

The Collector

By Amanda McClure

While many would agree that art is the hallmark of modern civilization, few will take on the task of establishing a *true* fine art collection within their personal spaces.

Brushing the shores of Lake Lanier and dotting the hills of the North Georgia countryside, art collections are becoming the norm in elegant homes. From traditional works, portraiture, still life and landscape, to bold and vibrant contemporary pieces, a myriad of styles often coalesce under one roof.

Tom and Alice Paris

For Tom and Alice Paris, collecting is something that they came to enjoy doing together as a couple. Alice was a music major and grew up surrounded by art, music and flowers, all shaping her love and appreciation for fine art. She remembers a beautiful watercolor that was once her mother's as a sort of starting point.

For the Paris family, the collection began to grow in earnest about 25 years ago through local art events including the Brenau University Gala and the Quinlan Visual Art Center Gala Fine Art Auction. Contemporary works are prominent on their walls, a love of size, scope and color palette dictating each choice.

One of the first artists collected by the couple was Ferdinand Rosa of Flowery Branch, an artist known for his monumental, abstract work. Other artists collected by the pair include Dennis Campay, Sarah Lamb and Steve Penley, all artists that have since embarked upon exceptional careers.

Dennis Campay, an artist widely collected by Georgian art aficionados, is now represented exclusively by galleries in New York, Charlotte (North Carolina) and Sea Island (Georgia.) Sarah Lamb, an artist also with ties to Gainesville, graduated from the Brenau University Studio Art program in 1993. Lamb is now a very successful still life painter in New York that has boasted sell-out, one-woman shows. Alice remembers visiting the artist in studio and watching her paint a watermelon with such skill and precision that she quickly became enamored with the piece, which, consequently, was a surprise Christmas present from her husband that year.

When asked to choose a favorite, Alice laughed, "it is like being asked to choose a favorite child, you just can't do it, and all are different, interesting and loved." One important piece in their collection is by artist Kate Fetterolf, an abstract painter of Atlanta. It features monumental peppers with a thick impasto of boldly-hued paint. Alice admits to using this particular piece to teach her grandchildren the colors of the rainbow.

Trey and Sandra Paris

Tom and Alice Paris' son Trey and his wife Sandra began their art collection with a significant wedding present – original cut-out artwork of the iconic Coca-Cola bottle signed by folk artist Howard Finster.

“We like having pieces from artists we know,” explained Trey.

Steve Penley is another friend to Sandra and Trey. After meeting in college, Trey and Steve became close friends later in life in Atlanta where they were both beginning their professional careers, Trey, as an executive with Coca-Cola, and Steve, as an artist. Penley painted one of his first two Coca-Cola bottles for Trey and the Company. The other original Coca-Cola piece is in the private collection of Bob Steed, retired partner with King and Spalding in Atlanta, whose wife Lou is also an accomplished artist.

While it's difficult to choose just one piece as their favorite, the Paris' enjoy the pieces that are personal to them with subjects that hit close to home. One such work is Penley's painting of four generations of the Paris men- Trey, his son, father and grandfather. Another is a Lou Steed piece of her granddaughter and Trey's daughter, who were roommates at the University of Georgia. They also have works by Trey's mother Alice, an artist in her own right, who began painting seriously shortly after Trey and Sandra were married. Alice's portrait of her grandchildren playing on the beach at Sea Island is one Trey and Sandra truly cherish, and it is prominently displayed in their home on Lake Lanier in Gainesville, Ga.

Knowing an artist personally is a gateway to collecting fine art. The Paris family has been fortunate to have forged many connections with a number of exceptional artists. “Clayton Santiago is a local artist we greatly admire and have come to know well. We would look forward to adding him to our collection,” said Sandra. “And,” added Trey, “Todd Murphy is another artist whose work we would love to acquire. I met Todd at the University of Georgia and we became friends. Todd began his art career in Atlanta and now is internationally acclaimed. His works are large in scale and are in many private and corporate, as well as museum, collections.”

Folk art is a prominent part of the Paris family's art acquisitions. Folk art, by definition, is typically art created by an untrained or “self-taught” artist. North Georgia has been the birthplace for many highly celebrated folk artists. Trey secured an original piece by Mary Greene at an auction, in addition to several pieces from Howard Finster and local favorite, Gillsville, Ga., artist, R.A. Miller.

Jimmy and Betsy Adams

Jimmy and Betsy Adams began collecting art as a married couple in 1992, although each began acquiring pieces prior to marrying while in their early 20s. Today, their home in Flowery Branch is a virtual gallery in itself, combining both their individual and collective styles, a variety of media, styles and subject matter with works by artists such as Bert Beirne, David Wendel, Dawne Raulet, Onyeka Ibe, Lynne Windsor, Roseta Santiago, Jay Kemp and Suzy Schultz.

Bert Beirne, traditional still life painter from Flowery Branch, is featured throughout their kitchen, while the formal living spaces showcase original works by Ann Goble, Roseta Santiago, Marc Chatov and Jay Kemp.

Jay Kemp is a Gainesville native and internationally acclaimed wildlife artist. “Jay has been a friend of ours for many years and we are so in awe of his talent. To know how he takes his time to create such stunning works, the result leaving you unsure if they are painting or a photograph. We have a real admiration of his creativity and focus,” says Betsy Adams. The first level of the Adams’ home features many of Kemp’s limited-edition prints as well as an autographed poster from the 2013 Southeast Wildlife Expo (SEWE), held annually in Charleston, where Kemp was named the Featured Artist for the event with his work on the commemorative poster. “To see Jay at the head of the Charleston Place Hotel ballroom as a line of people waited for him to sign their SEWE poster with his sons by his side was just the best moment,” said Betsy.

The first purchase that Jimmy and Betsy made as a couple was at the Quinlan Fine Art Gala in 1998 – “Off to the Races” by Roseta Santiago, an oil on canvas. “We were attending the Gala Preview Night when we first saw the piece. We went way over our budget that year, but we have never regretted the stretch,” explained Jimmy. The Santiago piece is prominently displayed in the Adams’ home. Santiago, once an Atlanta resident, now lives and works in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Jimmy added, “After that first acquisition, we rarely missed the Quinlan art event as it was the most fun to watch good friends competitively bid against one another as well as meet the artists who had created the work.”

When traveling for work or leisure, art galleries are a must for the family. “Our boys joke that they were tricked into vacations just to see art, but our youngest has recently begun sketching and painting, which we are encouraging as a way for him to maintain balance as his natural tendency is more towards science and math,” explains Betsy.

The Adams’ sons have favorites among the family’s art and also attend art events. “If you want to have a great conversation with someone, especially your children, visit an art gallery and let them tell you what they like or don’t like. We’ve been pleasantly surprised with how our sons have an appreciation for art and various artists and to see their preferences change over the years,” said Jimmy. At a young age, the family went to the High Museum of Art to see the Salvador Dali exhibition. One of their sons was enthralled while the other not so much. “Our oldest lobbied to see the exhibit and was interested throughout the entire experience while the youngest was looking for a Coke machine and a quiet place to sit away from the crowds. Now, both boys laugh about that day and each have great admiration for Dali’s work,” laughed Betsy.

Jeff and Hart Payne

For Jeff and Hart Payne, when asked when they started collecting art, Jeff said, “it depends on what you call art.”

When he was in medical school, Jeff bought pieces he liked for display in his apartment, and Hart, also using personal taste to guide her, accumulated many items during college as well. Hart comes from a family of artists and collectors. Her mother, Mary Hart Wilheit, is a sculptor and her grandmother, Mildred Orr Keys was also an artist. As far as collecting original work, Jeff began collecting in earnest when he started his practice. As a couple, they have collected original paintings since marrying in 1999 and have procured an amazing, and varied, collection of works.

“We have several copper sculptures from Hart’s mother. We hang our daughters’ art as well. They have painted many pictures for us for different occasions; some at school, some with their grandparents,” explains Jeff. One such interesting, and truly one-of-a-kind piece is a collaborative work with artist Dennis Campay. It was an interactive art experience that combines the work of this widely collected artist with elements painted by their daughters that they won at the Quinlan auction. On the collaboration, Hart says, “the girls got to help paint a painting with Dennis Campay. Actually, I got to draw a line or two, the girls embellished some parts he had already painted and their grandmother added to it as well. We had a fun afternoon with him and the finished painting hangs in a place where many can see that special piece.”

For the Paynes, art is a way of life, an integral part of their home, a mode of enjoyment. Art in this sense is not an investment; rather, they focus on what they like.

When placed with the familial antiques that Hart had inherited, the couple has enjoyed melding more contemporary art with antique décor, creating spaces that thoughtfully and artfully blend yesterday and today. They describe their collection as “eclectic,” and with pieces ranging from the Civil War to the present, landscapes with abstracts and much more, who wouldn’t? Somehow the two have managed to make their art organically flow throughout their home despite the vast differences in media and styles. A wide range of artists’ work can be seen in their homes. Artist Marc Chatov, acclaimed portrait artist who grew up in a family of artists, musicians and stage professionals, as well as others including Geoffrey Johnson, Steve Penley, Dennis Campay, Carol Christie, Bert Bernie and many local talents from the thriving community of Northeast Georgia visual artists are also on display.

Most purchases are made locally, with some pieces purchased on trips as remembrances. The annual Quinlan auction is a go to for many of the couple’s cherished pieces.

When selecting a favorite piece, the couple agrees that there are several; “We LOVE our Geoffery Johnson, but also we love a Steve Penley portrait of Bobby Jones that hangs in our home in Highlands. We also really like the painting that our girls did with Dennis Campay! It’s hard to pick out a favorite when we only purchase what we like!”

Jeff really likes his Civil War era painting that Sammie Flaherty, who was like another grandmother, gave to him. She was a huge influence in his collecting, and added art and antique pieces to the collection. Another favorite piece is a whimsical giraffe statue that was a surprise birthday gift for Hart affectionately nicknamed “Gloria” by her nephew. She was created by sculptor Betty Beasley and came from an exhibition at the Quinlan as well.

“We both appreciate each piece, but maybe in a different way. Our girls have opinions too about some of our collection and we have loved watching their tastes change as they mature,” says Hart.

What beats in the heart of fine art collectors that inspires them to commit the time and expense to bringing together exquisite acquisitions in their homes? For some, the art of collecting is learned. The rich cultural fabric of a familial collection can run deep with threads spanning and overlapping the generations. Others find that art brings people together, defining spaces, bridging cultures and often conveying a sense of community or greater purpose beyond what is simply decorative and ornamental. It is true that art collections can be viewed as a form of investment, but for many others, collecting art is simply a way of life. Art acquired simply for the sake of the beauty and enjoyment it brings.