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THE ART OF THE HUNT

Couples who collect art have existed since the dawn of human culture, but just how differently do men and women approach the purchasing of artwork?

As long as there has been art, there have been art collectors. The ancient Greeks did it; so did the Romans. Isabella d'Este, who was born into an illustrious Italian family of renaissance nobility, and her equally renowned husband, Francesco II Gonzaga, the Marquess of Mantua (1466 -1519), are one of the first couples known to have cracked the art world's glass ceiling with their perceptive eye for contemporary masterpieces, which included works by Leonardo, Titian and Raphael. Today, husbands and wives who invest in art collect for various reasons, and while it's often assumed that the most exciting collections have been built around a genuine interest in the pieces themselves (rather than an artwork's financial potential), MOJEH asks the unanswered question: Are men and women truly on the same page when they purchase works of art?

Perry El-Ashmawi was born in Bahrain in 1988 to art-loving Egyptian parents. She completed a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts from Concordia University, Montreal, and now represents Dubai's Opera Gallery. "There are two main reasons why people want to invest in art," she tells MOJEH. "There's typically a passion for it. You have a passion for investing in art and it becomes a pleasure," she says with a smile, "a pleasure treasure! Whereas others see it as a motivation to gain profit – in that sense it's a treasure asset, in a similar way to a luxury car or diamonds."

Women are far more likely to invest in a piece because of an emotional connection, she tells us. "Women see artwork less as an investment and more as a pleasure. They have a greater attachment to the piece. We're more emotionally involved in art. Men, on the other hand, tend to see art as a business opportunity." Similarly, a study by the Michigan State University supports El-Ashmawi's deduction, reporting that different genders exhibit differences in how they evaluate art: men place more emphasis on the artist and thus its financial potential (buying a work by an unknown artist represents more of a risk), whereas women are more likely to purchase based on the piece itself.

Male or female, serious art collectors are controlled by the market, which is influenced by demand and can force couples to change the course of their collection to maximise profits as they react to industry dynamics. Christie's Hala Khayat is a specialist in modern and contemporary Arab, Iranian and Turkish art. When the auction house prices artwork, Khayat explains that the piece's rarity and quality is considered, rather than the emotion it potentially evokes. "We value objects for what they are, but the collectors might be more attracted to jewels that once belonged to Elizabeth Taylor, or a tiara worn by a princess at her wedding. If a work of art was once part of a famous collection, such as the Rockefeller or Rothschild collections, it will also add its DNA, and be of high significance for some collectors."

The idea that women are better able to cut out the commercial noise

surrounding an artist is an interesting one. After all, argues El-Ashmawi, it's the enjoyment of feasting one's eyes on something spectacular that is the greatest measure of an artwork's worth. "I'm a true believer that the emotional return and satisfaction you get back from a piece outweighs the financial return by far. You can't buy a piece and not have a link to it; you'll feel nothing, which is a shame because there's so much work that goes into producing a piece of art. It's a rarity." Paul Marks, a representative of Lumas Gallery, goes against El-Ashmawi's argument by agreeing that those who acquire art by following their heart make the best collectors. "The value of art, in my opinion, is very emotional. Even though it's tempting to consider art as a financial investment, especially in times of a heated international art market, I would not recommend collecting art with purely financial motivations."

That's not to say that the majority of men aren't more likely to succumb to the seductive enticement of monetary advantages. Often an experienced collector's gut instinct can lead to the most lucrative of buys and, in time, a worthy collection. Salma Shaheem, joint venture partner and head of Middle Eastern markets at The Fine Art Group, helps clients create significant art collections that increase in value and gain historical significance in the long run. "It's very common for an artwork to be acquired as a result of an aroused emotion," she says. "One of the unique aspects of investing in art is watching your beloved collection grow in terms of value."

The majority of the most successful collections sold at auctions were assembled over an extensive period; such dedication requires a passion for the artwork itself. The late Yves Saint Laurent's artwork and antiquities, for example, went under the hammer at Christie's in 2009 and, on the first day alone, 60 paintings were sold for a total value of AED 813 million. Raya Mamarbachi is co-founder of Artscoops, which is an online marketplace for Middle East and North African art. "You should never buy an artwork for its financial value alone. In the end, you'll be living with it day in and day out. Furthermore, art is illiquid and needs time to increase in value. Not necessarily all artworks that you buy will increase in value; in some instances, due to downturns in the global economic market, artworks are worth less today than three years ago."

Of course, whether a woman's interest in collecting art derives from a passionate interest while her husband is enticed by the desire to make money depends on each couple, as well as each person. It's tempting to assume that men value a piece's financial gain because historically they were more likely to control the money. In the 21st Century, perhaps this explanation is too simple. MOJEH speaks with three couples that collect art and discovers that regardless of the reason, once you've started investing in art, it can be near impossible to stop.

Words by Annie Darling

Kamiar and Leila Maleki

Kamiar and Leila met at Christie’s Auction House in London while attending a book launch organised by a longtime friend and art advisor, Dina Nasser Khadivi. This was back in 2008 and they married in 2012. Kamiar collected art for 15 years independently prior to meeting Leila, who is also from an artistic background. Their marriage, they explain, allows them to share their passion for artwork together. Kamiar surreptitiously admits to buying artwork without Leila’s approval but they often travel to art fairs as a couple and enjoy bouncing ideas off each other.



Photographed by Luke Andrew Walker, courtesy of Kamiar Maleki (Fair Director, Contemporary Istanbul, 14-17 September 2017, www.contemporaryistanbul.com) and Leila Maleki (Founder of Amir Husein Studio London)



Iranian-born collectors Kamiar and Leila Maleki’s family home in Mayfair reveals the couple’s longstanding love for collecting various international artworks

When did your passion for collecting art first surface?

Kamiar: My parents Eskandar and Fatima Maleki have collected for more than 35 years and have given back to the industry in many different ways by supporting artists and contributing to the philanthropic world. We started collecting antiques, but our overall collection includes old masterpieces as well as post-war contemporary art. We have a strong focus on emerging art as well.

Leila: My grandfather was a high court judge in Tehran who turned to art after the Iranian revolution. He owned a gallery and collected antiques all his life; Kamiar and I still have many of his pieces. However, my passion for contemporary art began when I moved to London for university. My aunt and uncle own an art consultancy there that has founded projects such as Photo London and Prix Pictet.

Tell us about your art collection.

Kamiar: Our collection mostly consists of young emerging artists. I love to discover new talent. My primary joy was paint on canvas before I started curating. Now I enjoy processed-based artists, sculptures and even virtual reality. Our collection has the likes of Neil Beloufa, Paul Kneale, Kasper Sonne, and Melike Kara.

Leila: We have a very versatile collection that consists of international artists. Kamiar attends most of the art fairs and travels around the world to see their work. Of course, collecting young artists involves a certain degree of risk, but that’s all part of the fun. Many of what

we have collected such as Eddie Peake and Kour Pour are quite established now.

What types of artwork are you most drawn to?

Kamiar: You have to love what you buy. On one occasion I saw a painting on Instagram and thought, “Wow, I love it.” I contacted the artist, who then told me to contact his gallery. Three weeks later and the painting was in my house; it still hangs in my bedroom. I don’t have any border issues when discussing and purchasing art. I love out-of-the-box thinkers.

Leila: Young artists are the artists of our generation. Also our family collects established artists so we wanted to do something different that represents us as a couple. I remember the first work Kamiar bought when we were together was a photo by a Japanese artist and he only bought it because the ball in the photo was the colours of the Iranian flag!

Tell us what encourages you to purchase a piece.

Kamiar: Ultimately a collector never wants to lose money on what they collect. So we do our research about the artist as well as the journey they have had to get where they are. We also look into their potential future.

Leila: Although we only do that research once we’ve decided we like the artwork. We don’t only buy a piece because of the hype around it. This emotional connection is more important for me. Financial considerations only come into play when we’re discussing what kind of budget we have for a particular piece.



Maheer Moghraby and Nisrine El Lababidi

Dubai-based couple Maheer and Nisrine met in the UAE at their place of work, where Maheer is a television and film director. They’ve been happily married for 11 years and started to collect various Middle Eastern artworks very early on in their relationship. Towards the beginning, they sought individual pieces that appealed directly to them and their background, but after a few years they began to expand their collection to encompass other works that fit in with common themes present in their emotive pieces.



Maheer Moghraby and Nisrine El Lababidi, photographed here at their Dubai home, have been acquiring art together for 11 years and now share two children



Photographed by Julia at The Factory ME

When did your passion for collecting art first surface?

Nisrine: Both my husband and I come from a creative world – he’s a television and film director and I’m a creative director. We were both immersed in art classes as part of our university courses but it was only after getting married, alongside the boom of the art scene in Dubai, that we started getting interested in acquiring limited-edition prints that appeal to our tastes.

Maheer: It only became clear to us that we wanted to collect art when we were on a trip to London. We visited a dear friend who is also an art collector and they advised us to start collecting at an early stage.

Tell us about your art collection.

Nisrine: One of my favourite pieces from our collection is by Mohammed Al Rawas, who is an accomplished Lebanese artist who has exhibited worldwide and has collections in the Trondheim Kunstmuseum in Norway and the British Museum in London.

Maheer: We’ve only just started to collect seriously in the past few years but we love what we have so far. We have collected silk screens, lithographs and etched prints in limited editions that tell a social commentary. We’ve been expats for so long and sometimes we feel we long for our homeland, our roots.

Hence all the works we collect are contemporary and by various regional designers.

What types of artwork are you most drawn to?

Nisrine: I like collecting small artworks because of the delicate process that goes into creating them and also because the pieces are light. I can carry them with me wherever I go.

Maheer: I guess this is one of the problems associated with being an expat. The idea of leaving and moving to another country or returning home is always lingering in the back of our minds. Having easy-to-carry artworks is always a plus!

Tell us what encourages you to purchase a piece.

Nisrine: An artwork’s emotional value is more important than its financial potential, be it the subject, the colours or the shapes. An artwork has the capacity to be interpreted differently depending on the owner’s past experiences and personal preferences, so it conjures different emotions.

Maheer: For us, the piece definitely has to have a symbolic value. The artwork’s ability to evoke emotion is one that doesn’t change with time, whereas its financial value does – for better and for worse.



London-based couple Hannah Gruy and Harry Brantley, co-founder of luxury menswear brand Frescobol Carioca, have spent several years collecting Brazilian artwork

Harry Brantly and Hannah Gruy

After meeting through a mutual friend in London where they currently reside, Harry, co-founder of luxury menswear brand Frescobol Carioca, and contemporary artist Hannah have known each other for seven years and now have a one-year-old son together. Hannah works with artists at White Cube Gallery and already had her own blossoming art collection before meeting Harry, whose interest in contemporary art quickly developed with his other half's attentive guidance.

Photographed by Nadia Ryder

When did your passion for collecting art first surface?

Hannah: I studied Art History and have been working in contemporary art since graduating from university. I've always worked with young artists so collecting happened gradually – it was born from my natural curiosity in artwork.

Harry: I've always been interested in art. My clothing brand is influenced by some of Brazil's greatest thinkers including Burle Marx, Oscar Niemeyer and Alair Gomes. After Hannah and I got together, I learned about other, more contemporary, Brazilians like Beatriz Milhazes and Ernesto Neto. I dream of featuring these incredible artists in our collection.

Tell us about your art collection.

Hannah: There is no 'direction' in our collection; it's a collection of work by friends and artists that we love. It's a mixture of editions, photography, posters, objects, paintings and so on and so forth.

Harry: We always discuss the works together before we buy. We spend months talking about the artist's overall practice. We see their exhibitions and if Hannah is lucky, she visits them in their studio. Research is very important to us before we purchase a piece.

What kind of artwork are you most drawn to?

Hannah: I think I am most interested in the flexibility and transmutability of seemingly commonplace materials, as well as artists who play with that. I like British artist Marianne Spurr, American artist Virginia Overton and Brazilian artist Jac Leirner, for example.

Harry: I am definitely in love with most Brazilian artists – so many of them inspire our collection. I would love to collect more Brazilian art.

Tell us what encourages you to purchase a piece.

Hannah: I don't know if I would say that my emotions influence me when I decide to purchase artwork; it's more an intuition or an immediate connection to something present within the work. An artwork becomes very powerful to me when it entices me to look, and look again. This could be me trying to understand its narrative or simply to marvel at its materiality.

Harry: Hannah does most of the research, but for me it's just an intuitive response to the piece. I think about the financial potential, I'll be honest! But ultimately I know that an artwork's financial potential comes and goes, whereas pure love for an artwork never fades away.

