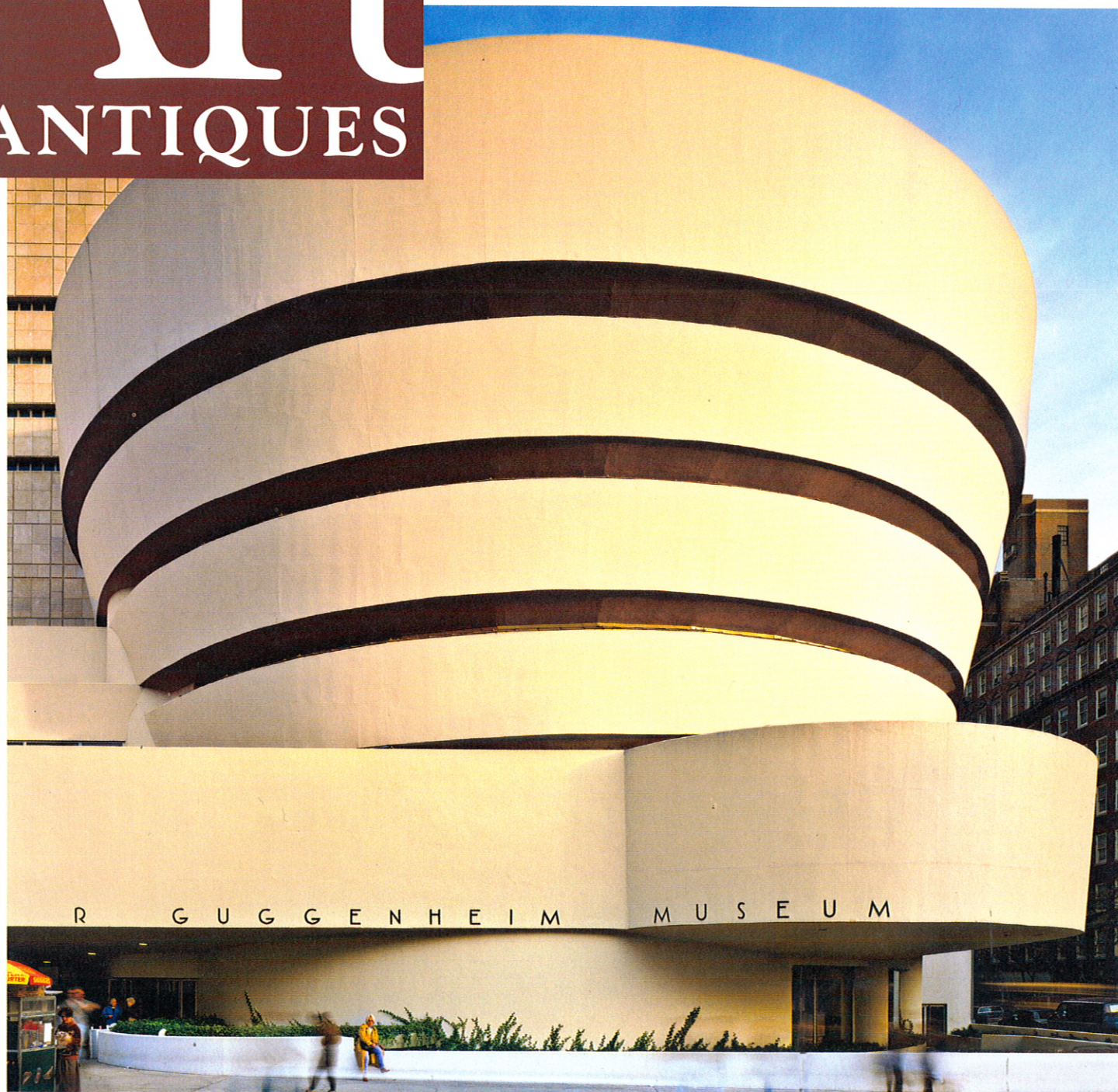


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# Art ANTIQUES

FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



GUSTAV KLIMT | COLORED DIAMONDS | LOUISE BOURGEOIS | SHOPPING BASEL

## MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE



# DRAWING ON SERENDIPITY

BY CHRISTOPHER HANN PHOTOGRAPHY BY GROSS & DALEY

A CURATOR AND AN INTERIOR DESIGNER  
MARRY THEIR TALENTS TO BUILD A  
COMPELLING DRAWINGS COLLECTION.

**INTERIOR** designer Glenn Gissler is sitting in a café on Ninth Avenue in Manhattan's Chelsea district, recalling the work of art that sealed the deal on the courtship of his future wife, the independent curator and art critic Susan Harris. It was a 1986 drawing by the conceptual artist William Anastasi—one of a series of works begun in 1968—that Gissler had received in lieu of a fee for design work at a SoHo gallery. Anastasi executed the drawings by holding a pencil in each hand while riding the subway and allowing the movement of the train across the tracks to determine the movement of his hands across the drawing board on his lap. The works were known as the Subway Drawings—an artistic expression, aptly enough, rooted in chance. Is not love, after all, prone to equally powerful twists of fate?

Harris so coveted the drawing, Gissler says, that even years later he would joke that she married him just so she could live with it. "It was an indication to her that I was game for the adventure," he recalls, "that she wasn't going to have to compromise her values."

After more than a dozen years of marriage, their values still very much intact, Harris and Gissler have collaborated on a collection of











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drawings by some of the most highly regarded names in contemporary art. Works by Willem de Kooning, Richard Tuttle, Nancy Spero and her late husband, Leon Golub, are among the works that populate their 1,700-square-foot apartment in Greenwich Village, where they live with their 7-year-old daughter, Siena.

Their motivation for collecting drawings, versus other media, is rooted in a shared fascination with the immediacy of the medium. "It's inherently a more intimate medium," Harris

says. "It told me more about an artist's intentionality, in terms of their art making, than other media. Visually I was always so captivated by drawings. I'm a sucker for lines."

The couple met when both were well into their 30s and established in their careers. Gissler began his design firm in 1987, four years after graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design with degrees in fine arts and architecture. His work, characterized by an uncluttered, casual elegance, has received notice in *The New York Times* and a long list of national magazines. Integral to his design approach is the placement of art. "Professionally, it's the part about my job I love the most," he says. "We obsess over the architecture, we



obsess over the furniture, we obsess over the lamps, the lampshades, all that stuff. But in the end, to me the thing that people walk away remembering is what's on the walls."

Gissler had been married briefly before, and he was certain that if he were ever to walk down the aisle again, it would have to be with someone involved in the art world. In Harris, he got more than he bargained for. "I met Susan and she was, like, not just in the art world," he says, "she was *in* the art world." When they arrived at the opening of a Cy Twombly retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1994, Harris knew so many people, that it took them an hour to reach the galleries. Gissler informed his new girlfriend that he'd never accompany her to another MoMA opening unless she wore sunglasses and a wig.

Harris had arrived in the city in 1979 to enroll in New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. Three years later, when she graduated with a master's degree in 20th-century American and European Art, she had little notion of the professional opportunities that lay ahead. But she knew she wanted to work in a museum, and she knew she wanted to be involved in the art of her time. "I wanted to be living in the culture," she says, "the art that defines a particular place and time." For nearly



Pgs. 86-87: Kiki Smith, "Untitled (Heart)" (above fireplace, left), 1987, collage, and Willem de Kooning, "Untitled" (above fireplace, right), 1965-80, charcoal on paper. Facing (above sofa, left to right): Nancy Spero, "Bleeding Bomb-Gunship (GOD)," 1966, gouache on paper; "Untitled (Artaud Series)," 1969, gouache on paper; Leon Golub, "Prometheus," 1998, gouache on paper. Vija Celmins, "Saturn Stamps," 1995, offset lithography, on dining room table (above). Richard Tuttle, "New Mexico, New York, #14" (left), 1998, acrylic on plywood, above the desk.





Robert Gilot, "Untitled," 1992, ink on paper, on windowsill. Tobî Kahn, "Shami," 1984, acrylic on wood and bronze with patina, on pedestal (right). Facing: Nancy Spero, "Let the Priests Tremble" (above), 1994-97, hand printing on paper. Alan Saret, "Untitled" (below), 1983, colored pencil and graphite on paper, above bed.

two decades she's been collaborating with artists and other curators to present exhibits at galleries and museums in New York and abroad. In recent years she's arranged shows in Spain and Portugal for Tuttle, Spero and the sculptor Jim Hodges.

In 1982, while still in graduate school, she was assigned to review her first show, a group exhibit that included works by Tuttle, Robert Ryman and Cy Twombly. Although Tuttle may be better known for his unconventional sculptures, Harris says it was his drawings "that really blew me away." Over time, Tuttle's work took on increasing importance for her, both in the way she viewed art and the way she viewed the world. "His art is a direct translation of his questioning of things, of responding to things in the world, and I identify strongly with that," she says.

She had similarly defining experiences viewing works by Golub, Spero (a feminist and social critic) and the painter Pat Steir, with whom she is now preparing a survey of her drawings for the Rhode Island School of Design Museum. Of Golub's work, Harris says,



"It opened me up in terms of other things that were out there. I just started to be much more engaged in art that was about the world."

The Harris-Gissler collection contains some 200 framed pieces—even Siena receives a drawing each year for her birthday—and more art is kept in storage. "In the end, I guess the art that we live with has a poetic quality, and I'm attracted to that in my work as well," Harris says. "That mid-century Abstract Expressionism—the art that we have doesn't look like that, but I was so attracted by the forcefulness and integrity of the artists of that generation. It's where I stepped into the flow."


The couple's collection tends toward minimalism, a favorite style of its owners, but as a whole the works are rather difficult to pigeon-hole. In the living room, an austere drawing by Tuttle is stationed next to a frenetic effort by Robert Smithson—jam-packed with repeated words and rambling text—that reminds Gissler of the sort of amphetamine-driven creative burst that helped Jack Kerouac produce *On the Road*. "There's a lot of kind of maniacal works, highly detailed, that required vast amounts of hand work by artists," Gissler says. "They're more obsessive—'obsessive' is a good word."

The works in the collection have originated from a variety of sources—friends, relatives, favorite galleries, even dumb luck. For Harris's 40th birthday, Gissler persuaded a dozen of her friends to buy an editioned work by Vija Celmins, the Latvian-born painter and sculptor known for her meticulous rendering of natural scenes. A Louise Bourgeois drawing was a wedding gift from Harris's parents. A few years ago at the Venice Biennale, Gissler and Harris were walking through the Piazza San Marco with



Siena in search of gelato when through a gallery window Gissler spied a drawing by Mark Tobey, who in 1958 won first prize at the Biennale. He was the first American to do so since James McNeill Whistler in 1895, which was the event's inaugural year. "Who would ever imagine," Gissler says, "that you'd find something you really covet in Piazza San Marco in Venice in the summer just going to get ice cream?"

For Gissler, part of the appeal of collecting drawings is their relative affordability. The bottom line has been a concern ever since he bought what he calls his first "real" piece of art in the mid-'80s, a gouache-on-paper self-portrait by Donald Baechler. It cost \$700, which Gissler paid in seven monthly installments. In New York's East Village in the 1980s, he says, "things in the galleries cost hundreds, not thousands or tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands." Those days, of course, are long gone. "Richard Tuttle just moved to Pace Gallery," Gissler says, referring to the venerable PaceWildenstein. "Who knows what's going to happen to the prices of his work? We could be priced out of the game."

At the root of the Harris-Gissler collecting philosophy is an abiding appreciation of the artist. They are not speculators—Harris doesn't even like to think of herself as a collector—and are not interested merely in stockpiling works by household names. Even some of their works by established artists with international reputations, such as Kiki Smith, were completed when those artists were young and relatively unknown. "We're very aesthetically inclined, but it's a home," Gissler says. "So there's a kind of ease and casualness with which we live with the work that is a reflection, I guess, of who we are." 

*Christopher Hann writes on culture, travel and business for publications including THE NEW YORK TIMES, EXECUTIVE TRAVELER and LEADER'S EDGE.*

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