

# salon focus

# An eye for it

**On Feb. 27, the Beaverbrook Art Gallery opens The Leslie B. Marcus Collection: A Gift To The Beaverbrook Art Gallery, the product of more than 30 years of work toward esthetic accomplishment by the eponymous Marcus. More everyman than erudite aristocrat, the Beaverbrook hopes Marcus's collection sets an example for cultured would-be collectors. But Marcus's desire to collect also reveals the spectrum of what's been called the unruly passion. Story by Mike Landry**

It's about 30 steep steps from street level to the top floor of Leslie B. Marcus's state-ly three-storey 19th-century heritage home. Averaging a foot per stair, Troy Haines, the assistant art preparator at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, estimates he must have walked a kilometre up and kilometre down those stairs when he packed up Marcus's art collection in January – not because there were a lot of stairs, but because there was a lot of art. After 30-some years of collecting art, Marcus amassed a unique collection of 136 pieces, now hanging at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in the show The Leslie B. Marcus Collection: A Gift To The Beaverbrook Art Gallery, which opens Feb. 27.

Marcus lives in tiny, rural Granville Ferry, N.S., across the river from Annapolis Royal. From a top-floor window of his home, over the steep-pitched end-gable roof, there is a clear view of the Annapolis River and the historic town. Before his art collection was removed, the tranquil view was one of the few breaks of sensory superfluity in Marcus's home.

Marcus's collection was like wallpaper, densely hung in every room. At one point in removing the art, Marcus, 76, told Haines he had missed one work from a room. He cheekily asked Haines to guess where it was. Falling an answer, Marcus opened a closet and pushed aside a row of clothes to reveal the hidden work.

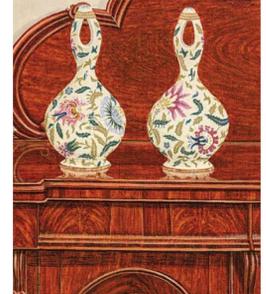
Haines finished his job in less than five hours, able to take a couple of works at a time to the truck. Marcus's collection is primarily smaller works, many on paper, with the largest frames measuring about three feet at the most. Marcus, a professor for 30 years with the University of New Brunswick, is quick to note that he is firmly middle class, neither rich nor poor. The art he's purchased is notable not for its extravagance, but for the quality of his taste.

"I was an opportunist in the best sense of the term," says Marcus. "I had the chance to get reasonable works and fair prices, and I took advantage of it."

For Haines, removing the work became a treasure hunt that revealed a surprising and varied collection of New Brunswick art.

Living in Saint John for 29 years, the city's artists dominate his collection, beginning with his first purchase in 1979, a work by Robert Percival, and continuing, in particular, with numerous works from Fred Ross, Herzl Kashetsky, Jack Humphrey and Miller Brittain. Even if the works were not by Saint John artists, he would have purchased them at one of the Port City's galleries. Terry Graff, director, CEO and chief curator of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, goes as far as to say the collection is "maybe even a sociological record of Saint John."

The collection also covers wider New Brunswick and Atlantic Canada, with a few national and international pieces as well. But tying it all together is Marcus's taste. "It is very subjective, because it was coming right out of the community in which he lived, and the artist he knew and



Herzl Kashetsky's acrylic Sideboard, 1981. PHOTO: COLLECTION OF LESLIE MARCUS

met. It's a personal collection," says Graff. "It's a lived collection. There's nothing distant."

Marcus was born an only child in Sherbrooke, Que. His father, Simon Marcus, was a doctor. There were many doctors in his extended family; his cousin, Rudolph, even received the 1992 Nobel Prize in Chemistry and the Marcus Theory of electrons is named in his honour.

Few in his family were much interested in the arts, but young Leslie had an aptitude for languages. He happily took to bilingualism and developed a love of books. Like many children of the era, he also collected stamps, an early indicator of his love of not only collecting and art, but also travel. Marcus visited Machu Picchu this winter, has been around the world and visits Vancouver annually. He has always had a passion for Latin countries, and is fluent in Spanish.

By the time he completed his undergrad at Bishop's University, his family had moved to Tucson, Ariz. Marcus followed, winding up at the University of Oregon, in Eugene. At the time, French literature was incredibly popular thanks to existentialism. As a graduate assistant, Marcus taught a course on Albert Camus' *L'Étranger*.

He thought he'd spend his career in the U.S., but was offered a position teaching in the University of New Brunswick's French department. He spent his first year, 1968-69, in Fredericton before being transferred to Saint John, where he would remain for the next 29 years, teaching French and Spanish, until retirement.

Initially, he wasn't too impressed with Saint John. The heyday of its visual arts scene was over. Miller Brittain and Jack Humphrey were gone, they died in 1968 and '67 respectively, and Ted and Rosamond Campbell were soon to move to Mexico.

Not that Marcus was interested in visual art anyway. "I avoided art," he says, "I took the idea that the only art that matters is

Rembrandt and all that. And then that's snobbish and silly. I'm not putting Rembrandt down, but who can afford a Rembrandt?"

It was an attitude he also once took to poetry. Even knocking a young, then unknown, Leonard Cohen, when he knew him in Montreal. "I was foolish. I was criticizing him. I was slapping him in the face, because I was saying he wasn't as good as Shakespeare. Well, who is as good as Shakespeare?"

It was the music scene with which Marcus fell into in Saint John. By the mid-'70s he had migrated to the art crowd, with local artists such as William Martel and Fred Ross. Marcus hadn't, and still has never, tried his hand at art-making – "as far as I know I have no talent for art" – but he liked the realism of the Atlantic Canadian artists. He isn't certain, though, why he started collecting it. "I just did. And then, after a while, I liked what I had."

Content with Saint John, and lacking other options, Marcus stayed until his retirement when he felt a change was necessary. He liked St. Andrews, Wolfville, N.S., and Annapolis Royal, N.S. The latter being the cheapest, he moved there.

Marcus shares his passion for collecting over plates of "haddi-bits and homefries," the day's special at Vicki's Restaurant in Granville Ferry. His wiry grey hair scatters schizophrenic from under his dark Baker Boy cap, so worn the fabric sheens on the crown. His grey sweater too has been well-loved, its holes accented by his pot belly.

Marcus converses with an intelligent confidence, but not effusively, as though each period too needs to be pronounced. He would have preferred the fish pan-fried rather than deep-fried, but he knows, as the TV set to Country Music Television and the dollar store Valentine's Day decorations attest, that Vicki's is not an elegant restaurant. But the portions are generous and "it's perfect for ordinary, everyday food."

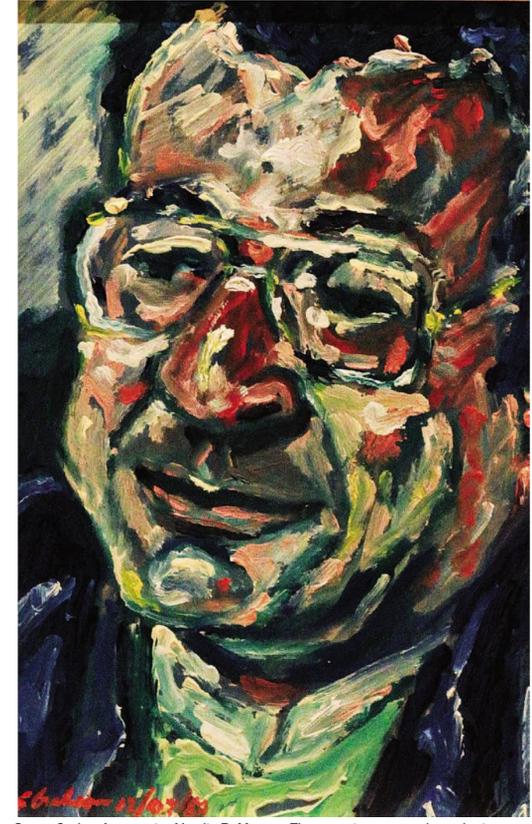
His approach to art isn't so different from that meal.

Marcus's philosophy toward collecting art is a tug-of-war between pragmatism and esthetic abandon. It's an intriguing mix best represented by two portraits of Marcus in his collection. One, by Herzl Kashetsky, is a dark depiction, Marcus smiling with a blank expression in mel-low-toned PrismaColor. The other portrait, by Susan Graham, is an expressionist explosion of colour and paint, with Marcus smiling.

Both portraits, though, are small, unobtrusive – not unlike Marcus. Graham, now a graphic designer in Toronto, remembers Marcus as a fixture in the art scene. It was her studio mate Bruce Wallace who asked Marcus to pose for their bi-weekly live model work.

"Les wasn't concerned much about the externals," she writes via email. "(He) lived inside his head."

In his essay for the exhibition, Marcus quotes the old cliché, "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like." The line



Susan Graham's portrait of Leslie B. Marcus. The portrait captures the esthetic abandon with which he embraces culture. PHOTO: JAMES WEST/THE DAILY GLEANER

is often used to mock art-world snobbery – perhaps most famously by Monty Python in a skit where gallery visitors nibble on a Turner – but Marcus is sincere.

"It's very sensible. We're all like that, the vast majority," says Marcus, who prefers smaller museums, like the Frick Collection, in New York, or the Mauritshuis, in The Hague, because they're practical, you can appreciate the collections in a day.

"I have no training in esthetics," he says. "I'm not a creative person, really."

Although open about his dislikes – abstract art as a whole, and any landscape

with another banal barn – Marcus is vague when pushed to elaborate on what it is he likes. He mentions composition, subject matter, but nothing specific.

Once, he bought a lithograph by Francisco Zúñiga, one of Mexico's top artists in the 20th century, after seeing a Kansas-based gallery's advertisement in a magazine. What was it that moved him so much? "All I can say is I like that kind of thing."

And, unlike many, if Marcus likes something, he's willing to spare the dollars for his cultural desires. Take, for example, his record player. It's not an old turntable, it's a Rega – the most expensive device, but a choice piece of high-end hardware.

Like his art, his turntable is best described as considered, not lavish. Marcus kept to a budget, the listed price wooing him as much as the art itself. One Miller

Brittain drawing in his collection isn't his favourite – a nude, with an odd bosom, more bull's-eyes than breasts – but the price was right.

He recalls a Bruno Bobak landscape – "one row of trees after another, just lovely" – that caught his eye in 1980, but which he regretfully had to pass up. At \$1,500, it was "a fortune."

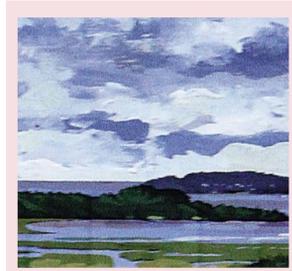
A couple of years ago, he walked away from a portrait by Jack Humphrey. At \$9,000, the large oil was beyond his means, but then he received a letter from Revenue Canada. He had misfiled his taxes, overpaying by \$9,000. He immediately bought the Humphrey, and it is one of four pieces from the collection that will greet visitors at the Beaverbrook.

"I felt I had to have it," says Marcus, noting the work is unsigned, as it was removed from the backside of another signed Humphrey work, which lowers its value despite its authenticity. "That was one of the nicest of Humphrey's figures of people that I've ever seen anywhere ... and it was at a price that was not cheap, but was affordable."

Although he knew many of the artists whose work he bought, he deferred to the gallery, as they had payment plans and granted him the right to first refusal. "Assuming it wasn't too high – even if it was a little more expensive than I could afford – if it wasn't too much more, then I figured, if I was lucky, it would appreciate over time, and it wouldn't seem so bad. And that's the case. And I've been lucky."

He's not sure how much he's spent over the years on art. The final collection donated to the gallery doesn't represent the total work he's purchased. He sold or donated many pieces as his tastes changed, trading up for other work. But he's never owned a car, and estimates if you converted 40 years of car payments to art, you would wind up in the ballpark of a figure.

Another caveat to his collection is that Marcus is a bachelor. He smiles and shakes his head when asked if he ever came close to being a family man. Because he was



Landscape by Fred Ross. PHOTO: JAMES WEST/THE DAILY GLEANER



Landscape by Bruno Bobak. PHOTO: JAMES WEST/THE DAILY GLEANER



Eastern Townships Lake by Goodridge Roberts. PHOTO: JAMES WEST/THE DAILY GLEANER



Forested Landscape by Fred Ross. PHOTO: JAMES WEST/THE DAILY GLEANER



Mexican Women by Francisco Zúñiga. PHOTO: JAMES WEST/THE DAILY GLEANER

single, he could dedicate a larger portion of his income to culture instead of college funds and summer camps.

But it isn't only fine art that Marcus collected. Although his art collection is now at the Beaverbrook, his home is by no means empty. Without moving a nail, Marcus was able to replace every vacant spot with work from his collection of framed antique maps of South America and Maritime photographic work.

Before offering a tour of his home, Marcus warns that it is "lived in, so it's a little bit messy." It's not so much messy as cluttered; Marcus's various collections fighting for space.

Downstairs is his cobwebbed collection of vinyl records, housed in four custom-designed rolling shelves stacked almost entirely with soundtracks – from *Citizen Kane* to the 1981 cult classic *Dragonlayer* – and classical music organized by record label. He doesn't own a single CD, and stopped buying vinyl in 1989 as production dwindled.

Upstairs is a collection of books on botanical art, which he would like to donate one day. Marcus isn't interested in the labour of gardening, just its depiction. He pays someone to tend to his backyard of greenery and concord grapes.

Another room features a wall of coffee table books. "Somebody thought they'd put me down, they said 'How many of those books have you read?' I said I hadn't read any of them. These are books on photography and art; they're not meant to be read. They're meant to be looked at," he explains. "It's like drinking sherry or something – you don't drink the whole bottle at once; you sip it, little by little."

While some fiction books are shelved, most are kept in dozens of Mi'kmaq baskets, in piles on the floor or whatever surface is free. One barrister's case is stuffed with books, all pointing page-edges out.

A sideboard is crowded with the dregs of his decanter collection, which he donated to the O'Dell House Museum in Annapolis Royal. A long table is covered with ceramics, as is a wall of shelving. The pieces are primarily from Atlantic Canada, all variants on a squat urn shape, and almost uniformly neutral in tone.

"I like things that are simple and black and white. It doesn't generally like elaborate designs," he says, noting most pieces were under \$100. "I've told people if they want to collect art cheaply, the way to do it is not to buy art; buy bowls and pottery."

His dozens and dozens of magazines, periodicals and sorted papers are organized into piles that cover his large antique dining table, as well as occupy chairs and the floor under tables. "They're not scattered like that. There's a reason d'être."

In his bedroom, 14 Sussex-built wanigans are arranged in a grid on the floor, providing more storage as well as a surface to display a full dinnerware set. The dinnerware is a modern reproduction, either Spode or Wedgwood, but Marcus enjoys the blue and white colours.

"This gives you an idea of what the place is like," says Marcus after a quick tour. "As I say, it's a mini museum, really."

Saint John artist and longtime friend Herzl Kashetsky says Marcus has a taste for fine things that is unquestionable. But Marcus's taste also trends close to the darker side of collecting, called the "unruly passion" by the late psychoanalyst and art historian Werner

Muensterberger. It's not something of which Marcus is entirely ignorant, either. "Sometimes, it's a sickness. There's something you see that you have to get, especially if it's within your price range. There's no end to that really, the urge for acquisition."

Leah Dilworth, an English professor at Long Island University, edited the 2003 anthology *Acts of Possession: Collecting in America* in which she takes a cross-disciplinary approach to examining the history of contemporary collecting. She says Marcus isn't unlike most of the collectors she's studied, in that they are generally inarticulate about why they collect. But where Marcus differs is in his ability to balance control and chaos, acquisition and appreciation.

"When I think about an individual collector," says Diworth, "it's like a story. It's a narrative of some kind. That's one way to approach collection or a collector, that there is a story they're trying to tell."

In Marcus's case, Terry Graff says that story is particularly strong, the collection hanging together exceptionally well.

"He invests himself in collecting. He's got the collecting bug. Some people are just hoarders, but I don't think that is the case with Leslie," says Graff. "He's collected work that fits his sensibility, his esthetic of what's meaningful and what's beautiful."

The Beaverbrook's acquisitions committee meets about three times a year to scrutinize potential purchases and works for accession. Although it's not usual for them to add 75 or 100 works annually, everything acquired must adhere to the gallery's collection policy and it is under no requirement to accept everything. Graff regularly receives inquiries and vets all work before it reaches the committee. It's led him on some wild goose chases, too.

While working in Prince Edward Island, a woman once contacted him saying she had a painting by Lucy Maud Montgomery. Intrigued, as he was unaware of the famous author ever having painted, he drove out to see the work. It was indeed signed by a Montgomery, but it wasn't Lucy Maud. It wasn't even a painting, but a cheap reproduction.

Prospective serious donations can be just as easy to decline. But when Graff saw a list of regional work in Marcus's collection, his interest was piqued. Marcus understood the shaping of a collection, and supported a local community. He had easy-to-store prints, drawings and small paintings that fill holes in the gallery's collection. "You can be as excited about little tiny drawing as you can great big painting," says Graff.

Marcus also purchased multiple works from artists, from varying periods and mediums. "I like to see that – it means that he's studying the artist's work," says Graff. "Two works by Jack Humphrey are better (than) one work, because it gives you the opportunity to compare and contrast ... get an in-depth sense of the artist's career."

Graff hopes audiences will learn from Marcus: that focus can trump financial means when it comes to developing a culturally valuable collection.

Marcus admits he made mistakes early on, bad purchases, lacking confidence in his own taste and relying on others. But he soon realized there was regional talent punching above its class. Rather than buying the low-grade chaff of celebrated artists, he could purchase a first-rate Kashetsky or Fred Ross.

"I don't want to sound arrogant, but I think I have a good eye. I've been told that I

do, and I bought local things. It's not that I don't think no decent art is done outside of Saint John, it's just, why should I collect Toronto art? I'd be competing with other collectors who go there two or three times a week. I go to Toronto every five years. What kind of art am I to collect?"

Instead, he began visiting local galleries almost every day, on the lookout. If the right piece, at the right price, arrived, he would pounce.

"I won't lie to you; if I was a billionaire I would collect the Group of Seven. But I can't afford them, and if you can afford them you're getting a 12th-rate Tom Thomson. It's far greater to get some of the (regional) painters. They don't have the same reputation, but they're great painters, and you feel proud of them. You're not ashamed to own them."

It's this mentality that struck a chord with Graff, as it's the new programming mandate of the Beaverbrook. Although founded upon British and Canadian art, Graff says as the province's official gallery it needs to carve a new program. "There's nothing worse than the homogenization of collections. It's very important we follow our own vision and actually contribute to the cultural story of New Brunswick," he says. "The approach Leslie took is a very proactive one for developing the culture of New Brunswick."

Given the size and weight of Marcus's collection, Graff knew it would take days to assess the collection. So, he organized the exhibition to allow adequate time for him and the committee. Any work deemed unsuitable for the Beaverbrook's collection will be sold off to support future acquisitions.

Marcus says the collection is insured for \$200,000 to 250,000, but it has yet to be appraised. That will happen during the exhibition. Though he doesn't care what the value is, he admits his ego would be damaged if it came back less than \$200,000.

But Marcus doesn't have much choice in letting the works go. At his age, he knows death could be waiting around any corner. With no one to inherit the work, the idea that his collection could be picked apart and sold to private collectors is horrible. If he has to part with the work, he may as well go for a substantial tax credit and the chance for his name to appear next to one of his collected works in a gallery.

And though his home remains full, there is an emptiness. Gone is Miller Brittain's *Native Man*, Fred Ross's dancers, Bruno Bobak's inky nude, Kashetsky's many aging self renderings, John Hooper's man in prayer, Alex Colville's rat and Glenn Adams' strangers perpetually waiting for the train in Sackville.

As he took gallery docents through the collection in preparation for the exhibition, Marcus paused at each work to

tell its story. Docent Gerry Rhymes notes, Marcus had "not the cold indifference of someone who was collecting for monetary value."

"It's someone collecting for the work," says Rhymes. "He left them in Fredericton, but it was like saying goodbye to a child."

However, though it may have seemed a sentimental moment, Marcus wasn't thinking about his collection. He was thinking about the small print he saw for sale in the Beaverbrook's members show.

"It was a very reasonable price, but I resisted the temptation," says Marcus. "Theoretically, I'm finished (collecting art), but it's all for yourself, and the ob-session, and all of that." S

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Bedroom Collage by Herzl Kashetsky. PHOTO: JAMES WEST/THE DAILY GLEANER

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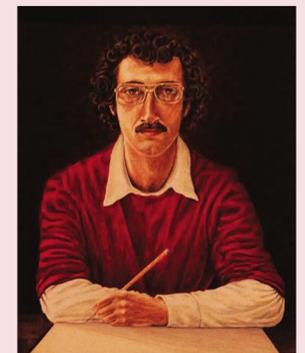
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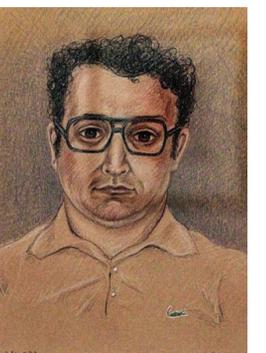
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These works, Self-Portrait by Herzl Kashetsky, left, Dancers by Fred Ross, Portrait of a Lady by Jack Humphrey and Miller Brittain's Native Man headline the exhibition of Marcus's collection. PHOTO: JAMES WEST/THE DAILY GLEANER



Portrait of Leslie Marcus by Herzl Kashetsky. PHOTO: JAMES WEST/THE DAILY GLEANER