

The Joanne Stevens and Thomas C. Jackson Collection

“Looking back on it, it didn’t just happen. We did a lot of research and made a lot of decisions, but it didn’t seem hard. It was enjoyable. Collecting focused our thinking about artists we liked. How did we get here?”

In preparation for the exhibition, *The Collector’s Eye*, the CRMA sat down with Tom and Joanne and discussed their collection—how it came to be and what they learned along the way. Below is a summary of that conversation.

Before They Started Collecting

Both Joanne Stevens and Tom Jackson have liked art most of their lives. Joanne took an American art history course in 1969 at Coe College from Bob Kocher that made a big impact on her. Tom was an art major at Western Illinois University and received an M.F.A. in studio art from the University of Notre Dame.

The year 2000 increased their art experiences. Tom resigned his position at Stamats Communications to become a full-time artist. They conducted library research at the Cedar Rapids Public Library into the current art world. They also learned, for example, that many New York City galleries were in the process of leaving SoHo and relocating to Chelsea, the former meatpacking district where rents were cheaper. They began travelling to New York City, the center of the art world, three or four times a year to visit one of Joanne’s sons, who moved there that year. While there, they would go to many galleries and museums.

As time went on Tom’s artwork was accepted in juried exhibitions in New York City galleries and their trips to the city increased. Most trips included a walk from gallery to gallery in Chelsea. In addition to the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim, they enjoyed seeing shows at the Fashion Institute of Technology, The New York Public Library, The Morgan Library & Museum, The Asia Society and Museum, The Jewish Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Frick Collection, and more. They also visited venues in Brooklyn and Queens. When work took them to Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Fort Worth, and San Francisco they went to galleries and museums in those cities as well.

The first piece of art Joanne and Tom bought together was Grant Wood’s *Shriner Quartet* in 2003. They didn’t consider themselves collectors at the time. It was something they saw locally at the CornerHouse Gallery and both liked it and thought, “Wouldn’t this be nice to own.” They admit to having some sticker shock over the price, but they liked it and bought it and had no plans to buy more art at the time.

The One That Got Away

In 2005 they saw some Thomas Hart Benton prints at CornerHouse Gallery. They spent a couple of weeks thinking about one in particular: *Morning Train*. It never occurred to them that it wouldn’t be available when they made up their mind. When they went back to buy it, it had been sold. This was a lesson learned: if you really like a piece, ask for it to be held until you decide, and don’t take too long to decide if it is the only one available. They bought a different Benton, *Planting (Spring Plowing)*. They still didn’t consider themselves collectors.

Getting Started

Around that same time Joanne and Tom were talking with a friend and Tom mentioned he thought he’d like other people’s artwork on the walls of their home. As an artist, they had hung Tom’s work on all the

walls. Joanne said she didn't know that. "I thought you just wanted your own work on the walls!" This led to a realization that they should begin talking about what they would like to see on their walls. They decided that art by Regionalists, while they really like it, wasn't what they wanted to collect. What they really wanted to buy was contemporary art. What they could afford was contemporary prints. The realization for the first time after a dozen years of marriage that they could be "the kind of people who collect art" led to a change in their goals and behavior.

One of their first decisions was to try to buy at least one piece of art a year. The couple decided it was something they could do together. They decided that instead of buying gifts for each other for birthdays, their anniversary, Valentine's Day, and Christmas, they would put all of that effort, time, and expense into buying one piece of art as a shared gift. It saved a lot of time.

In early January 2006 Joanne and Tom were having lunch in his studio in downtown Cedar Rapids when Tom began laying out printouts on the floor saying "If we could actually buy some art, I would get this (Jim Dine) and this (Philip Guston) and this (Ellsworth Kelly) and this (Robert Rauschenberg) and this (Ed Ruscha) and this (Larry Rivers) and this (Frank Stella). Joanne replied "Why not? Let's do it." When Karolyn Sherwood, the gallerist in Des Moines at the time who had the prints for sale, came to hang them in the Stevens/Jackson home, she said "This is an instant collection!"

What to Collect?

Joanne and Tom have never purchased an artwork as an interior design choice. They are moved by the art and purchase it without knowing where they will hang it, or if they have a place left to hang it. They want to purchase art by artists they respect that is representative of each artist's body of work if they can find one they really like that is available. They don't restrict themselves to a single movement. They are drawn to individual artists. Whether the artist makes abstract art or uses imagery, that artist has developed a way of looking at the world. The couple believe both abstract art and art with imagery expresses emotion.

They began researching art differently. They joined the Cedar Rapids Collector's Circle for a year. They joined the Des Moines Art Center Print Club for a year after that. They continued going to galleries and not just going to look, but to buy. For example, when thinking about the Chicago Imagists, they went to several shows at Russell Bowman Art Advisory in Chicago (when he still had a physical gallery) and purchased works by Ed Paschke, Jim Nutt, and Roger Brown. When they saw a museum show they liked they talked about whether they might like to own a piece by the artist.

Top Influencers

Joanne and Tom note many people, institutions, and events that have influenced their collection. When deciding what to buy they often think about what artists contemporary arts institutions have purchased. For example, who is in the collection of the Des Moines Art Center? MOMA (NYC and San Francisco)? The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth? The Walker in Minneapolis? Etc. They often think about these collections when making specific decisions. For example, they purchased *Distorted Cubes (B)* by Sol LeWitt and *Studio Forms* by Philip Guston in part because they had seen works by these artists at the Des Moines Art Center. They purchased *Occupation of Alexandria Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War, (Annotated)* by Kara Walker and *Three Shadows in a Landscape* by William Kentridge after seeing works by these artists displayed outside the Print and Drawing Study Room in the Grinnell College Burling Library.

The Back Room

Sometimes artworks that the couple ended up buying were not hanging in galleries and Joanne and Tom learned about them by sitting down and talking with gallery directors or owners. They mentioned to

Andrew Witkin at the Barbara Krakow Gallery in Boston (now Krakow Witkin Gallery) in 2006 that they were looking for a Sean Scully intaglio but hadn't been able to find one available. They were told that the gallery had recently received back artworks that they sold two years prior. Apparently, the buyer's family situation changed, and the individual returned the prints in the original shipping crate that had never been opened. Joanne and Tom had their choice of three Scully prints and chose *Wall of Light Red Grey*. Later that year the Metropolitan Museum had a show of his work titled "Wall of Light."

In 2007 they were talking with Jim Kempner at Jim Kempner Fine Art in NYC and mentioned they would really like to find an older food item print by Wayne Thiebaud. He said he may know of a piece that might be available. This led to Joanne and Tom purchasing *Four Cakes*, created in 1979.

In 2013 the couple visited Crown Point Press, not far from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and mentioned to a gallery worker that they were interested in Julie Mehretu's work. They were brought to a back room to see Mehretu's *Unclosed*. Joanne and Tom had seen this piece on the Crown Point website but since the piece is so large and so subtle, the photograph on the website did not do it justice and it didn't appeal to them. Seeing the work in person was a completely different experience and they purchased it.

Printmaking Studios/Workshops

Joanne and Tom visited other print workshops and publishers online. Tom would sometimes print out 10 or 12 images of artworks that were available and discuss them with Joanne. Sometimes they didn't buy any of them, sometimes they did. This has resulted in purchasing directly from the studios such artworks as *Fall Line* by John Baldessari in 2016 from Gemini GEL in Los Angeles, *Grid* by Terry Winters in 2021 from Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE) on Long Island, *Minidoka Snapshots* by Roger Shimomura in 2010 from Lawrence Lithography Workshop in Kansas City, and *Sky Gate 1* by Louise Nevelson in 2021 from Pace Prints in NYC. Of course it's still important to see the actual print in person. They had seen *Moscow on the Seine* by John Buck printed at Shark's Ink in Lyons, Colorado online but only made the decision to purchase it after seeing it in person at a print fair at the Javits Center in NYC.

Social Media

Even with all of the in-person research the couple has done, social media also plays a role. Tom saw on Instagram that Jim Kempner Fine Art was having a show of Sam Francis's prints in 2018 and inquired about available artworks. The couple decided on *Untitled* from 1978 because it so closely resembled a very large acrylic in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art that they had recently seen.

Auctions

Joanne and Tom admit they are not big fans of auctions. They did try it once in 2011 with Swann Auction Galleries in NYC by phone. The result was their purchase of *Untitled (Street Scene)* by Romare Bearden. They enjoy looking through the auction catalogs and keep them as reference to study artists' bodies of work in printmaking.

Printmaking Media

Concentrating on collecting prints allowed Joanne and Tom to develop an understanding of the processes used to make the artworks: intaglio (etching, sugarlift, drypoint, hard ground, aquatint, spit-bite); lithography; screenprint; woodcut; linocut.

Art Movements

When collecting one lives with the art. Joanne and Tom spend every day with pieces from different movements: such as Pop Art, Abstract Expressionism, the Chicago Imagists, and Minimalism. Each artwork provides information and projects its own feeling. The collection together provides a fuller understanding of each artist and each movement.

Social Awareness

Joanne and Tom believe artists and art change the world for the better.

Many of the artists that the couple have collected create art that reflects the artist's culture or makes statements about social issues. Romare Bearden's *Untitled (Street Scene)* depicts, in part, a black Jesus and street imagery. John Buck's *Moscow on the Seine* portrays Russian people and events. Ed Paschke's *Trabajo* depicts people of different races, perhaps united by work. Roger Shimomura was detained as a child with his family in an internment camp during World War II. Some of his prints show scenes from the camp from a child's point of view. Other Shimomura works combine Eastern and Western imagery, such as *Enter the Rice Cooker*. Kara Walker's *Occupation of Alexandria Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War* makes one think about the African American experience during those years. Enrique Chagoya's *Everyone is an Alienígeno* shows four people of different races and costumes. Louis Jimenez's *Reflejo del Chuco* is a scene familiar to his culture.

The couple didn't set out to have diversity of artists or image content in their collection. It was the process of looking for artists whose work they liked and respected, which has resulted in such a rich and diverse collection.

Eager Anticipation

Once a buying decision has been made Stevens and Jackson eagerly await the arrival of the artwork. They especially enjoy opening a crate with an unframed print and carefully peeling off the tape to unfold the protective glassine and reveal the first glimpse of their new artwork.