

Spring 1993

PEPPERDINE PEOPLE



**Frederick R. Weisman,
Artful Giver**

THE ART OF COLLECTING AND GIVING



**INDUSTRIALIST
FREDERICK R. WEISMAN
SHARES A SLICE OF HIS
UNIQUE WORLD OF ART
WITH PEPPERDINE.**

BY COLLEEN CASON

Three figures share a “Chance Encounter” under the street lamp of Frederick Weisman’s Los Angeles compound. A rotund “Eve” who appears to have nibbled far too many apples lingers by his Mediterranean pool. An “old man” dozes undisturbed by the gadgetry in his high-tech media room.

These sculptures are just a few of the cherished cast of characters who populate the world of Frederick R. Weisman.

And what a world it is. The Los Angeles industrialist has amassed a 1,000-piece contemporary art collection over the last 50 years. But numbers don’t tell

the story; the names of artists do. They include Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky, Roy Lichtenstein, Christo, Willem deKooning, Claes Oldenberg, and David Hockney, to name a few.

Last summer, he offered to share a generous slice of this world with Pepperdine at the urging of his former curator, Nora Halpern. The perfect “matchmaker,” Halpern had come to Pepperdine in April to direct its art museum, which had been unnamed since its opening in the fall of 1991.

Through his Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation, he pledged \$1.5 million

(Right) Because of Weisman's love for artistic neckwear, Pepperdine commissioned famous artists such as Claes Oldenburg, Edward Ruscha, Sam Francis, and Arman to create original ties for him. University professors from the Fine Arts Division, Joe Piasentin and Avery Falkner, also made contributions to the colorful collection.

(Below) Nora Halpern, founding director of the Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art in the Cultural Arts Center, enjoys a continuing friendship with her former employer. The two admire the exciting Keith Haring motorcycle, an attention-getter at the inaugural exhibition.



to the University with the funds going toward the cost of building the museum and support of its programming. In addition, he agreed to loan more than \$4 million worth of works to the University. Some of these have already been made permanent gifts.

Overnight Weisman's generosity elevated Pepperdine's profile in the artistic community beyond even the most optimistic expectations. "Pepperdine's art program has taken a quantum leap," University President David Davenport told the hundreds who attended the dedication of the Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art on the Malibu campus last September.

The announcement of the gift and the museum opening garnered press coverage in both national and international art magazines as well as in newspapers across the country.

"I never dreamed we would find a benefactor who would not only give energy to the physical plan of the build-



ing, but would also help us fill it with a world-class collection of art," Davenport said of Weisman, who is a trustee of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and a member of its Acquisitions Committee.

"I was just overwhelmed by the school," Weisman told the *Los Angeles Times*. "Pepperdine fulfills my desire to present fine arts exhibitions to college students to familiarize them with the

aesthetics of their era," said Weisman, a vibrant, soft-spoken gentleman of 81.

Weisman, in fact, has been more generous in a very meaningful way with Pepperdine than with any institution he has supported, Halpern notes with delight. For the first time, he let three prized pieces leave the two-story, vintage 1920s Holmby Hills villa that houses the core of his corporate and personal collections.

"This house is better than Disneyland. It's definitely an 'E' ticket art ride," said Halpern, referring to the tickets that once allowed visitors to ride the most exciting attractions at the Magic Kingdom.

The eye is beckoned everywhere to paintings, sculptures, and drawings with fabulous colors and creative designs. The works are eclectic, eschewing the "been there, done that" sameness of collections that center on a particular era or style of art.

Like an amusement park, some sights shock, some amaze, and others delight, and Weisman enjoys the reactions the art elicits.

He likes telling the story of paramedics trying to revive the "Old Man Dozing" when a window washer spotted it in Weisman's Century City office. The trained medics broke into the office after hours and were just inches away from the Duane Hanson work when they realized it wasn't a person.

Although Weisman sees art as the ultimate form of communication, his works do not always translate so well to the uninitiated. His current curator and registrar, Eddie Fumasi, recounts the story of how an overly zealous custodian almost defaced Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz's "Pedicord Apts," a sculpture depicting a tenement, by attempting to empty the ashtrays and clean its windows.

Blessed with an extraordinary eye for talent, Weisman obtained works by many artists before they achieved world renown. He purchased one of the first of Warhol's "Marilyn Monroe" silk screen series for a few hundred dollars when Warhol was lesser known. The late pop artist painted the Weisman family portraits, including his granddaughters, children of his son Richard.

A 1974 Warhol portrait depicts Weisman without his glasses. "He just doesn't look like himself without the glasses," said Halpern, who has known Weisman for more than 10 years.

She might add that her former boss doesn't look like himself without a flamboyant tie. As a special thank-you to Weisman for his generosity to Pepperdine, Halpern commissioned 40 artists from around the world to paint one-of-a-kind designs on neckties for him.

Another Weisman trademark is change. Halpern notes that she spots at least a half-dozen changes in the villa since her last visit just days before.

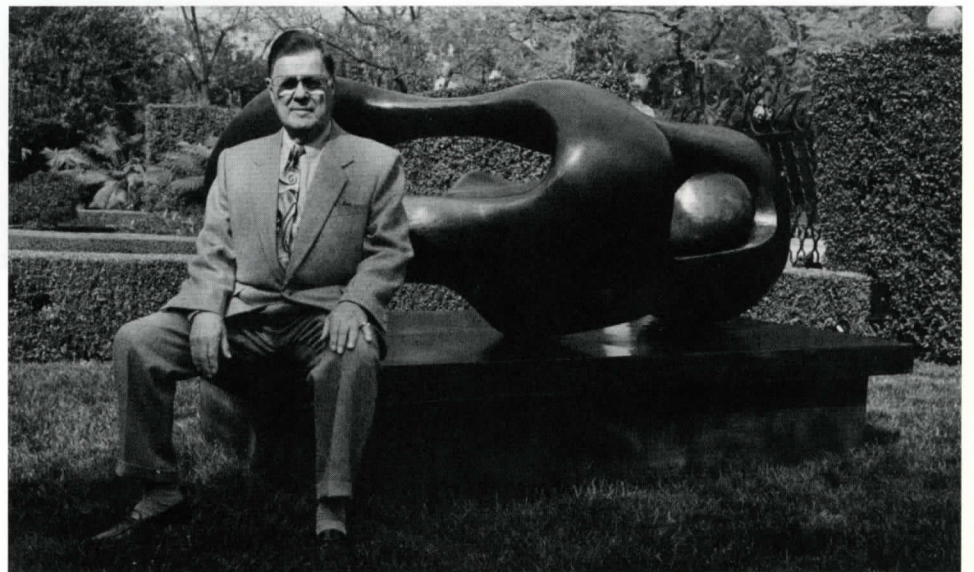
"The house constantly adapts to the art," says Fumasi, who replaced Halpern as curator of the Weisman Foundation collection. Fumasi points out walls that once were windows and works suspended from the ceiling.

"I have one rule," says Weisman. "If you own a work of art, it is your responsibility to hang it. If you can't find a place for it, sell it or give it to an institution that will appreciate it."

Many institutions besides Pepperdine have benefited from his generous observance of this dictate. He pledged \$3 million to the University of Minnesota in his birthplace, Minneapolis, for the construction of an art museum. He also gave \$1.5 million to the Twin Cities' Walker Art Center to fund a sculpture plaza. Then, he donated the Claes Oldenburg/Coosje van Bruggen fountain, "Spoonbridge and Cherry," in memory of his parents, William and Mary Weisman. Cultural centers in Paris, San Diego, Baltimore,



(Above) Weisman points out one of his lifelike sculptures by artist Duane Hanson. Having a quick sense of humor, he has enjoyed some of the incidents that have occurred when people thought the sculptures were alive.



(Right) Artwork flows outside the villa into the extensive and well-tended gardens where many pieces are placed in specially created environments. Weisman is proud of the fact that he never buys a work of art unless he has a place to display it.

Washington, D.C., and New Orleans have received significant gifts of funds or art.

His agility in adapting to change and the passion for innovation that marks his collection have served him well in his highly successful business pursuits. The son of immigrants who fled tyranny in czarist Russia, Weisman followed his father's example by flourishing in America's free enterprise system. The elder Weisman, who first worked as a newsboy, went on to become what the Minneapolis Tribune called "one of Minnesota's great personal success stories." The younger Weisman pays tribute to his father, who died in 1945, with a lifelike, Duane Hanson sculpture of William Weisman seated at a desk in his office.

While a boy, Frederick Weisman moved to Los Angeles with his mother. Never an enthusiastic student, Weisman was more inclined to earn pocket change through odd jobs, such as watchman at Hollywood's Magic Castle, than to study.

His love of collecting started in his youth when he used his wages to add to his coin and stamp collections.

After stints at the University of Minnesota and UCLA, he went to work in the sound department of Metro Goldwyn Mayer studios.

In a move that would set a life pattern, Weisman changed directions completely and achieved remarkable success.

While in his 20s, he bought a Los Angeles produce business. The firm prospered and merged with the far larger and older Hunt Brothers Packing Company to create Hunt Foods. He was made the company president at 31 years of age.

In his 10 years at the helm, Hunt's sales rose 600 percent. In the 1950s, Hunt Foods was renamed Hunt-Wesson and became the flagship company of the pioneering conglomerate, Norton Simon Inc.

Accompanying his business success were personal joys and sorrows. He married his business partner's daughter, Marcia Simon, in 1938, and they had three children, Richard, Nancy, and Daniel. The latter two are both developmentally disabled, and the Weismans became benefactors to charities that helped the mentally challenged.

Weisman remains a staunch supporter of social-service organizations, including the Venice Family Clinic in Los



At an age when many executives are only beginning to advance in the corporate world, Weisman was president of a major corporation. He is pictured with Goodwin Knight (left), former governor of California.

Angeles, to which he recently gave a \$500,000 challenge grant to establish a program that addresses emotional and social needs of the poor and homeless.

Fred and the late Marcia Weisman shared a fascination with art and in the 1950s began purchasing pieces. In 1952, they bought a Jean Arp sculpture for what was then an amazing sum: \$5,000.

"We didn't set out to become collectors. We were buying things we liked," said Marcia in a family history compiled in the early 1980s by Weisman.

By the late 1950s, Weisman left Hunt Foods to pursue a variety of enterprises. An investment in uranium mines produced big returns. He was a founder of Cal-Financial, the first savings and loan on the New York Stock Exchange. He purchased a race track, Tanforan, in San Francisco and developed a line of drug-store consumer products.

Always a pioneer, Weisman saw the promise of the economical Japanese cars in the U.S. market and in 1970 bought the Mid-Atlantic Toyota Distributorship.

Twenty years later, he divested himself of that enterprise and acquired two harness racing tracks in Maryland, making a handy trade of horsepower for horse power.

Despite the diversity of Weisman's business and artistic pursuits, he believes they share a common thread. "All my activities in art and business are an attempt to bring the world closer together."

Clearly, he delights in combining his business and his avocation. When traveling the world for business, he and Billie Milam—a noted art conservator—always make time to stop at galleries. Trusting their own eyes and instincts, they have discovered several new artists in Asia and Latin America.

Never one to pontificate or dictate what is great art, Weisman states simply how he chooses a piece: "I see what I love, and I buy it."

Nothing, he adds, communicates better than art. "It's quicker than language and clearer than philosophy."≈