad toilet training, or one form or another of infantile deprivation. That kind of analysis doesn't bring any kind of helpful insight to it. If you're a collector, it's one of the joys of life to assemble and order something that ends up having true meaning. It's also one of the joys of life to share it and show it to others who have some glimmering of what you're doing. There is an overall motivation in any project. One wants it to have an end, a final resting place. Some collectors are satisfied with a good auction catalogue after they're dead. But one can ask for a higher meaning than that.

Your Old Master drawings are deservedly famous. What distinguishes your collecting from that of your contemporaries and predecessors?

One of the chief collecting that applies to me is that of aesthetic response. Other collectors of Old Master drawings collect for identification. What turns them on is to find an anonymous drawing and identify it, even if it is not of any great aesthetic merit in itself. That's not the issue that appeals to me. I don't collect "the drawing for the left foot of the saint in the fresco of Saint Pancras by Giovanni da Fettucini". I collect for the aesthetic impact of the sheet itself. So I tend to have more finished sheets, though not always—I have Van Dycks and other pure working sketches. But it's the aesthetic impact that turns me on, not the discovery. Maybe I'm missing something, but that's what I like.

Have you intentionally avoided certain areas, such as Italian Baroque?

I never was turned on by the Counter-Reformation, either the paintings or the drawings. The baroque artists were out of fashion when I was studying. I was in the Berensonian snobbery tradition of dismissing the Lanfrancos and Guido Renis, who were so famous in the early nineteenth century for their sentimental appeal. They became the curators' favourites when the greater things were no longer available. I've come to see that Guido Reni, for example, is a very great artist. But they didn't achieve a drawing style as distinctive and significant as other artists—like Giambattista Tiepolo, whose drawings are inimitable and dazzling. Or Rembrandt drawings, for that matter: with their sketchy shorthand they evoke emotional experiences tremendously insightful into the human condition. I need this from a Daumier, a Turner—some kind of emotional and aesthetic impact. And I get it also from Delacroix, Gericault, Redon—from many artists whom I've collected in depth. I have more than ten Delacroixs, over ten Cézannes, fifteen Degas, five or six Gericaults, maybe twenty Tiepolos father and son, and at least eight Fragonards. I'm not doing a survey, but collecting multiple examples by those artists who I feel have been essential to my own understanding of draughtsmanship and of Western art.

What about Dutch drawings other than Rembrandt?

That’s a special field. For instance the George and Maida Abrams Collection is only Dutch seventeenth-century drawings. There are a great number of what the French call petits maîtres who are wonderful artists, but not the peaks of draughtsmanship that I’m talking about. There certainly are others than Rembrandt—I would love to have a Cuyp landscape or an Avercamp “skaters” watercolour.

So you’ve collected favourite artists in depth, and individual examples representative of certain important schools?

That’s right. And the other area is work by artists who are wonderful, but outside the mainstream of Western traditional collecting. Fairly early in the game I was able to get a wonderful Caspar David Friedrich gouache, and now I have a total of five by Friedrich. I was able to buy a Wilhelm von Kobell from Munich of people on horseback meeting a peasant, one of the “encounter pictures” which are little known masterpieces of Biedermeier painting. And I have Danish artists—Købke and others—who are now talked of as participants in a Golden Age.

How did you develop such a close relationship with the Morgan Library?

As a drawing collector, very early on I was obviously attracted to the Library, and early on I offered them a Callot drawing as a gift. Fred Adams, who was director at the time, rejected it, saying, “We don’t take gifts from dealers”. So my first attempt to become friendly with the Library was summarily rejected, and I was rather crestfallen. Fred Adams is now a good friend and we joke about these things, but when Charles Ryskamp became director (he is now director of the Frick Collection), I began a series of donations from my collection which led to the 1975 exhibition of 115 drawings, the first catalogue of the Thaw Collection. It was a great success and put me in the firmament of serious collectors. And at that time I made a promise in the catalogue to give the Morgan my entire collection of drawings, which by opportunity and instinct is very strongly weighted in favour of the nineteenth century, their greatest need. Since then, there has been another show in 1985, and they have used my drawings in a number of exhibitions. I’ve pursued the transfer little by little, as for tax reasons it seemed beneficial.

Not long ago they needed to buy the building next door, the Morgan Mansion, because it was the only possible way they could ever expand. I gave them a substantial cash donation toward that purchase. Even though Charles Ryskamp had left by that time, and a new group was in charge of the board, they invited me to become a trustee. So the relationship has been a very happy one. Nothing that I’ve done in life has made me more proud or happier than supporting this great institution.

What is it about the Morgan that merits your undivided support?

Its collecting standards, its exhibiting standards, and its standards of scholarship are so far above the average. In a period of declining standards they have maintained the old ways of scholarship, and I believe in that.

We know the urgency to go in for blockbusters, with box office being the determining factor. The Library has vast collections in areas of basically scholarly interest, like illuminated manuscripts, illustrated books and literature—not the stuff of public blockbusters. But they make wonderful exhibitions out of these things, some of which turn out to be highly popular, yet it's always combined with a sense of quality and scholarship. Their catalogues are not flashy, but meticulous and informative.

How have other institutions compromised standards?

The politically correct has become so dominant in our universities and even in our journalism. The idea that nothing is true or false except the ethnic, gender or sexual preference bias we personally bring to it, and that these are the only things that matter in a work of art, not what the artist conceived, but his or her ethnic background, or economic position, or parents' religion—all of this nonsense has taken over the world of scholarship as it emanates from our universities, where we look for leadership in scholarship. And that is why politically neutral ground, like the Morgan Library, becomes so valuable now, because there are so few enclaves where this kind of thing has not taken over.

But they suffer for it. Some of the great foundations which should be pouring money into an enterprise of this quality are uninterested because they're not dealing with ethnic or sexual or political background issues. If the Morgan Library were to devote itself to inner-city slum art they probably would get foundation funds which, in our climate today, an exhibition on Shakespeare or the French Revolution or Holbein would not. It's very odd. The Library lives on the money it raises each year, and it's coming up against these problems because of the quality and purity of its scholarship and exhibitions.

Have you acquired drawings specially for the Morgan?

Yes. I'm always thinking of the end result of where the collection is going, and after a point the activity of collecting often had the Morgan and its needs specifically in mind.

Are you still dealing?

I still have a firm and I still own things in shares with other dealers. But I decided to stop selling pictures on my own because I really prefer not to dwell on how much a picture's worth or going to be worth. I used to talk too much when I sold pictures—as you can probably tell from listening to me now. Unlike dealers such as Alexander Rosenberg, who never said a word—he just put the picture on the easel and you either bought it, or you didn't—I was full of information and I loved to share it. But the business lost its charm.

When I started, collecting opportunities were there for everyone with a little money and any eye at all. You could go around New York to the small auction houses, like Kende Gallery—where there were a lot of fakes—and old Park Bernet before Sotheby's, to antique shops and book sellers, smaller dealers and drawing shops like Walter Schatsky on 57th Street. And if you had a good eye you could find things that were right and worth a lot more than you paid for them. There was still the air of discovery in the market. We were impecunious and struggling, but it was a great deal of fun. Then at some point in the early 1980s—sometime around 1982 or 1983, if not a bit before—art turned completely into money, and then the fun went out of it.

What was it that swayed you towards the field in the first place?

I had this instinct about having things in my hands. At college I bought little things in antique shops and put them in my room. I remember in graduate school I bought a $10 print by the German minor master Heinrich Aldegrever, and ran to show it to my teachers. I was always on the lookout, but in a very juvenile and unsophisticated way. It took many years before I knew what I was doing.

I understand Janos Scholz was a mentor.

Janos was very helpful when I was a young art dealer with very little money and very little real knowledge of either connoisseurship or the art world. Though he had very little disposable funds throughout his life, he made marvellous finds going through portfolios or drawings in the days when there were shops where you could do that. He was able to tell by looking at the handwriting of a drawing whether it came from Bologna or Rome or Florence or Venice. Like Shaw's Professor Higgins who could tell exactly where an accent came from, almost to the street—Janos could do that with drawings.

Where did you acquire stock when you first began?

I purchased my first Old Master drawing in 1951 upstairs from the Weyhe Book Shop on 61st Street and Lexington Avenue. They had a little gallery with boxes and boxes of drawings, and one whole box of Giambattista Tiepolo drawings—the single figures—from the Dan Fellows Platt Collection. They were $500 a piece and I bought one. A year or two later I bought a Rembrandt drawing for $3,500 from A. & R. Ball, refugees from Dresden, who had a whole box of famous Rembrandts from Friedrich August, King of Saxony. I bought one of the least expensive because that's all I could afford, a little frozen river landscape for $3,500, and they let me pay $300 a month for ten months. Soon after I bought my Seurat drawing from them for $11,000, a Seurat that would today bring a million.

The price structure was so different then. I had a friend working at the Curt Valentine Gallery on 57th Street, and they would let me have Morandi still-life paintings on consignment for $300, which I would take and sell for $350. Today they bring $400,000 and $500,000 dollars.

The gouache by Chagall on the back cover of one of the Skira books, with a man in a white suit leaping over houses, I sold to the Zacks collection in Toronto for $2,500. It would be two and a half million today, at least. The great Kandinsky Murnau landscape of 1909, a colour plate in the Grohman book that eventually is going to the Museum of Modern Art—I bought it from a refugee in New York for $2,500 and for nearly a year I couldn't sell it. I had to pay back the money that I borrowed from a relative of mine to buy it, so I sold it for cost to Richard Zeisler, who kept it in a closet for six months before he even put a frame on it, it was so unimportant to him. Now it's one of the stars of his collection, worth umpteen millions of dollars. It just was a different world.

How did you get your business off the ground?

I started really at the bottom of the barrel, with nothing—$4,000 borrowed from my father. With a friend from college whom I had met in Europe we started the New Book Shop and Gallery at the Algonquin Hotel on West 44th Street. We had two floors: one was a book shop, and the upper was an art gallery. We had no money to buy anything, so we put up some younger artists' work, but it was very slow going. After a year my partner left because he wasn't getting anywhere. Three years later I gave up the bookshop, owing publishers all over the place money that took me six years to pay off, and moved uptown to Madison Avenue between 57th and 58th Street on the second floor. I got interested in German Expressionist art because it was very inexpensive at that time.

The first real money I ever made was $13,000 from the sale of a Nolde painting, an important oil from 1914, “Red Evening Sky”, to Donald Winston who gave it to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. I was married by that time, and my wife let me go to Germany for a week to go to the galleries, and with that $13,000 I brought back about $50,000 worth of art by paying small amounts and getting credit for the rest from the dealers who were hungry to sell anything in those days. The Kirchner estate was housed in a bombed-out ruin in Stuttgart, and I went down and picked out a huge Fauvish painting of about 1906 of two women in street dress, which is now in the Los Angeles County Museum. It was Kirchner’s wife and her sister, I think. I brought back the “Houses at Night” (1912) by Schmidt-Rottluff which is now in the Museum of Modern Art, a Fauve Heckel, and many good drawings and watercolours.

At the same time I was still trying to discover drawings. I found a Rembrandt drawing of a beggar leaning on a stick in a box at a collector’s house. I thought it was real and he said it wasn’t, so I bought it for $75. Fritz Lugt, who was still alive in Paris at that time, authenticated it for me and it’s now in a famous New York collection, accepted by all scholars. By that time I had no artists. I was a dealer selling what I could find using my eye on the secondary market. Then I moved uptown to East 78th Street where Ira Spanierman is now, a basement apartment with a street entrance. And then I became a private dealer, by appointment. I began to grow.

When did you get into Old Master paintings?

Not until quite late in my career because I didn’t have the money. I had one lucky break. A friend named Nat Hammer helped me get six predella panels from the St Catherine of Siena altarpiece by Giovanni di Paolo from the Stoclet Collection in Brussels. I brought them to America and bought them half-share with Dr Rudolph Heineman, who was the great private art dealer who created the Thyssen Collection with both the father, until his death, and the current Baron Thyssen. He marketed these pictures, which resulted in the first big piece of capital that I had. And through him I learned Old Master dealing like very few people ever learned it.

Who are some of the major collectors with whom you’ve done business?

Norton Simon became one of my great clients. I think I was as close to him, and sold as much to him, as any dealer. The Norton Simon Museum is filled with things that came from me.

Has any museum been exceptionally good?

The Chicago Art Institute under Harold Joachim was a superb client. Whenever I showed him anything he understood immediately what it was, and how good or bad it was, and he knew when to act. He had to go out and beg for the money from Mrs Regenstein, who teased him terribly, but was a great patroness. And he had to get Mrs Tiffany Blake when she was alive, who was also a wonderful source of support for Harold. But whenever the right drawing came along Harold knew, and immediately said, “We’re going to have it regardless of what it takes”. And that kind of curator you seldom see any more.

Do other figures stand out in your memory?

Rudolph Heineman, whom I’ve already mentioned, is long dead now, but he was the éminence grise in the Old Masters field. Hardly anyone knew him directly, but he was in every great picture as a partner. He was based in New York, 907 Fifth Avenue. The bulk of the best pictures Heinie Thyssen inherited from his father all came through Heineman, and he wrote the first great catalogue of the Thyssen Collection. He worked closely with Agnews and with me, and with others. Mrs Heineman is still alive and active, and a good friend of mine. She’s become a great patron of the National Gallery of Art and of the Morgan Library.

One of the great figures in my life is the restorer Mario Modestini, in whose studio I have sold many pictures just as he’s cleaning them. Charles and Jayne Wrightsman were with me as he’d started to clean the great Tiepolo “The meeting of Anthony and Cleopatra”, and we saw it was in mint condition—just the varnish coming off. I’ve sold many great pictures in the restorer’s studio. I was taught that technique by Heineman.

What were some of the greatest sales of your career?

It’s hard to remember just the high points. Selling the great Goya portrait of General Guy from the Marshall Field Collection to the Virginia Museum. Two great Zurbaráns to Norton Simon: the great still-life which I did along with Stanley Moss, and the “Birth of the Virgin”, also from the Cortini-Bonacossi Collection. I sold the great Monet “Boulevard des Capuchins” (1874), the picture that was a scandal in the first Impressionist show, to the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery; a Baldung Grien to the Metropolitan Museum; a great “Interior of St Peters” by Panini to the Norton Simon Museum. I mentioned some of the German Expressionist things I had early in my career. I sold together with Acquavella to the Goulandrises the great Picasso of the picture that was the warm-up or follow-up to “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon”, the great dancer of 1907. The National Gallery didn’t bite. I’ve sold great Cézannes to Berggruen, pictures to Thyssen ...

How did you become interested in American Indian art? Did it have to do with your move to Santa Fe?

We really got attracted to the Southwest the time we spent over a week in New Mexico appraising the O'Keeffe estate. Having spent a winter here at the farm near Cooperstown [in Central New York State], we knew we needed a better climate, so we bought a house down there and began dividing the year between New York and Santa Fe. Now we spend the whole year there with a few weeks exceptions.

I had to have something to do. I needed an outlet for my energies, and my energies are, for the most part, collecting energies. The local galleries were filled with things that I don't care about, and there were no Old Master drawings. But there was American Indian art. I had the luck to have a tutor, Ralph T. Coe, Jr. As director of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Ted had organised the great "Sacred Circles" exhibition of American Indian art which travelled to the British Museum in 1976. I could try things out on Ted and learn with him. And it just snowballed!

By the time I had 300 pieces I was interested in an overall purpose and final resting place for them. Though Santa Fe needs a major Indian collection, they seem interested in nothing but their local Navajo and Pueblo material, and there's a lot of politics involved in the museum world down there. So I looked for another answer, and my wife and I thought something like the Shelburne Museum in Vermont would be right. Then we realised that Cooperstown, with the Farmer's Museum and Fennimore House across the street, would be ideal. My friend "Gib" Vincent discussed it with the Clark Foundation and Jane Clark, and other people active in the town, and they came up with the idea of building a wing for the collection adjoining Fennimore House. And of course I promised the whole collection. Then it became like my drawings: I had to make sure it was good enough. And I went on a binge to buy enough of American Indian art from all regions and periods to make it a well-rounded collection. The strength of the collection is objects like Northwest Coast carvings, Eskimo masks—sculpture really. I do have a good group of Plains things, but I'm not interested in what Ted Coe calls the "bow-and-arrow" type of Indian art. With my European art perspective, I'm more interested in things that can be perceived as works of art than just moccasins or decorated war shirts.

Can the same aesthetic values be applied to collecting American Indian art and Old Master drawings?

I think connoisseurship is connoisseurship, whatever you direct it to. You can learn. You start looking, then it begins to make sense. If I wanted to look at the most rarefied type of Chinese porcelain, if I spent enough time and had someone to show me the characteristics to look for, I think one could find one's way. It's like learning to read a language.

Is the trade in American Indian objects very different from that in Western objects?

It is. The dealers from whom I buy are not Indians, but basically traders who keep very little in the way of records or photographs, and give almost no account of where something has come from. It will take another few years before they learn the techniques of what I would call responsible art dealing.

In what other activities are you involved?

With another trustee I run the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, which gives between $2.5-3 million dollars per year to worthy and needy artists under the will of Lee Krasner. That is an important part of my life right now. Also, I have the Eugene and Clare Thaw Charitable Trust in Santa Fe, which supports groups, not individuals, in the arts, ecology and animal rights. It has strongly supported a group that restores and maintains the old adobe churches in New Mexico which have been in sad disrepair.

I have friends with whom I still work, and am a member of several boards, including Artemis, though not a very active one. Also I support the Glimmerglass Opera here in Cooperstown. I read a lot, and I'm a contributing editor of the New Republic Magazine for which I write occasional art pieces and book reviews. I like the out-of-doors, and I have a ranch with some horses where I like to get out and walk with my wife and our dogs.

Desert Island choice

Which three works of art from your collection would you take with you to the proverbial desert island?

I would take Rembrandt's "Descent from the Cross"; a black-bordered Goya drawing called "She Leaves Everything to Providence"; and the great Cézanne still-life of 1904-1906 that usually hangs over my fireplace in New York. It's one of the great watercolours of all time. It's fresh, not faded at all. It will be in the exhibition.

And which not in your collection would you like to take along?

I would want to have a good Dürer drawing. I've never had a chance at one that I thought was right enough or good enough. Which one, I don't know. Maybe the one in the Lehman collection, the early self-portrait with the pillows. And I would take a Van Gogh letter with a drawing in it. That would mean a lot to me. I have a great Van Gogh reed pen drawing, but I didn't put that on my list; it's the Van Gogh drawing that's most like a Rembrandt, done at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer outside Arles. And almost anything early by Degas, like one of his self-portraits.

Collectors Old Masters Museums & Heritage Connoisseurship Native American
Art dealers Pierpont Morgan Library Interview

COOKIE SETTINGS