

A mix and match approach

By Clare Henry

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American collectors Simona and Jerome Chazen share a rare conviction that one should never differentiate between fine and applied arts. "We believe painting, sculpture and craft are born from the same creative spirit - and are happiest when they live with one another." To this end for almost 40 years they have championed the decorative arts, integrating them into their homes so that glass by Dale Chihuly and William Morris and ceramic sculptures from Viola Frey and Anthony Caro sit beside paintings by David Hockney, Andy Warhol, Robert Motherwell and Gerhard Richter.

The Chazen collection is vividly colourful, which makes for a joyful, optimistic welcome. Frank Stella's rainbow "Double Scramble" and Roy Lichtenstein's 1988 abstract "Imperfect Painting" set the tone in the main drawing room while a riot of reflective glass pieces sparkle by the picture windows and surreal ceramic figures adorn tables and shelves. "We are drawn to strong figural work or powerful abstraction - and very little in between," says Simona. "We also go for bold shapes and primary colours."

Indeed colour is the unifying factor in this large and unusually diverse collection, which makes its debut at New York's Museum of Arts and Design (Mad) before going to the University of Wisconsin-Madison where the Chazens met as students. "It's the first time we have exhibited paintings at the museum," says curator Jennifer Scanlan. "For us, it's a ground-breaking move."

The Chazens' commitment to Mad does not stop with their exhibition. Fifty of the 96 works on show are eventually destined for the museum. The couple have been deeply involved with Mad for 25 years. Jerome was chairman from 1989 to 1995 and oversees the museum's expansion committee as Mad marks its 50th anniversary with a move from 53rd Street to Columbus Circle, which will triple its space. He also chairs the capital campaign, which must raise \$50m by 2007.

Simona is a member of the board and co-chairman of its collections committee, a position she is well qualified to hold. Unlike most American collectors who employ a curator, she is her own curator, researching, buying and recording items for their holdings that now include 500 works by 200 artists. However, the acquisition is done in tandem. "We do have one rule; if one of us hates it, we don't buy it."

In 2003 the Chazens donated \$12m towards Mad's controversial new home in Columbus Circle, the former Huntington Hartford Gallery, designed by Edward Durell Stone, which Mad plans to reconstruct and re-clad. Some believe it should be a protected building, leading to a legal battle that is not over yet. "My husband is a high energy man," says Simona. "He also has the patience to resolve this matter." The Chazens have three children and five grandchildren and in May donated \$20m to fund an expansion of the museum at their Wisconsin alma mater.

I returned to their vast 48th floor New York City apartment at the end of "art removal" week - boxes filled the hall, walls were bare, window sills and display cabinets empty. Even Mary Shaffer's 1991 "Series Water" glass piece, which usually hangs over the guest bedroom bay window, was absent, its wires forlorn traces by the ceiling. "I'll live, It's only for nine months!" Simona joked.

Simona says she's always been a collector. "I grew up in a Victorian house which my parents had bought and which my mother, a sculptor, proceeded to fill with 19th century furniture, silver, bronzes, porcelain, prints and pictures, so the idea of living with beautiful things was natural. That period was out of fashion then, so she got tremendous bargains in second-hand stores, like a Tiffany vase for a few dollars." Her mother's love of sculpture had its effect, for three-dimensional art plays a large role in the Chazen collection.

"When we married we decided to buy contemporary rather than period furniture, things with clean lines: Swedish- or Bauhaus-style chairs and tables, which we have continued to do. We were always interested in art, especially the Cubists, but couldn't afford paintings so bought Braque reproductions - that kind of thing. We moved on to original prints, buying works by artists who pleased us. Some early prints by Hockney, Rivers, Rosenquist, Lichtenstein and others still hang on our walls."

In the early 1980s the Chazens discovered glass, and were hooked. Over half the works in the collection and on show are studio glass. Jerome explains: "I never had a grand plan for the collection. Fortunately, we were exposed to glass by some of the movement's leading figures like Dale Chihuly and Harvey Littleton. I always found colour seductive, but glass alone has that magical quality of colour brought to life with light."

"It was a new field," says Simona. "The American Studio glass movement really led the world. Tradition had stifled progress in Italy and Czechoslovakia - their technique was great, but there was no room or wish for innovation." By the early 1980s the US movement had matured enough to spark the arrival of specialist glass galleries. "We bought from the three Hs: Holsten, Heller and Habatat. We met Dale early on and bought several beautiful works. In our view he's the greatest voice for art glass of the 20th century. It was all very exciting and very accessible. If you were travelling you could ring up glass artists and collectors and they would be delighted to ask you over. We made a lot of friends."

Friendly juxtapositions also occur in their displays, notably a vivid 1987 oil by Richter beside Klaus Moje's colourful fused glass piece. "You see, it's exactly the same sensibility at work," says Simona triumphantly.

The Chazens' collection is replete with images of the human head. "Well, I am a psychotherapist, after all," says Simona. These range from Jacques Lipschitz's seminal bronze Cubist "Tête" of 1915 to Robert Arneson's 1990 "Woo Too", a ceramic self-portrait with mirrored sunglasses. Here again glass plays a role, with a stunning red Cubist head by Czech artists Stanislav Libensky and Jaroslava Brychtova.

Will the Chazens' conviction that craft and fine art are of equal significance prove effective? This vibrant display could go some way to persuading the sceptics.

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