



THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

AN INTERNATIONAL DAILY NEWSPAPER FRIDAY, JUNE 20, 1986

Cultivating an eye for art that has more than aesthetic value

By David Clark Scott
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

New York

Jane Wesman brushes back an unruly, sun-streaked shock of hair and points to a macabre painting on the wall beside her desk. "It's worth twice what I paid for it three years ago," she says.

The Rick Prol painting is one of two dozen contemporary pieces Ms. Wesman has on display in her office and home. All were bought for less than \$2,000, some for as little as \$25. And a few in her modest collection are worth six or eight times what she paid.

Wesman, it should be noted, is savvy or fortunate enough to have started buying from young artists on the Lower East Side of Manhattan about six years ago. In the ensuing years, the East Village has blossomed into New York's newest art district, with more than 100 galleries.

And Wesman has her own Manhattan-based public relations firm that specializes in the arts — giving her an edge in knowing and befriending new artists.

But her approach to buying inexpensive art, which often means that of young, unknown artists, is universally adaptable. The lessons she has learned can be helpful for any art investor

ket than the next patron. In fact, buying works by obscure, young artists is akin to investing in nascent over-the-counter stocks. Prices are low but volatile. If you decide to sell, buyers may be scarce and the sizable brokers' fees will eat up profits. And what's hot today may be cold tomorrow.

"It used to take three or four years for an artist to catch on, and then he or she would stay at the top of the heap for six or seven years," a veteran New York art critic says. "Today the gestation period is much shorter. It can be terribly risky."

The most sought-after artists can suddenly drop into obscurity, because they either stop producing or lose their following. In each city or region, just who is in vogue can depend on media exposure, gallery support, and sometimes only a covey of "trend setting" wealthy patrons.

"I have a piece by a woman who did beautiful portraits, but she's no longer painting," Wesman notes. "She was a such complainer that the dealers didn't enjoy working with her. Often, a young artist's personality happens to count."

But even if a young artist falls out of favor, the loss is typically just a small investment. Hal-

Says Wesman, referring to a bust of Abraham Lincoln in pastel hues: "What difference does it make if it's worth 50 cents? I'm happy to have it."

To educate herself and train her eye, Wesman subscribes to Art in America, Art News, and Art Forum. And she goes gallery and museum hopping, splitting her field trips between uptown and downtown. She often spends Sundays frequenting such East Village galleries as Hal Bromm, Limbo, Gracie Mansion, Civilian Warfare, and Piezo Electric. But she also roams uptown to cultivate an understanding of the masters and their influence on today's artists.

Similar advice is meted out by experienced collectors like Barbara and Ira Sahlman. "You've got to put in the time," says Mr. Sahlman, head of a textile manufacturing company. "Go to the galleries. You've got to trudge through the mire in order to sharpen your eye. Until you see a lot, you don't know what you're seeing."

The Sahlmans have collected in several realms. Fifteen years ago they filled their nine-room Madison Avenue apartment with Victorian and Edwardian antiques. Then they sold everything (at a profit)

ings. In 1985 they sold it all again. The new venue was a spacious lower Manhattan loft with a 360-degree view; "sunrise, sunset, and moonrise," Mr. Sahlman says with a smile.

And the new collection: East Village art. Their budget is a bit larger than Ms. Wesman's ("we don't spend more than \$6,000 or \$7,000 for a piece"), so their pieces tend to be larger.

And their collection already includes the odd Christo and a Warhol. But both Wesman and the Sahlmans have acquired works by many of the same East Village artists: Luis Frangella, Russel Sharon, Judy Glantzman, Rhonda Zwilling, and Grace Graupe-Pillard.

"We've worked very hard at it," explains Mrs. Sahlman, a sculptor herself. "We go to as many openings as we can. Spend Sundays in the Village. You've really got to get to know the artists."

Getting to know the artists and gallery owners can be crucial to choosing potentially valuable art. A gallery owner known to support and promote young artists can be more important for an investment than the artists themselves, one art appraiser says. If demand stays high, prices will rise.



Jane Wesman with 'The Wader,' by Russel Sharon



Barbara and Ira Sahlman with 'Untitled,' by Terry Rosenberg

PHOTOS BY DAVID CLARK SCOTT