

FRIENDS

Account of the Group Interview of Collectors at the CODART Symposium “The World of Dutch and Flemish Art,” 15 October 2013, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

George Abrams built up his collection in close cooperation with his late wife, Maida Stocker Abrams (1938-2002). The Maida and George Abrams Collection is one of the finest collections of Dutch drawings with a focus on the seventeenth century ever brought together in the United States.

Read more about his collection and his philosophy of collecting in this [eZine interview](#), where George Abrams says: “I love the research and scholarly side of drawings and have always tried to encourage and support this type of activity.”

George Kremer and his wife, Ilone, collect Dutch and Flemish Old Master paintings. The artists represented in their collection include Hendrick ter Brugghen, Gerrit Dou, Frans Hals and Rembrandt. Learn more about the Kremer Collection on its [website](#), where George Kremer talks about his motivation for collecting: “We very much like to share our love and passion for these paintings and show the public why we believe these works are exciting, beautiful art that played an essential role in the development of Western art.”

Thomas Leysen, chair of the Friends of CODART Foundation, is a passionate businessman who, as he himself admits, suffers from a serious condition: the collecting bug. His collection focuses on Antwerp masters of 1500 to 1650, that is to say, from Quinten Metsys to Rubens, Van Dyck and their followers. Leysen enjoys lending his artworks to museums, because, as he says, “This way others can enjoy them too. Often, when works are lent out, additional information about them comes to light.” Read more about Thomas Leysen and his collection in this [eZine interview](#).

Marieke Sanders-ten Holte and her husband, Pieter Sanders, have been collecting contemporary art for more than forty years. The focus of their collection is the work of young and still relatively unknown artists primarily from the Netherlands but also from abroad. Their extremely varied collection includes paintings, sculptures, photographs, video art and works on paper. Many of the artists represented in their collection have become internationally known in recent decades. Two weeks after this interview took place, Mr and Mrs Sanders announced their intention to make an important donation to the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam ([see press release](#)).

Rudi Ekkart (chair) was director-general of the RKD (Netherlands Institute for Art History) from 1990 until his retirement in 2012. Since 1997 he has also served as chairman of the “Ekkart Committee,” which carries out research into artworks stolen during the Second World War. In 2004 Ekkart was appointed Affiliate Professor of Methodological Aspects of Art-Historical Documentation at the University of Utrecht. In addition to these activities, he serves on the board of numerous organizations in the national and international cultural sphere and is the author of many articles, books and catalogues.

Ekkart has also served as a member of the Board of CODART (1998 – 2006) and an advisor to the Board (2007 – 2012).

Rudi: In recent years CODART has paid quite a lot of attention to contacts with private collectors of Dutch and Flemish art. Collectors play a major role in the international art world and many of them have collections that are comparable to museum holdings. Many private collectors are in contact with museums, but the nature of this contact is different in each case. So I intend to ask these four eminent collectors about their cooperation with museums. But before we start the discussion, I'd like to ask them to introduce themselves and their collections, and to show us the slides I asked them to bring along of their favourite works.

Rudi: When did you start collecting?

Thomas: I started buying art at a pretty young age. While still at school, I bought a few things with money given to me by my grandmother, but my really serious collecting began maybe fifteen years ago.

George Abrams: I started a little earlier than Thomas, about 1960. I got interested in Dutch art while studying at Harvard Law School. I spent a summer in the Netherlands, working for the student travel organization NBBS, which gave me an opportunity to wander around museums. I was really overwhelmed by Dutch museums and Dutch art. I got married in 1960, and my wife and I started looking at Dutch paintings and drawings, though we were really taken by the drawings, because they seemed more personal to us and more spontaneous. Cambridge (Mass.), including Harvard, became a center of Old Master drawings. The great curators were there: Paul Sachs, Agnes, Seymour Slive and later on, Konrad Oberhuber. One of my great heroes is a man by the name of Jacob Beam, who was curator of drawings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York from approximately 1960 to 1990. Jacob Beam did not like Dutch drawings: he did not encourage the local collectors connected with the Met to buy Dutch drawings, nor did he buy them during that period of thirty-plus years, which was a great opportunity for me and my wife. We collected together for forty-two years, and in 1999 we gave 110 drawings by great masters such as Rembrandt and Ruisdael to Harvard University. I regard that institution as a center of interest – and the creation of interest – in Dutch and other Old Master drawings. I'm also involved with the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where we now have 200 drawings on loan. We also collect paintings – I like paintings, but I love drawings.

George Kremer: Since 1995 I've been collecting – together with my wife, Ilone, who couldn't be here today – seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish paintings, as well as nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French paintings. But the focus of our collection is Dutch and Flemish art from the seventeenth century. We've built up a collection of about sixty-five works, which we use as an instrument to show people the beauty of Dutch art, because we passionately believe that this is one of the great schools of painting. We try to disseminate information about our collection through our website, as well as by publishing catalogues, participating in exhibitions, and organizing our own exhibitions, of which we've done four so far. And the collection is still growing: we probably acquire two, three, maybe four paintings a year on average. And the surprising thing to me is that it is still possible, even today, to build up a really good collection of seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish art.

Here on the left you see a self-portrait of Gerrit Dou, which he painted when he was about thirty-two. It is the smallest self-portrait of the twelve known today, and in my view it is actually one of the jewels, certainly one of the best self-portraits of Dou in existence today. At the top [referring to the slides projected on the screen] you see a penitent Saint Peter painted by Gerrit van Honthorst. I'm very proud of this acquisition, because it was produced in Rome, and today we know only seventeen pictures that Gerrit van Honthorst actually painted in Rome before returning to Utrecht. Here, at the bottom, you see a painting by Dirck van der Lisse, and the last painting, at the upper right, is *A Young Maidservant* by Michael Sweerts, an iconic work of seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish painting.

Rudi: Thank you very much. Now I'd like to give the floor to Marieke Sanders, who has a collection of an altogether different kind: works of contemporary art.

Marieke: I collect together with my husband, Pieter. We come from collecting families, so it was not so unusual for us to start a collection, and it's a passion that we share. We always have to agree about buying something: if we don't agree, we just don't buy it. No one advises us; no one else comments on it. Our collection is extremely varied – we have paintings,

photographs, objects, ceramics – and we're also very much interested in new media. We like fresh ideas and the innovative use of materials, and the artwork should be energizing. Our whole collection is too large to keep in our house, so we store a lot of it in a depot, from which we make a new selection every two years and rehang our collection to have a new way of life in our own home.

I've picked five works from our collection to show you. First I'd like to point out the work by Folkert de Jong at the right, where you see old books with a skull on top of them: a contemporary *vanitas* still life. Another picture I'd like to show you is this photograph by Juul Hondius. We really love this portrait because of its subject: loneliness. At the top you see a work from our collection that is critical of society. It's by Alicia Framis, and it criticizes the position of women and the political situation in China. In the middle you see a work by Viviane Sassen. She photographs the clothes designed by Viktor and Rolf, but she also made a series of works on Africa to show the people in a different light. She is very much concerned with light as rendered throughout the ages.

Rudi: Thank you very much, Marieke. Now I'd like to switch to our first topic of discussion, which is the relationship between private collectors and museums. George Abrams, you have been cooperating with museums for many years.

George Abrams: I really love museums. I love to spend time looking at artworks of all kinds, and I've been doing that my whole life. For many years I've been cooperating closely with museums. Many curators, particularly at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and at Harvard, were extraordinarily helpful when we started our collection. It became more and more important to exchange our knowledge and our experiences as collectors with other collectors and museum curators. For us it is also vital that works from our collection end up in museums, so that other people can have some of the same experiences we've had.

Marieke: We have a lot of contact with curators and museums. We feel it's very important to lend out works from our collection, because we think it's important for the artist to be seen. And, as I said before, we cannot show our whole collection in our private house. For a long time I was chairing the board of the Teylers Museum Endowment Fund and as a gesture, the director suggested exhibiting works on paper from the Teylers Museum together with works from our collection. That was a very interesting project, because it showed – and this is the message I want to get across here – that contemporary art is, in one way or another, a continuation of the tradition that started in the Middle Ages or even earlier. It was amazing to show these traditions and the way artists work – then and now – with light, horizon, subject and so on. For me it was a gift to see some of our works in this context.

George Kremer: We also have a lot of contact with museum people and curators. I personally don't perceive these people or museums as competitors, because we're not necessarily looking for the same thing. It's nice to know that you can talk to people who know much more than you know yourself. In judging Old Masters, we often need help with such matters as assessing a painting's condition.

Rudi: And with regard to the condition of the paintings: are you also in touch with the restorers?

George Kremer: Yes indeed, I've been cooperating for almost twenty years now with the restorer Martin Bijl and I'm very happy with him. I like to be involved in the restoration process, because it teaches you a lot, it's a tremendous way of learning how to look at paintings. It sounds easy, but learning how to look at paintings really closely is tough, but that's exactly what you have to do in order to assess their quality.

Rudi: Thomas, do you compete with museums?

Thomas: Yes, sometimes you compete with museums, but you don't always know who you're competing with. On the question of seeking advice: I often seek advice, but it's also happened that I've bought a painting immediately, because I was determined to have it. I would never work systematically with advisers for all my purchases, because then I would no longer feel that it was my collection. But I certainly learn a lot, and I enjoy interacting with curators tremendously.

George Abrams: I do feel as though I'm competing with museums, although I cannot be in competition with the Boston Museum because of my position there as a Trustee. One of the things that has impressed me during this symposium is that collecting drawings is very different from collecting paintings. Fewer and fewer top-quality drawings come on the market, and there is enormous competition for the good ones. Museums are among our major competitors, and you sense that competition every time you see a good drawing. Sometimes you – and some of your curator friends – are in the midst of that competition.

Rudi: I'm also interested in your contact with other collectors and the competition with them. Do you have anything to say about that? Let's start with contemporary art.

Marieke: Sometimes there is very stiff competition. You have to be very quick at times. We go to a lot of art galleries and art fairs, and there are previews and even preview previews. Sometimes there's no problem at all, but a while back we were at a gallery and we saw an artwork there, and we thought, "Well, that's a nice work, we'd like to have that," but it was a three-story building, so we went up to the other floors just to see the whole collection, and when we came down we told the gallery owner: "We'd like to buy this work," and he said, "I'm sorry, it's just been sold." But it's fun anyway, I don't think I've ever held a grudge against anyone just because they had a more acute eye and were quicker to decide than we were.

Rudi: Do you also feel competition from other collectors, George?

George Kremer: Not really. I strongly believe that you must have your own ideas and your own vision of the collection, but you're also dependent on what the market has to offer – that's the nature of the game. You have to do your homework, of course, go through the catalogues, attend the sales, keep informed. But you still have to follow your own vision. We succeed in buying good paintings, and paintings that strengthen the character of the collection. And I agree very strongly with Thomas that you really must make your own decisions, because otherwise it's not your own collection. You might make mistakes that way; only time will tell.

Rudi: Do you feel that you've made serious mistakes? This is always a nice question to ask.

George Kremer: No, no, I have no problem answering it. We've made comparatively few mistakes, because we were willing to study and learn, and we had good teachers. We have made some mistakes, we've exchanged paintings for better paintings by the same artist, paintings that were sort of rejected after a few years. You don't fight it, that would be silly, you just listen to what people tell you, and you agree or disagree and decide accordingly, whether or not to exchange a painting. But no big mistakes, no, I'm happy to say.

George Abrams: Paul Sachs, the great museum director and collector, once told me that if you don't make one mistake in ten, you're buying too cautiously.

Marieke: It's different with contemporary art. It all depends on what you call a mistake. You follow your instinct and feel triggered by a particular work at that particular time. That's part of collecting. Good works will stand the test of time, and you can only hope that the artist will continue to develop and stay on course. But if you buy early, if you believe in an artist, you can never tell what he will do in ten years' time, and that's what makes it so interesting. That's also what makes our cooperation with museums so interesting: often a museum doesn't buy early work, so it's missing in their collection. This is often why they seek out crucial works in private collections when they mount bigger shows of an artist's oeuvre.

Rudi: Thomas, do you have any experience with...

Thomas: ... mistakes?

Rudi: Mistakes you've made?

Thomas: Well, who's to say? Mistakes in the sense that I bought something that turned out not to be what it was supposed to be? Not that often, at least not so far, I think. I don't collect to an absolute level of quality like many other collectors do. I have a number of paintings which I think many great museums would love to have on loan (and some of them do), and other paintings that I'd be hard pressed to get accepted by a provincial museum. Still, I had a reason for buying them, they all have a story. They're connected to my collection, and so I'm happy to have them. Actually, I find it very hard to part with anything that I've bought. I occasionally exchange something or sell something back to the market, but very rarely, because we always had a reason for buying it in the first place, and generally that reason still applies. So I'm happy to have works by minor masters in my collection, if I had a good reason for acquiring them.

Rudi: A question for both Georges. You've both had museum exhibitions that showed large parts of your collections. What's it like, having so many of your dear friends away from home?

George Abrams: I'm going to be embarrassed by my answer. I've now got 150 drawings that we've given to Harvard and they're over at Harvard, and I've got 200 on loan to the Museum of Fine Arts, and I have another 450 in some boxes, including a few under my bed. There are no empty walls; my problem is finding the space to put some additional things. I was talking with a great collector of the past, Ian Woodner – some of you may have known him or perhaps know his catalogue. A woman came up to him and said, "Mr. Woodner, I really don't see how you can stand it, having your drawings away all the time. They're on loan. Doesn't that bother you terribly?" and he pointed to his head and said, "They're all up here, stored in my mind," and in fact they are. When you own something it's up here; when you give it away, it's not up there in the same way anymore,

but it's still there, even if you don't have it in your immediate presence.

Rudi: George, you've also had large exhibitions of your collection. You don't have hundreds of other paintings.

George Kremer: I'm not going to be embarrassed by my answer either. We don't actually hang Old Masters at home for two reasons: we do a lot of lending and we live in different places. So it's totally impractical to have Old Masters at home. You can imagine having to travel to Amsterdam or Spain or Dallas just to get hold of a picture. That doesn't work. So at home we hang nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century paintings – Impressionism, pre-Impressionism, fauvism – and the Old Masters we essentially use for, well, educational purposes, and we love the idea of showing these things to the public. When we were in Holland during our show at the Frans Hals Museum, I went there every day just to talk to the people.

Rudi: So you were there at that moment.

George Kremer: Yes, and you talk to the people who come to see the stuff, and it's fabulous. You talk to these people and you ask them what they think and you tell them what you see, and I find this exchange with the public exhilarating. But we don't have Old Masters at home; that's the long and the short of it.

Rudi: Thomas, I know that quite a lot of your paintings are now on loan to museums, but you are working on your new house, and trying to acquire family portraits of former owners. Have you decided to have more artworks at home?

Thomas: Yes indeed, and I'm very much looking forward to the day when we will actually move in. The idea is to bring most of the paintings home, but we will still be happy to lend to exhibitions, if it makes sense to do so. In our current home the space is limited, though, so in recent years most of the paintings I bought went directly to a museum. I'm very happy about that, because I certainly wouldn't want them to be sitting in a depot for a couple of years. I learn a lot about these paintings when they're on display, and some of the museums research them thoroughly, so I find that a great experience. But it will be a happy day for me, the day I see my collection together for the first time.

Rudi: Well, there's always one other important question about private collections, and that is their future. George Abrams has already found a destination for parts of his collection. How do you see the remainder of your collection in the future? Do you hope that it will find a place in a museum, or do you think, as many collectors do, that it's good for the market when

collections, or part of them, are put up for sale?

George Abrams: I keep hearing collectors say that they love the idea of putting their collection back on the market, so that other people can have the same pleasure they had – which usually means that they need or want the money. I've made some decisions and I'm working out the details. Including nineteenth-century Dutch, I have about 550 drawings in my collection, and I have a group of paintings, some of them very good. There are ten [paintings] that I consider appropriate as part of a drawing collection. I also have a group of other Dutch artworks: a collection of about 250 historical silver medals from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, bronzes and wood sculptures, glass and leatherwork, tiles and the like. At the moment I'm thinking of putting these objects, together with drawings and some paintings, into a foundation for Dutch art that would be affiliated with both Harvard and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. I want these artworks to be accessible to the public and to students, and I would like to provide an opportunity for scholars and students to come from Europe to the Boston area to research the art collections at Harvard and the MFA and also to work with some of the other strong public and private collections in the Boston area. There are other collectors who would join in this effort right now. We haven't worked it out totally, but there are at least two other important collections that will be part of this initiative, and we're hoping that this plan will become a reality in the next two or three years.

Rudi: Marieke, do you think about having at least parts of your collection in a museum at some future time?

Marieke: Yes, we certainly do. However, we cannot envision one museum in the Netherlands that would have the whole collection, even if we were willing to say, "Feel free to sell whatever you don't want to keep." It's a difficult issue. Some years ago we contacted the Rijksdienst voor Cultureel Erfgoed (Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage) and they saw many works that would fit in with their collection. We gave over a hundred works to the Institute. And we're now selecting other works and talking with a museum, to see if there are works that would fit into their collection. It's a very interesting issue, but it takes a lot of time, and it requires a lot of research into what Dutch museums and our collection have in common, and what it would make sense to donate.

Rudi: George, do you ever dream of seeing parts of your collection prominently displayed in a museum?

George Kremer: No.

Rudi: Well, that's clear enough!

George Kremer: This might sound callous but it's not meant to be. I really don't want to think about what will happen to the collection. I'm building a collection, so that is sort of my whole attitude and my whole way of thinking. It's like constructing a building: you have pillars, you have a foundation, and if you give away even one important work, the building will start to wobble. Most collectors realize that they are creating an ever increasing problem for themselves, because what the hell do you do with this collection, this baby that you've nursed so carefully? I don't really want to think about that. My attitude is, "I want to build the best possible collection," and I think we are doing a decent job, and we will continue to do that, and I have no idea where it will end. I'd probably want to keep the collection together, and continue to do what we're doing, which is showing it to the public.

Rudi: Thomas?

Thomas: Well, I'm not quite at the same stage. It's not that I don't want to think about it, but I certainly haven't made up my mind at this point.

George Abrams: You're younger than I am, that's why.

Thomas: Yes, and when the time comes, it will also be a decision that would certainly involve my wife and children. I have to say, though, that I'm really inspired by an institution such as the Fondation Custodia: a collection that is intimately linked to its house, to its history as a research institute, and to its founder. I find the idea very appealing of seeing my collection at some future time as a living collection, in its intended setting, and also functioning as a place of scholarship.

Rudi: I want to thank all of you for this discussion. Thank you for being so open about your collecting activities and for sharing your experiences with us.