



COLLECTOR
PROFILE

RICHARD J. DEMATO



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RICHARD J. DEMATO thinks back to his youth and observes, “Art was the only subject I got straight A’s in.” Today he is still scoring high in the art world, though it took many twists and turns to bring him to this point. Born in Brooklyn, he was raised on Long Island and then in Southern California. At UC Irvine, he double-majored in art and biology, ultimately entering a Ph.D. program in molecular biology and biochemistry. Alas, that arena did not fulfill his desire for creativity, so Demato entered the apparel industry; within four years, he was running his own women’s sportswear firm. While working for a European textile mill, he relocated from Los Angeles to New York City, a perch that allowed him to travel abroad and exercise his aesthetic eye in the world’s great museums.

After 24 years in fashion, Demato found a new calling creating awareness and funding for nonprofit organizations by helping them sell art, and by guiding the artists with whom they collaborated. This led organically to his 2009 opening of RJD Gallery in the charming town of Sag Harbor, on the eastern end of Long Island. Not surprisingly, a portion of the gallery’s proceeds benefits charities supporting victims of domestic abuse, abused animals, and people living with mental illness. Looking back over his unique career path, Demato notes, “Fashion has much in common with fine art; both depend on timing, design, composition, color, and media.”

As a collector himself, Demato’s first purchase occurred in 1974 in Ensenada, Mexico, where he bought a giant papier-mâché parrot by Sergio Bustamante, and also a well-executed

copy of one of Winslow Homer’s Caribbean storm scenes. Together these constituted a harbinger of his lifelong eclecticism. Over the years, therefore, he has acquired items as diverse as lithographs by Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood, two original works by Jamie Wyeth, and many antiques.

Yet Demato’s real passion is contemporary figurative realism. He is thrilled that “the rest of the art world has declared it as the great *new* trend, though it has long been a priority for me.” He says, “I collect and promote emerging and mid-career artists who make well-executed works that challenge me to discover more than the obvious, who share their voices and bare their souls, who tell stories that may sometimes provoke us. My paintings are about people. I think people who love people collect artworks depicting people.”

Today, in his Sag Harbor home built in 1833, Demato has more than 175 such works on display, with many more in storage. On his walls are paintings and drawings by Teresa Elliott, Haley Hasler, Andrea Kowch, Kevin Munte, Katie O’Hagan, Frank Oriti, Margo Selski, Adrienne Stein, Phillip Thomas, Pamela Wilson, and Tyler Vouros. He also has sculptures by Mateo Lo Greco, Beth Carter, Bombardieri, and Veronique Guerrieri. Demato’s dedication to these artists is epitomized by a series of transactions involving Andrea Kowch’s painting *Sojourn*, now in the permanent collection of the Grand Rapids Art Museum in Kowch’s native state of Michigan. He had initially bought it for himself, but agreed to sell it to a

man who intended to donate it to this museum. When Kowch was invited to submit a work to Grand Rapids’s popular *Art Prize* competition, she learned that she would actually have to own that work herself. As *Sojourn* was her best work thus far, Demato arranged for the private owner to sell it back to the artist. After its successful *Art Prize* showing, Demato helped convince the museum to acquire *Sojourn* directly. Advocacy like this is time-consuming and risky, but when it works, it is transformative.

If there’s one fellow collector that Demato admires, it’s Steven Bennett of San Antonio, who has amassed “the most focused group” of works produced through the *Women Painting Women* initiative. (See the October 2013 issue of *Fine Art Connoisseur* for details.) Bennett, he says, is “determined to understand the artwork and the mind of its creator. When he loves it, he must have it, regardless if he has wall space for it. In fact, he’s seeking a larger home right now.”

Overall, Demato believes that “collecting art is one of the most rewarding things you can do.” He says, “I start the day very early, walking through my house with a cup of coffee, appreciating the artworks I’ve been fortunate to acquire. It’s amazing how you can continually find new emotions within the same piece, as your own perspective on life changes.” Turning to practical matters, he urges others to “buy art because it speaks to you. Trends fluctuate, but work you love is always ‘in style.’ It’s hard to sell it, and you’re going to have it for a long time. And if any gallery says a piece is a great investment, run from them!” ●

(OPPOSITE PAGE TOP)
ANDREA KOWCH (b. 1986),
In the Distance, 2015,
acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 in.

■ (OPPOSITE PAGE
BOTTOM) **KATIE O’HAGAN**
(b. 1972), *Resistance*, 2015,
oil on canvas, 60 x 84 in.

Artwork photos: Gary Mamy

