

HOLLYWOOD'S GREATEST ART COLLECTORS AND THEIR PHILOSOPHIES

By John D. Beatty

#1 - Opening Slide

“I am not a collector,” the actor Edward G. Robinson once said. “I’m just an innocent bystander who has been taken over by a collection. I am just a lover of paintings. I do what I do for the sheer joy of it.”¹

Vincent Price, a fellow collector and actor, said, “If I could prescribe a single rule for looking at a work of art, it would be to enjoy it. If we’re honest with ourselves, we have to admit we enjoy our tears as much as we enjoy our laughter. The only moments of life that are a bore are when we don’t care one way or another.”²

Billy Wilder, the famed director and another art collector, said, “Having worked every day of my life and not owned horses or yachts or junk bonds, I put everything into art to decorate my walls. I wish I’d collected more and directed less. It’s been more fun collecting than making movies.”³

Art collecting is a passion that transcends boundaries and has captivated individuals from all backgrounds, so long as you have the money to do it.

¹ Karen Chernick, “The Hollywood Gangster Who Was One of Frida Kahlo’s First Collectors,” *Art Market*, 7 August 2019, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-hollywood-gangster-one-frida-kahlos-first-collectors>

² “36 Thoughtful Quotes by Vincent Price,” <https://quotes.thefamouspeople.com/vincent-price-5194.php>

³ Andrew L. Yarrow, “Billy Wilder Decides to Sell Some of His Art Collection,” *New York Times*, 30 August 1989. [https://www.nytimes.com/1989/08/30/arts/billy-wilder-decides-to-sell-some-of-his-art-collection.html#:~:text=Having%20worked%20every%20day%20of,"](https://www.nytimes.com/1989/08/30/arts/billy-wilder-decides-to-sell-some-of-his-art-collection.html#:~:text=Having%20worked%20every%20day%20of,)

Hollywood, with its glitz and glamour, has seen its share of art enthusiasts, who have not only excelled in the world of entertainment but have also made significant contributions to the world of art through their collections. We will explore the collections and philosophies of three iconic Hollywood figures: Edward G. Robinson, Vincent Price, and Billy Wilder, who, apart from their illustrious careers, emerged as some of the greatest art collectors in the United States in their lifetimes. By examining their backgrounds, artistic tastes, and the legacies they left behind, we gain insight into their unique approaches to art and the impact they had on the art world.

#2 – Robinson portraits

Edward G. Robinson

Edward G. Robinson had perhaps the most significant art collection of any celebrity of his era, and he ranks among the most well-known collectors in U.S. history. The actor, of course, is best known for his cinematic roles as gangsters and villains, starring in such films as “Little Caesar,” “Double Indemnity,” “Scarlet Street,” “Key Largo,” and many others in the *film noir* genre. On screen, he was tough, snarling, and cigar-chomping, and often played Italian mob figures. However, the actor off-screen was far different from his film persona. A Romanian Jewish immigrant, he was an introspective, sensitive, soft-spoken, gentle man, who spoke seven languages and had a passionate appreciation for masterpiece paintings. If you wish to see him on screen as a character close to his real self, watch him in

his last film, "Soylent Green," in 1973, in which he plays a librarian opposite Charlton Heston. He was a liberal Democrat who was grey-listed for a time during the McCarthy Era, wrongly accused of being a Communist, but who remained a strong advocate of liberal causes and civil rights all his life.

Born Emanuel Goldenberg in 1893 in Bucharest, Romania, Robinson arrived in New York City with his Yiddish-speaking parents in 1904. He attended the City College of New York with the intention of becoming an attorney, but he became interested instead in theatre and won a scholarship to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts to study acting. At that time, he changed his name to Edward G. Robinson, the G standing for Goldenberg, and he made his debut on Broadway in 1915. Many roles followed, both on stage and in films, with his break-out performance as a gangster in "Little Caesar" in 1931. Other villainous, tough-guy parts followed. They earned him a handsome income, but he was often typecast as a crook, much to his regret, since he would have enjoyed playing more character roles that were not villains. His favorite film was the 1940 "A Dispatch from Reuters," in which he played a journalist building a newspaper empire. He was also fatalistic about his career and later remarked, "If I hadn't become a movie gangster, it is highly probable that not one of my paintings would have had the chance to collect me." He added: "Here is a paradox. Turn killer and you have the means to satisfy your thirst for beauty. When Hollywood conveyed me, through

various sin-stained roles to a succession of sizzling electric chairs, the paintings began to appear. Sometimes, crime *does* pay.”⁴

When he was still a youth in New York City, Robinson became interested in art. He would cut pictures of paintings out of magazines and paste them into scrapbooks, and then he would go to the library to read all he could about why a particular painting was considered important. He visited museums and studied art on his own, and thus he became entirely self-trained as a collector without the need of either a consultant or advisor.

In the mid-1920s, several years before his appearance in “Little Caesar,” Robinson made his first art purchase: an unsigned painting of a cow, for which he paid \$2 at an auction and which he hung beside reproduction paintings by Matisse and Rembrandt. This initial work sparked his collecting passion, which became almost an addiction as his stature as an actor increased. With the crash of the stock market in 1929, his brother lost all of his savings, but Robinson remarked later that he survived the Great Depression by having invested wisely in art and not stocks.

Great art was still affordable and available in the 1920s, including those of the Impressionists. Robinson frequented galleries on Gallery Row on 57th Street in New York City, sometimes with his close friend, the composer George Gershwin. He bought art on instinct and impulse, choosing what he liked and what spoke to

⁴ Karen Chernick, “The Hollywood Gangster Who Was One of Frida Kahlo’s First Collectors, *Art Market*, 7 August 2019, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-hollywood-gangster-one-frida-kahlos-first-collectors>

him. He hated when gallery owners tried to sell him on purchasing a particular piece, stating that he wanted to let the art speak to him directly and intrinsically. He loved to haggle over prices. Gallery owners knew this fact and would jack up their prices for him, knowing that he needed to believe he had gotten the price down. The game of buying a painting was as fun for Robinson as owning the art itself.

#3 – Robinson and Degas painting

On one celebrated shopping spree in 1933 to celebrate the birth of his son Manny, he bought a large Edgar Degas painting of two dancers for \$2,500. Later that day, he bought a Pissarro and a Monet, each for \$2,500, and in what he described as his “heady and nutty joy,” he purchased another Pissarro the next day. If we adjust the \$2,500 purchase prices to modern dollars, each painting cost him about \$58,000. The work of the great Impressionists is virtually unobtainable in modern galleries today; most of it is now in museums. Today, his collection would be worth over a billion dollars.

Robinson’s first wife Gladys felt that he was spending too much money on art, and he admitted in his autobiography, “She was sensibly worried about my cavalier attitude toward money. We were living beyond our means, and it concerned her. We bickered and she was right and I was wrong, but when I look around my house today, I feel that maybe she was wrong and I was right.”⁵

#4 – Robinson with paintings

⁵ Edward G. Robinson, *All My Yesterdays: An Autobiography* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973), 97.

Over time, Robinson amassed a museum quality collection of some 90 paintings, nearly all of them from the French Impressionists or from the early twentieth century. He favored pieces by such painters as Monet, Renoir, and Picasso, and actively sought out works that resonated with his personal experiences. He also liked older masters such as Titian and Goya, but he felt Rembrandt was overrated. His friend Vincent Price regarded the collection as “safe” and not daring or unconventional. For the most part, Robinson liked those artists whose work was well established and collected by others.

#5 – Daughters of Revolution

The greatest work in the collection, in the opinion of Price, was Grant Wood’s “Daughters of Revolution,” now in the Cincinnati Art Museum. It was an allegorical work about American prejudice toward Germans. The ladies are self-proclaimed patriots with anti-German sentiments, but they stand before an image of Washington crossing the Delaware, which was painted by a German artist.

Despite his mostly conventional tastes, Robinson did discover some unknown artists in his time who are now celebrated today. The most famous occurred on an art-buying trip to Mexico with Gladys in 1939, just after he had filmed “Confessions of a Nazi Spy.” There he met with the famed painter Diego Rivera and purchased several works. He was introduced to the work of Rivera’s wife, Frida Kahlo, then a struggling artist, and he became one of the first Americans to recognize her talent. He bought four of her paintings for \$200 each, her first major

sales, which gave her financial independence at the time and helped make her work known in the United States.⁶

#6 – Robinson family

Robinson met with and worked directly with artists in commissioning new pieces. He was a close friend of Henri Matisse and helped the artist celebrate his 70th birthday with him. On a trip to Paris with his wife and son the same year as the Rivera purchase, he met Edouard Vuillard in a café and commissioned him to create a family portrait in pastel. While it was not a masterpiece, Robinson quipped, “it beats the hell out of Kodak snapshot.” The drawing is now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Art in Boston.⁷ Robinson also became a painter in his own right.

#7 – Robinson mansion

By the 1940s, Robinson realized his collection had grown in significance and needed to be shared with the public. He built a wing on his Tudor Revival house at 910 North Rexford Drive in Beverly Hills and opened it to the public twice a week. His whole staff, including his butler, were trained as docents. Celebrities could show up on a less defined schedule any time they wanted. He was very proud of the collection and saw himself as a spokesperson for art appreciation.

⁶ Raquel Stecher, “Edward G. Robinson, the Art Collector,” *Turn Classic Movies* blog, <https://tcm.tumblr.com/post/617465455309996032/edward-g-robinson-the-art-collector-by-raquel>

⁷ Karen Chernick, “The Hollywood Gangster Who Was One of Frida Kahlo’s First Collectors,” *Art Market*, 7 August 2019, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-hollywood-gangster-one-frida-kahlos-first-collectors>

#8 – Robinson and Picasso painting

In 1956, Robinson and Gladys divorced, and the following year as part of the settlement, he was forced to sell 60 of his paintings. The process proved painful, and it broke his heart as Gladys knew it would, since she had wanted to hurt him. But just as he was ready to auction everything off, the Greek shipping tycoon Stavros Niarcos stepped in and purchased his entire collection for \$3.2 million. It came with the understanding that Robinson could purchase some paintings back when he could afford them. Eventually, he was able to reacquire 14 paintings. It was by far the collection the greatest in Hollywood history, and some of the paintings were of such cultural significance that they should have been designated national treasures and not allowed to leave the country, a practice that is followed in Europe.

#9 Robinson and wives

In 1958 Robinson married dress designer Jane Arden and began building a new collection, but it never lived up to the original, in part because the price of art had so increased that he was no longer able to afford what he bought in the 1920s. He died in 1973, and his collection was sold and dispersed. However, many pieces can be found today in museums, and his legacy as a collector is still celebrated.

Vincent Price

#10 Vincent Price

Vincent Price may have been the most articulate and erudite celebrity collector and art advocate in the United States in the twentieth century. Like Robinson, his image in cinema and popular culture differed greatly from the real man. Price appeared in both A- and B-list films from the 1930s to 1990s, often in horror genres, but also sometimes as humorous, campy villains. In caricatures, he is usually seen either as a sinister villain, or in the case of impersonations by Dan Ackroyd, as a homosexual with exaggerated effeminate mannerisms. The real Vincent was different: thoughtful, scholarly, funny, and irreverent, and a strong supporter of liberal causes like Robinson. He had a keen wit and a wide circle of friends, including many people outside of show business. One writer called him classless, “an exaggerated gentleman. He gave upscale a good name, and he was always handsome, charming, dignified, and a little bit sinister.” Married three times and the father of two children, Price was bisexual, according to his daughter Victoria, and he had relationships with and was emotionally drawn to both men and women. She writes in her father’s biography, “My father craved the frisson of intellectual, artistic, and creative exchange, and it did not matter with whom he found it. To him, the sharing of artistic and intellectual passion was as profound an expression of love as existed.”⁸

Price was born in 1911 in St. Louis into an affluent family. His father was the president of the National Candy Company, and his grandfather had invented Dr.

⁸ Victoria Price, *Vincent Price: A Daughter's Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 306.

Price's Baking Powder, the first cream of tartar-based baking powder, and it had made the family wealthy. Vincent attended private schools and graduated from Yale with a degree in Art History in 1933. He then went to London and entered the Courtauld Institute of Art to further his studies. While there he was permitted to study paintings and drawings in the British Museum and at Windsor Castle. In London he was drawn to the theatre, performed on stage, and then went to Hollywood to make his film debut in 1938. He was first cast as a leading man, but by the 1940s he began appearing in character roles, first as villains and later as troubled figures, who he said were not monsters, but people "besieged by fate and out for revenge."

Price's first art purchase happened when he was just 12. A local dealer in St. Louis had an original Rembrandt etching for \$37.50. He scrounged up enough money to put \$5 down and after six months managed to save enough to buy the print and take it home.

#11 – Robinson and Price

Like Robinson, Price was infatuated with the visual arts and became a passionate collector for the rest of his life. The two were close friends and not competitors. Calling him "Eddie," Price considered Robinson "the quintessential amateur," which he intended as a compliment. Robinson knew the pieces in his collection extremely well, had by far the more valuable collection, and was well versed on the artists he collected. Price, by contrast, became the more daring,

unconventional collector. In 1956, the two would compete against each other for charity on the topic of Art History on the \$64,000 Question TV show. In the final round Price deliberately answered a question wrong after Robinson had missed a question so that the two could tie and thereby share the jackpot. He didn't want to hurt his friend.

On another occasion, California wildfires once threatened to burn Price's house and destroy his collection. Robinson rushed over to help, and the two worked together trying and cram as many paintings into their cars before escaping the flames. The fire ended up turning in a different direction, and the house was spared. That was the sort of friendship they had.

#12 – Price with sketches

Price took a cerebral approach to art because of his extensive formal education in Art History. His range extended beyond paintings. While he lacked Robinson's financial means, he described his own taste as "undogmatic." He could easily have taught Art History at the university level if he had wanted, and he enjoyed lecturing as much as acting. He enjoyed meeting with students, and he was committed as Robinson was in sharing his collection with the public and opening his home to private viewings. He wrote his 1959 autobiography as an artistic tour of his home.

According to Victoria Price, her father had a special affinity for collecting original drawings, because he felt they offered a view into the artist's creative process and thereby a glimpse into their souls. The sketches, he believed, were

closer to the act of creation than paintings. “He loved the stories behind pieces of art,” Victoria wrote. “The main thing for him was that seeing art gave him faith in humanity. It gave him faith that we would overcome all the qualities in human nature that he made horror films about.” It was a view that he shared with Robinson.

Price had several favorite artists, among them Albrecht Dürer, whom he praised for the complete communion the artist achieved with the natural world in his woodcuts and engravings. He managed to purchase works by Goya and Modigliani, among many others, but there were no Monets or Renoirs, which were beyond his price range. He admitted in his autobiography, “I love to live with works of art. But I have learned to look myself right in the wallet. I could never own a great painting by [famous] names, so why not own something that I just happen to like? I really don’t think, in my case, it’s just a case of sour grapes or financial inability. I really prefer making up my own mind about my time than having time tell me what I should like or own.”⁹

For this reason, Price liked collecting more affordable, living artists, including William Brice, Eunice Basson, Howard Warshaw, and Richard Diebenkorn. As the co-owner of a gallery for a time in Los Angeles, he befriended them and promoted them by recognizing their talent. Price often said that he liked American artists better than those of Europe. He found American art more stimulating, saying that it

⁹ Vincent Price, *I Like What I Know: A Visual Autobiography* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), 232.

had “the magnificence of experiment” instead of the “dull baritone monotony of the slick young Europeans.”¹⁰

#13 – Price with Native American collection

In 1949, when Price had amassed a substantial collection and had divorced his first wife Edith, he went to Mexico, Central America, and Peru for the first time. There he discovered pre-Columbian and Spanish colonial era art. Finding it inexpensive and in great supply, he began assembling a large collection of Native American pottery and figurines as well as altar crosses and early Spanish ecclesiastical art from Central America. He undertook extensive research, and after years of working with archaeologists, he became an expert on this artform. He built his collection at a time before there were widespread copies and forgeries that have made collecting pre-Columbian art more challenging today. He developed a museum-quality collection of folk art that he displayed in his house.

Though he was raised as an Episcopalian and remained nominally a Christian all his life, Price was not overtly dogmatic in his beliefs and was tolerant of all religious faiths. He converted to Catholicism late in life as a favor to his third wife, Coral. He believed that religion and art were closely linked, and he found God in artistic expression. His daughter said, “Art was Vincent’s religion, and museums were his church.”¹¹ In his autobiography, *I Like What I Know*, Price explained,

¹⁰ Ibid, 226.

¹¹ <https://vincentpriceartmuseum.wordpress.com/2020/05/15/the-history-of-vincent-prices-art-collection-at-east-los-angeles-college/>

“There is a oneness in the purpose of all art, revealing, to those who understand, that that purpose is the edification and instruction of the human mind in the richest secret of life. Through his art, man has a chance to repay the Divine Power who put him here – coin for coin, what he has cost – and to show the deepest gratitude for being alive.”¹²

#14 – Price with painting

Price left thousands of other quotations about art in his various books, including his 1959 autobiography. He made these observations:

“I learned one very important thing about museums: you can’t see everything. You aren’t expected to like everything, and you don’t even have to try. What you’ve seen and didn’t grasp will come back to you another time – fully charged – to be plugged into your receptivity. What you have seen and reviewed, what you have discovered for the first time, will always be there. You can’t lose it.”¹³

“The love of art may not be the surest way to become a millionaire, but one thing it teaches you is worth more than anything in life...tolerance. And more than tolerance ... understanding.”¹⁴

In remembering his first impressions of Michelangelo’s Pièta at age 16, he later wrote: “...it came to me that I was not going to be blessed with creative genius,

¹² Ibid, 84.

¹³ Vincent Price, *I Like What I Know: A Visual Autobiography* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), 61-62.

¹⁴ Ibid, 64.

and it may have been at this moment that I made up my mind that, as long as this was true, I had darn well better compensate for it by becoming the most receptive human being that I could become. I knew for sure that I liked art, and I better know everything I could about what I liked. I became an audience, then and there, for the drama of the eye. And once you accept that fact, it is almost impossible ever again to be bored with life... All you have to do is open your eyes.”¹⁵

He also said this: “I’m extremely profane, unconsciously so, when I see something great for the first time; I don’t know why, but beauty and profanity are related to me in the same way. It may be that I want to think of art in the vernacular, but I have no control over what comes out of my mouth when my eyes take in great beauty ... it might just be the reason I avoid going to museums with elderly ladies.”

By the 1950s Price had become widely known as one of the country’s leading proponents of art appreciation. He became the second most requested lecturer on the college campus circuit after Eleanor Roosevelt. In 1957, he and his second wife, Mary Grant, endowed and donated initially 90 pieces from their collection to East Los Angeles College to form a teaching collection at the school. Named the Vincent Price Art Museum, it predated the founding of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and UCLA’s Fowler Museum. They eventually gave more than 2,000 pieces. It was a teaching collection, where students were encouraged to take

¹⁵ Ibid, 65.

the pictures off the wall and study them. Today, the collection continues to grow with the acquisition of new pieces. In 1962, Jacqueline Kennedy invited him to serve on the White House Art Commission, and he continued to serve during the Johnson years. He was also named a commissioner of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board of the Department of the Interior, because of his knowledge of pre-Columbian art.

#15 – Vincent Price Collection

In 1962, Sears and Roebuck announced a partnership with Price to offer the Vincent Price Collection, a selection of more than 50,000 pieces of fine art to be sold through their stores. They included real paintings, etchings, and signed prints, some by the great Masters, at a wide range of prices. On the backs of each item were certificates of authenticity. Vincent scoured art catalogs from all over the world to look for pieces at reasonable prices that were readily affordable for the average customer. There were original prints by Rembrandt, Goya, Chagall, and Picasso, as well as original works by a variety of living artists in America, Europe, and Central and South America. Some of the best-known names were Andrew Wyeth and Salvador Dali, whom Sears commissioned to create pieces for the collection. Sears sold the works only through a select number of stores, and the program continued through 1971. You can still find art from the collection for sale on places like eBay, complete with Price's endorsement. Some works have

appreciated in value while others have not and are still quite affordable. Indeed, some may never be very valuable, while others proved to be wise investments.

A heavy smoker, Price died in 1993 at the age of 82. His influence as an advocate for art has not really been eclipsed by any other Hollywood celebrity.

#16 – Billy Wilder

Billy Wilder

There were other art collectors in Hollywood's heyday, among them Alfred Hitchcock, Greta Garbo, Helen Hayes, Tallulah Bankhead, and many others. Helen Hayes was the owner of several Renoirs. All of them rubbed elbows with Robinson and Price at various gallery openings, auctions, and museums. Sometimes they competed for the same pieces, though there was also a sense of camaraderie and mutual support among the collecting community. If one discovered a piece that fit well in a particular collection, they would often share the news with their friends. Price was once in New York visiting a gallery and discovered a Renoir that was beyond his budget. He told his close friend Helen Hayes, and the two went together in a taxi for her to buy it.

The director Billy Wilder had perhaps the third most prominent collection among these celebrities, though he was a far more private and reclusive collector than either Robinson or Price, and he was not a close acquaintance of either.

Wilder was born in Austria in 1906 and grew up in Vienna, where his interest in art first germinated. He later explained it to an interviewer: "It started in Vienna,

when I was going to the Lycée, a high school. Somebody brought a copy of an Egon Schiele drawing, rather pornographic for its day. That kind of made its rounds under the desks, and they caught one guy and he was expelled for about a week until his parents came. I started inquiring about Schiele, and he began my undying interest in art.”¹⁶

#17 – Wilder as director

Wilder later dropped out of high school, became a journalist, and moved to Berlin. There he made several German films in the late 1920s and early 1930s before escaping to America in 1933 after the Nazis burned the Reichstag. He reportedly arrived at Ellis Island hiding his money under his hat band and carrying several Toulouse-Lautrec posters under his arm. His mother, grandmother, and stepfather were all killed during the Holocaust. Wilder was drawn to Hollywood, where his talent made him one of the most successful directors of his time. He is best known for such films as “Double Indemnity,” “Lost Weekend,” “Sunset Boulevard,” “Some Like It Hot,” “Sabrina,” “The Seven Year Itch,” “Witness for the Prosecution,” “The Apartment,” and many others.

When his Berlin friend and fellow art collector Frank Perls arrived in 1939, the two of them opened a gallery and began a 35-year quest to collect fine art.

#18 – Wilder with art

¹⁶ Susan Morgan, “Billy Wilder,” *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 50, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 22.

As a collector, Wilder had a taste for modern art, like Price. His advice to other collectors was simple: “Don’t collect. Buy what you like, hold onto it, enjoy it.”¹⁷

Of his collection he said, “I have accumulations, like a squirrel. I never collected paintings, sculptures, African or Oceanic art to protect against inflation. When I’m crazy about a canvas, I can never envision selling it. Nor would I separate myself from a dog I love. It’s a sickness. I don’t know how to stop myself. Call it bulimia if you like, or curiosity or passion. I have some impressionists, some Picassos from every period, some mobiles by Calder. I also collect tiny Japanese trees, glass paperweights, and Chinese vases. Name an object, and I collect it.” Like Robinson, he also became an artist in his own right and painted a variety of nautical scenes.

As a film director, Wilder developed a set of artistic sensibilities that became deeply intertwined with his filmmaking career, and his approach to storytelling was heavily influenced by visual aesthetics. His films became his canvasses, while his own art collection continued to grow. In addition to Picasso and Alexander Calder, he collected works by Joan Miro, Paul Klee, Joseph Cornell, Mario Marini, Heinz Balthes, Georges Braque, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.

Even though his collection Robinson’s, Wilder was never didactic or preachy about it. In fact, unlike Robinson or Price, he had no interest in sharing it with the public for most of his life or talking about it extensively to the press. He just collected, quietly and passionately, using the money he earned from his successful

¹⁷ Austin Kleon, <https://austinkleon.com/2019/06/22/wilder/>

films. Only in 1989, when he neared the end of his life and was concerned about the potential taxes that his wife Audrey would have to pay that he agreed to sell his collection via auction at Christie's in New York. He said at the time that he wanted the thrill of seeing and hearing the buyers making their bids. In the end it sold for \$32.6 million.

During the 1990s, after selling everything, he began collecting plastic art created by Bruce Houston. Only then did a friend convince him to exhibit publicly some of his collection in a Beverly Hills gallery. He died in 2002, and the collection he assembled late in life has also been sold and dispersed.

#19 – Modern Hollywood

Hollywood Collectors Today

Hollywood remains one of the largest centers of art collecting in the world with some of the most up-scale galleries located in the Los Angeles area. Reporter Barbara Isenberg, writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, observes: “In Hollywood, art is *the scene*. It's what industry people discuss over pasta *checca* and seared ahi. It represents beauty, wealth, passion, power, culture, status, and celebrity. It's about deal-making and high-rolling. The players are glamorous. So is the game.”¹⁸

Many Hollywood celebrities today are art collectors. It makes sense, says a reporter for *The Daily Beast*. “Cinema is an art, so why wouldn't participants in the

¹⁸ Barbara Isenberg, “Hollywood's Art Connections: Where Actors, Agents, and Movie and TV Executives Meet, Art Is the Topic. Whether for Love of Art or the Limelight, Celebrities Have Become Big Collectors,” *Los Angeles Times*, 12 May 1991. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-05-12-ca-2488-story.html>.

creation of moving images also be moved by images?"¹⁹ This modern collecting group includes Brad Pitt, George Lucas, Leonardo DiCaprio, Jack Nicholson, Barbra Streisand, Beyoncé and Jay Z, Steve Martin, Madonna, David Geffen, Elton John, Oprah Winfrey, Ellen Degeneres, and Lady Gaga, to name a few. Geffen's collection, the most valuable of them all, is estimated to be worth \$2.3 billion and includes works by such abstract expressionists as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, David Hockney, and Willem De Kooning, among others. By contrast, DiCaprio's collection is only worth about \$10 million. Stephen Spielberg and George Lucas have collections worth between \$200 and \$600 million. Spielberg loves Norman Rockwell and also collects Disney color cartoon cells. Madonna's collection is worth \$100 million and includes works by Frida Calho as well as photographs. Indeed, photograph collecting is becoming a hot new trend in the art world, as are works by female and African American artists.

Most celebrities have a strong preference for contemporary artists, such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Oscar Murillo, Banksy, and Andy Warhol. The few exceptions are those who have been in the arena longer. Collectors like Jack Nicholson, who have been at it since the 1960s, collect older artists, including Picasso, Modigliani, Matisse, Elsworth Kelly, Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Gustav

¹⁹ Helen Holmes, "Inside the Secret, Very Expensive World of Hollywood's Star Art Collections, *The Daily Beast*, 3 October 2022; <https://www.thedailybeast.com/inside-the-secret-very-expensive-world-of-hollywoods-star-art-collectors>

Klimt, Salvador Dali, and Alexander Calder. Before his death in 2010, the producer David L. Wolper had reportedly the largest collection of Picasso statuary in private hands. Steve Martin has a passion for indigenous Australian art but is mum about what else he collects.

Few members of the modern celebrity world collect the Impressionists, probably because their work is too difficult to find. On the whole, they show little interest in earlier artists from before the twentieth century. One celebrity in his 30s told a reporter that he only wants to collect artists from his own generation and eschewed owning anything from 1960s artists such as Andy Warhol. Art prices of many contemporary artists have soared, while the antiques market in many areas has plummeted. The exception is Shaker furniture, for which Oprah Winfrey is reportedly a large collector. Great artists from the nineteenth century are still collectible for those interested, but it is out of reach for many. A collector like Edward G. Robinson would appear out of place in the modern Hollywood scene because of his more classical tastes.

If these celebrities all share a passion for art and are frequent buyers at Christie's and Sotheby's auctions, none have any interest in sharing their collections with the public or even speaking about their collections or collecting philosophies. They avoid the press and publicity. They do not see themselves as having a public role in promoting art appreciation and prefer to keep what they do hidden. The exception is David Geffen, who has given a \$150 million gift to the

Los Angeles County Museum of Art with a gallery in his name. Parts of his collection will end up there after his death.

Few celebrities go to auction houses actually in person, and when they do go, they visit galleries privately during off hours. They have representatives do all the bidding for them in auction settings. Most hire professional art experts to serve as their advisors. Victoria Burns, an art consultant, told *The Daily Beast*: “With every client, I try to figure out what their ambition is around collecting. Are they collecting art for social purposes and image expansion? Are they trying to create a certain image of themselves and their personal brand through the art that they collect? Or are they really emotional people who have to really connect with their art?”²⁰ For many modern collectors, it’s all about being a part of an exclusive club.

Barbara Guggenheim, the art advisor to Tom Cruise, says that he collects “works that are very intensive, that have a lot of movement and that are very positive, and I think that is who he is.”²¹ Cruise refuses to say anything to the press about what he collects and remains one of Hollywood’s most mysterious collectors.

Why should we care what celebrities collect? Perhaps because celebrity culture serves in many ways as a mirror of popular culture, and they are major drivers of

²⁰ Helen Holmes, “Inside the Secret, Very Expensive World of Hollywood’s Star Art Collections, *The Daily Beast*, 3 October 2022; <https://www.thedailybeast.com/inside-the-secret-very-expensive-world-of-hollywoods-star-art-collectors>

²¹ Barbara Guggenheim quoted in *ibid.*

the art market. Like it or not, celebrities help set our social standards and trends, and they contribute in a major way to the prices that are realized for certain artists. If we seek to understand the *Zeitgeist* of our time, we look to the likes of Lady Gaga, Oprah, and Taylor Swift as much as our political leaders to help us define and understand it. At a time when information on all topics has exploded and is even falsified and convoluted on social media, our culture no longer values a celebrity with the honesty of Edward G. Robinson or Vincent Price. We no longer seek out the famous to articulate the importance of art or who use their status to teach, define, and uplift us. Such a notion seems quaint and out of place.

#20 – Vincent Price in Gallery

Yet, it goes without saying that we need art in all its forms – visual, musical, literary – if we hope to heal some of the sharp divisions in our world. Gaining a deeper understanding of artistic expression is never a waste of time. As Vincent Price said so well on many occasions, “Art is the history of man, man’s highest achievement, and if you’re going to look at the history of man, you might as well look at the best he does.”²² So, go to a museum and appreciate it, and if you can afford to do so, collect what you like to the extent that the walls in your house and your budget will allow. Study it. Encourage it. Make friends with local artists and support their work. When we do these things, we uplift ourselves and our society, and perhaps there is no better way of coping through the times in which we live.

²² Vincent Price interview with Larry King, 1987, *Youtube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Jb_1ehmmmk

