

REMINISCENCES OF A COLLECTOR

HENRY PEARLMAN

Foreword

When I reread and edited “Reminiscences of a Collector” some twenty years after Henry Pearlman’s death, it was with a privileged eye: I was able to see the face and hear the voice behind every word. More than that, editing these memoirs allowed me to revisit someone whose arm I will always feel on my shoulder.

We grandchildren were too young to share Henry’s singular passion. But he glowed whenever he talked about paintings or stood in their presence, and we learned from his example, as we learned from so much else—his love of chess and baseball; his instinctive sympathy for the underdog; his gentleness, humor, and inclination toward simple things and small pleasures; his complete integrity. It was all of a piece. Years later, I am still awed by his connection to paintings; but now I also feel traces of the pleasure and inspiration he felt when standing before a Cézanne or a Modigliani.

I only knew him as an older man, short and round and wearing a back brace; yet when I picture him, he is pitching to me in his backyard at Croton-on-Hudson, New York, or (still in his business suit) having a catch in Central Park. And when I hear him talking about art, it is in a voice that knows I am still a child, while addressing the adult I will become.

Henry Pearlman wrote as he lived: plainly, at times even innocently, but always from the heart and utterly without pretense. His manuscript left a spare and somewhat fragmentary account of his adventures. But except to make some obvious repairs and rearrangements, I have taken few liberties with the text. The words are his—including those few I have added or altered to better reflect how he actually thought and spoke. I know he would have welcomed such touches.

“Reminiscences of a Collector” was written in New York in the 1960s and 1970s. It is a self-portrait of a man who was down-to-earth but complex, self-educated but shrewd; a self-made man. He was born in 1895 on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, and raised in Brooklyn. After high school, he went to work as a secretary for the United Cork Company for \$7 a week, rose to a sales position, and in 1919 founded his own company, Eastern Cold Storage. The small firm played an important role in the marine refrigeration industry for more than half a century, and was awarded for its contributions to shipbuilding during World War II. In 1925 Henry married Rose; seventy years and two daughters, seven grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren later, she continues to oversee the art collection.

This is no ordinary American success story. This was a man who in midlife, and rather improbably, taught himself one of life's most rewarding tricks: not just to discern, but to feel in one's very being, the transformative power of art. He was not a scholar, although out of sheer enthusiasm he developed considerable knowledge of art, and widely respected taste. Rather, he was the truest and most accomplished of amateurs. This narrative is not a treatise on art or art collecting, but something more: a testament to the passion that paintings can inspire. For Henry, the superficial appeal of a painting, the monetary value, the critical assessment of it, meant little or nothing. The deeper personal pleasure it gave him meant everything.

When I was seventeen, and spending a summer in the south of France, Henry showed up unexpectedly and gave me a tour of the region, visiting his artist friends and pointing out places where Cézanne had painted. He talked about the light of Provence; about Van Gogh's letters to Theo, and Daudet's novella, *The Tartarin of Tarascon*, which inspired the Van Gogh masterpiece. He loved the human stories behind the canvases: the trials of the artists; the quirks of dealers and collectors; the sometimes tortuous careers of the paintings themselves. I was still too young to share my grandfather's passion; but now I could begin to see what it meant to him—and how much he enjoyed sharing it with me. Paintings told stories, for him, and stories were life.

To develop such a passion, and make it virtually a part of one's character, is no small achievement. To experience ecstasy in any form—art, nature, love, religion—is a gift. Henry Pearlman's journey from Brooklyn to the shipyards of Quincy and Baltimore and Pascagoula, and the galleries of Madison Avenue and Paris, was impressive. Sharing that passion was a greater gift by far.

Jeffrey Scheuer
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