

BLOUIN ARTINFO

The Frick Collection's Inge Reist on the Oral Histories of Art Ownership

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For the director of the Center for the History of Collecting at the Frick, in New York, the story behind a collection can be as important as the artworks in it. Since the center's founding as a discrete division of the Frick Art Reference Library in 2007, Inge Reist has been committed to realizing an ambitious oral history project to address the important but often overlooked elements of collecting and patronage. Julia Halperin talked with Reist about encouraging art collectors to share their stories.

What prompted you to launch the oral history project?

We envisioned it as part of our programming from the center's inception in 2007. Looking at works of art from the point of view of ownership leads you into the realm of cultural history, even more than art history. Because it's not stylistic influences, it's trends and it's taste: why the trends, why the taste. If a certain collector is regarded as a great arbiter of taste, then other people want what they are collecting. They become the key that unlocks a door to a richer understanding of a period.

This aspect of art history has been largely ignored in academic circles.

I think the pendulum is swinging back from more theoretical to more object focused art history. So inevitably, collecting plays a role. I got through an entire Ph.D. program at Columbia University and never looked at an auction catalogue. They didn't even collect exhibition catalogues until the blockbuster scholarly genre came along. But these materials allow you to discover what I call the biography of the work of art—where it's been, who it's been attributed to, what it sold for, its condition.

What are your criteria to identify collectors for the project?

The criteria at the moment are very easy because these are major collectors. Obviously, they have to be alive and able to describe their collecting experiences. We have a list of 20 but just added another. We thought, Oh yeah, why didn't we think of him? So it's kind of malleable.

What sorts of questions do you ask the collectors you interview?

What's your first memory of being struck by a work of art? Without being too psychological about it, we are trying to get at their motivations, the origins of their passion. Tracing the way an individual's taste developed over time or how he or she perceived influences is important. Not too long ago I had a





wonderful conversation with Tony Ganz, who has a lovely perspective on how his interest in collecting was initially informed by his parents' passion and by being surrounded by superb art. But then he became his own man, his tastes changed, and he and his wife began to collect differently. And there are people like Tom Hill, who collect older art and contemporary art, which I think is fascinating.

Are your interviewers familiar with the collectors' holdings?

They do a lot of homework. Being aware of which artists collectors knew personally, for example—that's a pretty important thing for those who collect contemporary art. Often these artists played a big role in steering them in one direction or another.

We're working with the Archives of American Art [at the Smithsonian], which has been doing oral histories, not so much of collectors but of dealers and artists, for more than 40 years. This was a new angle for them, and that's one reason they were happy to collaborate with us.

There are probably 5 or 10 top collectors in the world whose names are virtually unknown outside a very small circle. Are you planning to reach out to them?

That's true. There was a show at the Clark a few years ago of Renaissance portraits, all from one collector, but I didn't see his name anywhere. I think that once people know that the Frick does oral histories of important collectors, hopefully there will be a bit of a bandwagon for it [laughs]. We had Eli and Edythe Broad here for a small dinner after he did an interview. One of the guests was encouraging another to do an oral history for the center, and Eli jumped right in, saying, "You really have to do it!"

When will you complete the histories, and will they be accessible to the public?

We are hoping to do all of the collectors on the current list within a couple of years. Ultimately, they will be freely accessible to researchers, but understandably, some of the subjects would rather we not make them available until after their death. That's the case with Steve Martin and the Newhouses. We have to respect people's private lives, and we want them to be candid about what went into their thinking and their collecting. As I say to all our subjects, we're in this for the long haul.