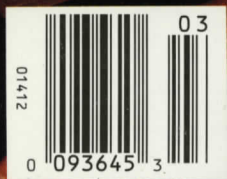


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America's Top 100 Collectors

A Special Issue



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Rosemary and George L.
with their Oceanic Uli figure





Letting the Good Times Roll

Frederick Weisman fills a restored New Orleans townhouse with a witty mixture of classic art and camp icons.

■
By Carol Strickland
Photographs by Tina Freeman

Twenty-six years ago, businessman and art collector Frederick Weisman lay gravely ill in a hospital in Los Angeles. He had lost his memory following brain surgery, and recovery seemed a dim hope. Then his wife hung a favorite painting of his on the wall. As soon as he saw it, Weisman snapped out of his comatose state. "Excuse me, doctor," Weisman said to a stunned neurosurgeon. "Let me tell you about this painting. It's a Jackson Pollock."

Ever since the day art brought him back to the world of the living, Frederick Weisman has been living both with art and for it. One of the country's foremost collectors of contemporary art, Weisman has thousands of pieces scattered across the globe. Works from his collection are on loan to museums everywhere. They fill the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation in Los Angeles and his Mediterranean villa in Holmby Hills, California, and since 1988, have been installed in a restored 1830 Creole townhouse in New Orleans. The building, which had been used as a gas station and flophouse, was in dreadful condition (and inhabited only by pigeons) when he and his wife, the late Marcia Simon Weisman, acquired it in 1980. After they remade it from top to bottom, it won the Vieux Carré Commission award for preservation and restoration in 1987.

Everywhere, the past jostles the present. Amid a timeless French Quarter setting of ceiling fans lazily chopping the sultry air, dangling crystal chandeliers, and velvet curtain swags, stands art so radical it startles the eye. A canary-yellow Lichtenstein sculpture perches on an Empire card table. A camp image of Mae West by Red Grooms

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*The only piece Weisman worried might offend guests is pop artist Alan Jones's table (above), similar to one used in the film *A Clockwork Orange*. "But on the contrary," says Weisman, "people respond favorably, with laughter."*

presides over a dignified Federal dining table. On wide pine planks, next to a Diego Giacometti wrought-iron table and chairs, a sculpted Little Richard dances. In the marble bathroom sits a lifelike John DeAndrea sculpture of a woman buck naked. For this home and collection, eclectic is an understatement.

"Life goes on, art goes on," Weisman says. "I want to keep up." An indefatigable collector, Weisman began acquiring art in the 1950s. Although he first bought European modernists like Jean Arp and Pierre Soulages, it was love at

first sight when he saw Franz Kline's black-and-white paint slashes. Encouraged by the collector/dealer Ben Heller, Weisman became involved almost exclusively with American artists, especially New York School painters like Gorky, Pollock, De Kooning, and Newman.

"I knew Barney Newman early in his career, and his work turned me on," Weisman says. "When others saw what I was buying, they thought I was out of my mind." Although his collection spans major postwar movements from abstract expressionism to pop, minimalism, and

conceptualism, Weisman never acquires works because of an artist's rank in the pantheon of art history. "Fred buys from the heart, not the intellect," says his wife, Billie Milam. "Art calls to him."

Judging from his track record of identifying contemporary masters, Weisman's eye for art is remarkable. Among those he supported early in their careers are Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Sam Francis, Robert Graham, Ed Ruscha, Joe Goode, and Chuck Arnolli. An early backer of Roy Lichtenstein, Weisman recalls, "People



Each piece Weisman owns seems to have a story behind it. Not least there's the Duane Hanson sculpture of his father (above), which Weisman commissioned in triplicate — each dressed in different attire — for himself and his two brothers.

thought he was something out of the funny papers, but I had the feeling his work was today. We're living today, and art should reflect that."

"Fred never studied art," says Milam, who comes from an academic and museum background. "His method of studying visual art is by seeing, not reading a book. He walks into a gallery and buys something avant-garde. In many cases, it later becomes mainstream."

For Weisman and Milam, visual art is never just decor. "We live with art," Weisman insists. "We're not just display-

ing it." They fervently believe that their art should be seen, and are generous in opening their New Orleans townhouse and Holmby Hills villa to visitors. They refuse to sequester valuable work in vaults. "Fred goes berserk if anything is in storage," Milam says. They also constantly move works among their various properties, changing the mix. When Weisman is asked to name favorite works among his vast holdings, he invariably responds, "If you have children, do you have a favorite? I can't say which is the best; I love them all."

Each piece Weisman owns seems to have a story behind it. Not least there's the realistic Duane Hanson sculpture of his father, which Weisman commissioned in triplicate—each dressed in different attire—for himself and his two brothers. "I love it," Weisman says, "but when I sent one to my younger brother, he admitted, 'I haven't been able to sleep with father in the house.'" Hence, versions of the piece the artist calls *Executive in Red Chair* and Weisman calls "Father" now live in New Orleans, Holmby Hills, and his older brother's home.

Hanson is currently working on three commissioned sculptures of Weisman's mother, to join the seated father figure.

And what of the bronze alligator, *Petite Camille II*, slithering up the courtyard wall? — another *coup de foudre*. When Weisman visited Elizabeth Shannon's studio, he was captivated by her stuffed alligator and wanted it for his New Orleans courtyard. After being told it would deteriorate in the rain, he commissioned her on the spot to cast one in bronze. "Weisman has changed the landscape of contemporary art in New Orleans in a short period because of his generosity," local gallery owner Arthur Roger says. "He's a model for collectors. While others of that caliber may seem elitist and intimidating, Fred and Billie are easy-going and approachable, knowledgeable and passionate."

Weisman's unflagging pursuit of new discoveries seems to keep him youthful. Besides its cheek-by-jowl mélange of famous and emerging artists, another characteristic of the collection is whimsy. Most pieces are upbeat and brimming with wit, imbued with little of the skepticism that runs rampant in contemporary art. "The sense of humor and creativity in the works opens people's eyes," Milam says. The only piece in his New Orleans townhouse Weisman worried might offend guests is pop artist Alan Jones's table, similar to one used in Stanley



"People thought the contemporary art would ruin the traditional ambience of this place, but the work blends in beautifully," says his wife. "Most people wouldn't have had the nerve to put them together."

import Toyotas and again increased his fortune exponentially.

Yet for all his business success, Weisman seems most proud of his art. His goal in the New Orleans house was to create an environment that would capture the fun-loving nature of the city itself. "People thought the contemporary art would ruin the traditional ambience of this place, but the work blends in beautifully," Milam says. "Most people wouldn't have had the nerve to put them together." Instead, nerve—and verve—are the two qualities most evident in this extraordinary home and collection. □

Kubrick's film *A Clockwork Orange*. Reminiscent of Madonna's more bizarre fantasies, the table features a buxom, half-nude woman balancing a plate-glass slab on her back. "Fred doesn't see the piece as offensive. He enjoys the humor of it," Milam says. "I haven't heard anyone say the table is not appropriate," Weisman adds. "On the contrary, they respond favorably, with laughter."

Perhaps the cinematic provenance of the piece recalls Weisman's own beginnings. After starting out in the sound department at MGM studios, he soon advanced to the wholesale produce business. At thirty-one, Weisman became one of the youngest presidents of a major corporation, Hunt Foods. In 1958 he got rich when a uranium mine of his struck pay dirt. In 1970 he began to



