



## Collected Wisdom: Jordan Schnitzer on How to Build a Collection to Share

BY JAMES HALDANE | SEP 25, 2024

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### What got you interested in collecting?

When I entered first grade, my late mother, Arlene Schnitzer, enrolled in the Portland Art Museum art school. As she started bringing home her own canvases, she began buying art. Three years later, she opened the Fountain Gallery in Portland. At 14, I bought my first work from the gallery—a small piece called “Sanctuary” by Louis Bunce. It was \$75, reduced to \$60 with the family discount. I paid five bucks a month from my allowance.

### How has your taste changed over time?

My taste is constantly evolving, and my collection looks sort of like a dumbbell. On one side are the major post-WWII artists. They’re virtually all American: Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly, Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, Jim Dine, Helen Frankenthaler, Louise Bourgeois, Louise Nevelson, Robert Rauschenberg. For decades, I’ve been building a teaching collection to provide free loans of artworks, grouped by artist or theme, to public museums—it is the largest private collection of prints and multiples of virtually all those artists. The other side is the contemporary artists: Hank Willis Thomas, Jeffrey Gibson, Alison Saar, Vanessa German, Julie Mehretu, Stanley Whitney, Leonardo Drew. We’re focusing on building up even more pieces—and not all prints—from these newer artists to develop a volume of work by each to loan as a major exhibition.



JEFFREY GIBSON, "I FEEL REAL WHEN YOU HOLD ME," 2024.  
PHOTO: BORN XDS.

### **How would you change the art world?**

It is tragic that so many districts throughout the U.S. have had to cut back on art education. If I had a wand to wave, I would spend hundreds of millions of dollars in classrooms employing art students to teach kids about art, making art and our history.

### **Who is the most unjustly overlooked artist?**

Judy Chicago was overlooked for decades. She's brilliant and had guts in the late '60s and '70s when it was a boys' club, and the museums didn't give wall space to women and other groups. She's in her 80s now, and I'm delighted that she's getting the recognition. So many artists don't get it until after they're gone.

### **What was your very first collection?**

I started collecting postcards at the age of about five. My father would send me them from his business trips. Then I moved to matchbooks. When I was in seventh grade, I wanted to start buying antique guns, but they were too expensive so I collected antique miniature cannons instead.

### **Who is the most important historical figure in art?**

Michael Govan at LACMA suggested to me that, in every century, two artists break out of the pack. I think the most important artist of the first half of the 20th century was Picasso. The plates, the paintings, the drawings, the prints—he was an artistic genius. In the second half, it was Warhol. He's the most accessible artist of a generation of greats, and his themes are as fresh and relevant today as they were in the '60s.

### **Favorite art fair and why?**

The annual International Fine Print Dealers Association exhibition in New York is heaven. I'm the largest buyer of all the print publishing businesses and many of the print galleries, so it's very special for me. It's one-stop shopping.

**Favorite city for art and why?**

New York. My favorite museum is now MoMA because they broke things up physically and programmatically in the renovation by mixing drawings, paintings and sculpture. And the Met is the most scrumptious, unbelievable museum with something for everybody. That said, the art world is still too New York-centric. There are such wonderful cultural leaders and museums all over the country. Why don't we pay a little more attention to them?

**Best art gift, given or received?**

I gave my daughter a set of lithographs of John Baldessari's series "Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line." Baldessari did things that were at once so wonderfully silly and poignant. The images, captured on Kodak film, show just what the name suggests.



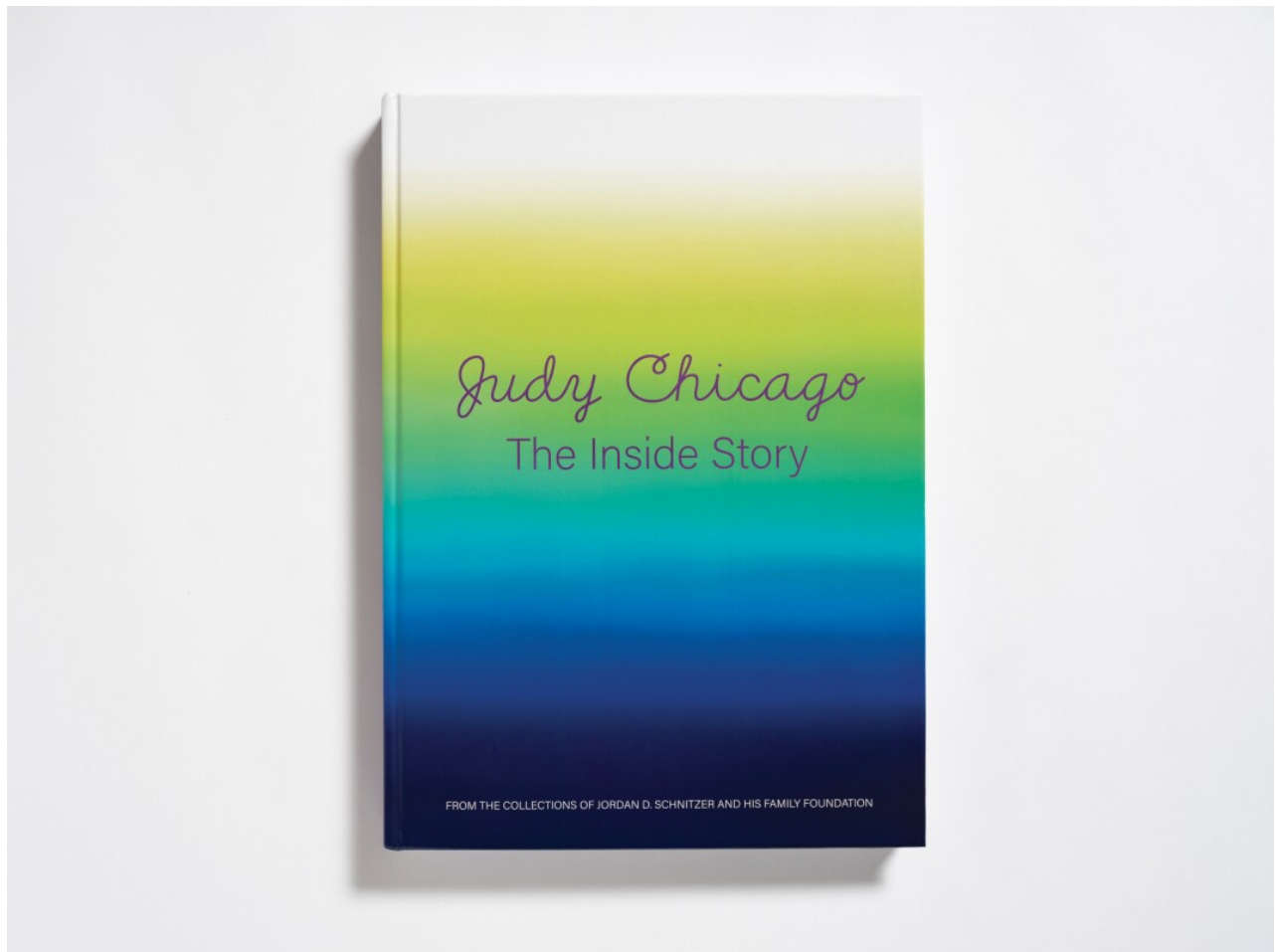
JOHN BALDESSARI, "THROWING THREE BALLS IN THE AIR TO GET A STRAIGHT LINE (BEST OF THIRTY-SIX ATTEMPTS)," (DETAIL), 1973.

PHOTO: © JOHN BALDESSARI 1973. COURTESY ESTATE OF JOHN BALDESSARI © 2024, COURTESY JOHN BALDESSARI FAMILY FOUNDATION, COURTESY SPRÜTH MAGERS.

**A favorite art book?**

It has to be the art books we publish—the latest one we published was on Judy Chicago last year. It showed her career and the depth and breadth of the various art phases better than any other book about her.





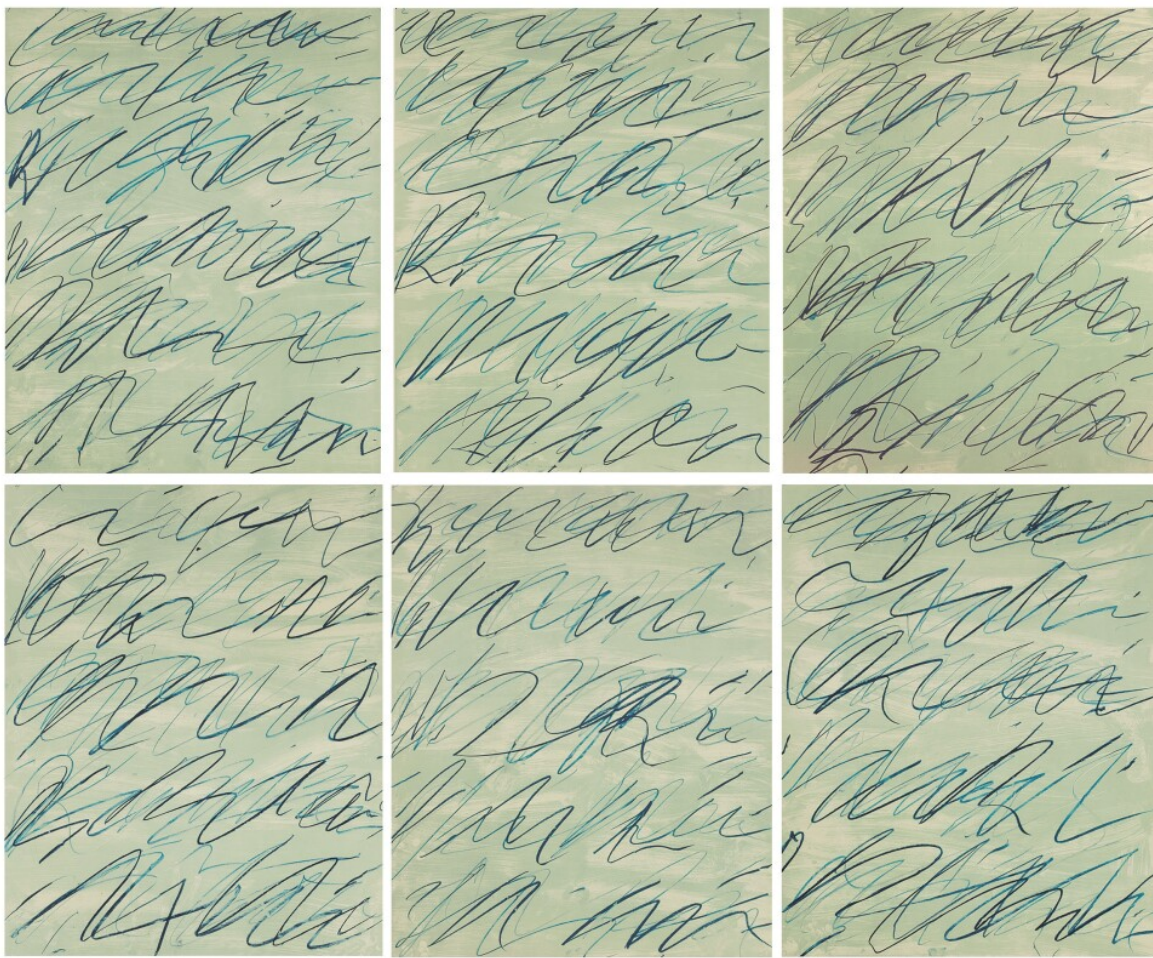
*"JUDY CHICAGO: THE INSIDE STORY: FROM THE COLLECTIONS OF JORDAN D. SCHNITZER AND HIS FAMILY FOUNDATION".*  
PHOTO: AARON WESSLING PHOTOGRAPHY.

### **Why is philanthropy important?**

I grew up with a phrase my parents used all the time: "To those much is given, much is expected." Each of us can do something for someone else. The irony is that the more we do, the better we feel about ourselves.

### **What's the piece that got away?**

A work by Cy Twombly called "Roman Notes." It is a set of nine prints in which he does his scribble stuff. I look at it and my knees just buckle. Years ago, the Susan Sheehan Gallery in New York had one for \$36,000, and I couldn't afford it. Then another set was going for \$60,000. Then one went to \$120,000. Now they're probably \$350,000 to \$500,000. Will I ever get it? I assume at some point, I will allocate the money.



CY TWOMBLY, "ROMAN NOTES," 1970.

PHOTO: © CY TWOMBLY FOUNDATION COURTESY: BASTIAN GALLERY, BERLIN.

### **What was your best impulse buy?**

Last fall, my family foundation had a Hockney show at the Honolulu Museum of Contemporary Art. While there, I found an exhibition by a local artist called Lauren Hana Chai. There was one work—a whimsical, colorful scene with people dancing—that I bought for myself but I planned to put in my sons' room. When it arrived, I looked more closely. What I thought was just a lot of Hawaiian dancers has a little more romance involved. The little figures are doing things my seven- and eight-year-old boys shouldn't see yet! So they'll have to wait a few years, but I got something to remind me of the trip.

### **What was your wildest white-knuckle moment at auction?**

It was bidding in 2019 for the most expensive individual print I've ever bought—a Jasper Johns "Flags I" for \$1,200,000 at Christie's New York. Bill Goldston, the printer Johns worked with, said it was one of the best examples he'd ever seen. I normally bid on the phone because I am on the West Coast, but that day I sat in the salesroom and raised my paddle. There is an energy—a competitiveness—that starts. What's wonderful is having a relationship with an auction house specialist. In the prints department at Sotheby's, I had this with the late Mary Bartow and now with Molly Steiger. We'll sit there and say, "Well, what do you think? Should I do one more?" The pitter-patter is so much fun. Their job is selling work, and mine is buying it, but they care about the collection and are protective of me.

### **What was the most recent art addition to your home?**

I'm lucky—I have a few houses—but once we put artworks up, I don't rotate them unless a museum borrows one because they just mean so much to me. We've just put up a Hockney, a Polly Apfelbaum,



some Keith Harings, a Damien Hirst, an Alex Katz and a big Robert Colescott.



SCHNITZER WITH ROBERT COLESCOTT'S "*HOMAGE TO DELACROIX: LIBERTY LEADING THE PEOPLE*," 1976.  
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE JORDAN SCHNITZER FAMILY FOUNDATION.

### **What tips do you have for collectors just starting out?**

First, buy some local art. We all need to support our local artists and local galleries. They're in every community. Don't be intimidated; just ask questions. Who is this artist? Why do you have them? Just listen. Second, I'm a great believer in quality. By buying prints or multiples, you can get some of the leading artists of our time for a few hundred or a few thousand dollars.

### **What is the best compliment someone has paid to your collection?**

Last year, our Kara Walker show started touring again. It went to the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art, which is three miles from the 1619 site where the first enslaved people came to the U.S. With each of these museum loans, we talk in advance about outreach programs, and I like to fund transport to bring in visitors from underrepresented groups. For this show, we called up the NAACP, reached out to other key leaders, and the museum created two advisory boards. After the exhibition closed, I received a letter from one of the curators, Heather Hakimzadeh, saying, "Your exhibition did more to integrate our museum into the broader community than any exhibition in its history." How does that not warm my heart?

### **Which collectors, past or present, do you admire?**

It's interesting. In the real estate business, I'm not jealous of anyone. When I see someone do some deal that I didn't think of, I say, "Wow, what can I learn from that?" I must admit, though, that I admire and am a little envious of the Broads, the Nashers and the Meyerhoffs. Five or six of these collecting couples got to a lot of these postwar artists' studios, folks like Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly, because they were contemporaries.

**Do you have artist friends?**

I was always worried about meeting big artists because I'd heard some were temperamental. And I'm not a stargazer person—I don't make a big effort to meet Hollywood stars or whoever—but how lucky I feel now because there are a half-dozen current artists with whom the personal relationship is as important as the art relationship. I talk to Hank Willis Thomas every week. This summer, we had our exhibition of his works at the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington. They used 97 of our 165 pieces, and he came out with his wife and parents. The work itself is spectacular, but seeing the joy of his walking in, and then his parents being there, seeing their son, was one of those special art memories I'll have forever.