

Collecting to give

David and Celia Hilliard spent a lifetime carefully buying art — and their work eventually filled in key gaps at the Art Institute

By Roy Strom

If you are a collector — of art, baseball cards, coins, cars, stamps, wine or pretty much anything other than vacation homes — here are some litmus tests to determine whether you're a good one.

Strike that, an exceptional one.

Have you been building your collection for nearly five decades?

Is your collection so vast that you have never seen it in its entirety all at once?

Was the first time you saw your collection as a whole when a world-renowned museum put it on display for four months?

Has a team of international scholars and art experts opined on your collection in a 240-page book published by Yale University Press?

Do you have one collection that passes all these tests and a second, separate collection that very well could as well?

Maybe this isn't a fair test. It's just a few ways to describe David and Celia Hilliard.

A 40-plus year journey

The first thing visitors see as they enter the Dreams and Echoes exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago is meant to be arresting — and not only because the wall the painting hangs on prevents you from seeing a portion of the 115 pieces of art from David and Celia's private collection that is on display in the rooms behind it.

The pastel is 3 feet wide and 2½ feet tall, which makes it the largest work on display in the five-gallery exhibition that runs through Feb. 23.

The piece by William Degouve de



Photo by Ben Speckmann

Nuncques, circa 1894, is an eerie scene at dawn or dusk in a sparsely populated forest.

What grabs your eye is a man pulling a body-length saw through a tree trunk he is standing on with uncomfortably bare feet. Then you notice a second man. He's holding the saw's other end from a hole in the ground underneath the trunk, his bald head and sullen features just a bit grimmer than his above-ground counterpart.

"I always thought that this should be called 'The Junior Partners,'" David Hilliard said, referencing an act from The Chicago Bar Association's "Christmas Spirits" performance. "Because that's what they're doing there. They're working their life away."

It makes sense that this is how Hilliard

interprets art.

He has been an art collector almost as long as he's been an lawyer — 51 years, all but three spent at intellectual property firm Pattishall McAuliffe Newbury Hilliard & Geraldson — and it's hard to tell if he's more accomplished in one field than the other.

He's racked up a collection of legal victories, clients and awards that's as impressive in its own way as his and his wife's trove of drawings, paintings and sculptures — which include works by artists such as Frenchmen Edgar Degas and Henri Matisse, England's George Romney and Belgium's James Ensor, among a long list of others.

Hilliard has been a pioneer in both worlds.

He was a founder of the now-9,000 member Young Lawyers Section of The Chicago Bar Association, which gives an annual award named in his honor.

And he and his wife started collecting works from Odilon Redon years before there was wide interest in the French symbolist. A popular rebirth of his work culminated in the Art Institute's landmark Redon exhibition in July 1994, which featured three drawings from the Hilliards' collection.

Hilliard made partner at his law firm in 1971. He accomplished the art world equivalent in 1979 when he was named an Art Institute trustee, a position he still holds.

He was once a vice chairman of the Art Institute. At 76, he won't hold the museum's top leadership role. Still, he would be no stranger to that type of responsibility after a 20-year stint as managing partner of Pattishall from 1985 to 2005.

Douglas Druick, the president and director of the museum, said working with Celia and David was one of the most rewarding experiences of his years at the Art Institute. In part, that is due to the

fact that the Hilliards have given or promised to give the museum — so far — 61 of the works in their exhibit. They've also contributed to a museum fund and gifted pieces outside the current exhibit.

Joe Welch, Pattishall's current managing partner, called Hilliard the epitome of a big-picture trial lawyer, able to marshal troops and craft creative, winning strategies. That has helped Hilliard and the firm capture victories protecting brands including Ford, Pepsi, Encyclopedia Britannica and a long list of others.

The story of a legal career is one this magazine tells often. What follows is a different story, of a couple who has been on a 40-plus year journey to grow an art collection and contribute to the enduring success of one of Chicago's top cultural institutions.

Navy negotiations, a \$100 plate and an appetite for art

After Hilliard graduated from the University of Chicago Law School in 1962, he served three years and four months in the Navy as a JAG Corps claims officer.

That took him in 1964 to Lisbon, Portugal.

One day, after honing his negotiation skills by appeasing a local cab driver who accused a Marine of choking him with an offer of \$200 and a horde of cigarettes (which he procured outside the Navy's blessing), Hilliard wandered into an art gallery connected to his hotel.

An unglazed ceramic plate with a self-portrait done by Pablo Picasso caught his eye. It was No. 12 in an edition of 100. He



found its three-dimensional features and rough finish appealing.

The first piece of art Hilliard bought was \$100, less than half the price to settle disputes in Lisbon, but apparently just as memorable.

After his stint in the Navy, the Massachusetts native who still speaks with the remnants of a Boston accent returned to Chicago.

In 1966, he joined Pattishall, a firm that already had a history of service men and an appreciation of art: Beverly Pattishall was an ex-captain who had two ships shot out from under him in World War II. Jerry McAuliffe was a lieutenant colonel. And Edward S. Rogers, a founder of the firm, commissioned in 1928 the creation of 12 German-made wooden coats-of-arms that still hang on the walls of the University Club's Cathedral Hall.

Hilliard had whet his appetite for prints while overseas, and upon arriving in Chicago, he began investing some of his \$8,000 starting salary at Pattishall in disparate prints — a few rare but important pieces by French impressionist Camille

Pissarro, some works by German expressionists and others that fit his driving motto at the time: Quality is the most important art consideration.

At the same time, Hilliard was developing a strong interest in the history of Chicago and the Art Institute.

He started a second collection — seeking out historical Art Institute publications including exhibition catalogues, annual reports and monthly bulletins. He and Celia — a cultural historian whom he married in 1974 — grew that collection into a wide set of manuscripts and historical documents relating to Chicago and its arts community, which was on display at the Newberry Library in November.

"There's some really rare stuff there, and that's just simply decades of going into used bookstores and picking things up," Hilliard said of the collection that includes documents from before the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. "In many cases, we ended up paying \$5 for them."

The couple's interest in the Chicago art community and Hilliard's involvement with the Art Institute — which officially

began in 1974 when he was asked to be a member of the auxiliary board — led to a new driving force in their decision-making.

The couple began buying drawings that would fill voids in the Art Institute's collection.

"What we were trying to put together was something that would make a difference for Chicago, for the Art Institute," Hilliard said.

A purpose-driven collection

They accomplished that with help from a long list of people, including Suzanne Folds McCullagh, the Anne Vogt Fuller and Marion Titus Searle chair and curator of the department of prints and drawings at the museum.

In 1982, she gave the Hilliards a list of art dealers in New York that helped the Hilliards make their first trip — at least in effect — as curators for the museum.

"We're a very famous collection for French and Italian drawings and prints of the 16th through the 19th century," McCullagh said while walking through the dark-green-walled Dreams and Echoes



Celia and David Hilliard, next to William Degouve's "The Servants of Death." Ben Speckmann

exhibit shortly before it opened in October.

"And there are very few areas where we aren't as strong, but one of the areas where it's not as strong is the French 17th century."

Demonstrating how the Hilliards bought with the museum's interest in mind, McCullagh described one of two pieces the couple bought on that 1982 trip to see five Big Apple dealers. It was a drawing of a woman holding the images of the crucifixion in her hand by Claude Vignon, a French artist who lived during the time period which the museum's collection lacked.

"He did his homework," McCullagh said.

The drawing she pointed out may very well have led Vignon to create a larger work of art, but it likely was never intended to be a finished piece on display at an art museum.

As is the nature of drawings, much of the Hilliards' exhibit is akin to the artists' training ground. These are the scribbles that led to masterpieces; it would be like a baseball card collector seeking a card of Ted Williams' days in the minor leagues. How did he struggle before he hit .400?

Celia, in a 4,000-word statement the couple wrote describing their collection, said that appeals to the couple "in its close

connection to an artist's first and truest impulse and to the sense of a struggle on paper to give that thought a fresh and vivid form."

In that regard, the Hilliard drawings in many cases help explain later, better-known paintings from these artists.

Hilliard's inspiration

Hilliard said part of his inspiration to help fill out the collection was due to a comparison of the Art Institute of Chicago and his hometown of Boston. Whereas the Chicago collection of late 19th-century and 20th-century art was terrific, Hilliard said, "The early stuff wasn't."

"When you got back before 1850, you didn't have what they should have had. And in Boston, the reverse was the case. They had gone to sleep in 1900 and they didn't wake up until long after I was a citizen of Chicago."

Druick, the Art Institute's president, said the Hilliards' donations have added "immeasurably" to the museum's collection of Romantic and Symbolist works. It has augmented the museum's holdings of 19th-century paintings by offering sketches and studies by the artists of those paintings, he said. And it takes the museum into realms it was only starting to explore, including

northern European landscapes of the 16th and 17th centuries, Druick said.

"The Hilliards have followed their own interest through their collecting journey, but always with the museum in mind," Druick said. "It is this latter aspect that really characterizes their generosity — it is a civic-minded generosity."

As the Hilliards' collection grew through nearly annual trips to visit New York art dealers (the couple still has the original list of dealers McCullagh wrote for them), so too did David's role at the museum.

In one of the perks associated with that, the Pattishall firm hosted an annual holiday party at the museum from the late 1980s to the early 2000s. The 200-attendee, after-hours parties featured private showings of the museum's exhibitions.

While the firm knew of his interest in the arts, somehow the extent of his art collection was never fully realized by many of his colleagues. They found out shortly before the public did — during the run-up to the Hilliard exhibit's opening in October last year.

"I don't think, generally within the firm, there was knowledge of how extensive and remarkable that collection is, with very famous artists and such interesting pieces," Welch said.

Larry Fujara, Pattishall's executive director, concurred.

"We knew he liked picking up pieces. We knew he liked purchasing pieces, but at least I didn't, and probably most of us (at the firm) didn't have any idea the depth of his collection," Fujara said.

"And then when he came in with that book (a 240-page, hardbound treatise published by Yale University Press), we were like, 'Oh my God, these are some incredibly great pieces.'"

Apart from his art collecting, former Pattishall lawyers describe Hilliard as a mentor who stressed professionalism with opposing counsels, and often picked up clients as a result of practicing what he preached

Mark Partridge, a partner at Pattishall until 2010 who practiced with Hilliard directly during the 1980s and 1990s, said Hilliard would always make time to stop at art museums when they went to other cities. Partridge said Hilliard's art appreciation aided his legal work.

"He was always aware of the importance of making a visual impression in the case," Partridge said.

Doug Masters, managing partner of the Chicago office of Loeb & Loeb who worked with Hilliard at Pattishall from 1988 to 2003, described Hilliard as a master of the information on all of his cases.

"His desk never had anything on it," Masters said.

"And it was just remarkable that for a guy who never let anything stick on his desk, he was always immediately able to put his hands on the key piece of paper that you needed."

Floyd Mandel — national co-head of Katten Muchin Rosenman's IP practice, who began his legal career as an associate at Pattishall from 1973 to 1976 — said he remembered a group of associates making a trip to Hilliard's North Side apartment before he married Celia.

"We were very impressed at the way it

was decorated," Mandel said.

Why give?

Another one of David Hilliard's original motivations for buying art was simply "want(ing) to hang something on the wall," he said.

His apartment was originally a blank canvas — quite literally.

He had little to no furniture and one rug, which, on the rare occasion he and Celia had a small group of guests, would be rolled



up and moved from room to room with the visitors as they sat on the floor, sipped wine and looked at art.

Eventually, the Hilliards' collection overtook their apartment walls. They also got rugs for each room.

Until an October visit to the Art Institute, the couple had not seen their collection in one place.

"Did you ever realize you had quite so many landscapes?" McCullagh, the day's tour guide, asked Celia. She hadn't.

Walking through the exhibit for the first time, David commented on the glass the museum installed on the drawings — a new kind from Germany, he said, that has absolutely no glare. He mentioned that he hadn't realized the pieces' different sizes. He joked that an Art Institute employee touching up the frames was "improving each drawing."

"By the time the show's over, they'll all look pretty good," he said jokingly.

When asked what the moment — seeing the art together for the first time — meant, though, he refrained from any sweeping comments about the decades-long journey he and his wife took to this point.

Celia gave it a shot: "You realize that there's a certain thread that you're not always quite aware of. A thread of interest, or whatever it is, that you pick up on in a lot of things that you see. And you tend to keep on selecting certain things that match that theme a long time before you realize what that theme is."

That sentiment echoes the 4,000-word statement he and Celia wrote that is intended, David said, to answer the question: Why collect art in the first place?

While the couple's journey eventually gained the purpose of donating to the Art Institute and strengthening Chicago's standing in the art world, in an interview, David gave a simpler answer: "Because it's so much fun."

The couple has made lifelong friends in New York, Paris, London and elsewhere. Displaying that fact, as he flipped through the book that documents their collection, David told intricately detailed stories of how and where the pieces were bought.

There was the time when David heard whispers in the back of a New York courtroom during a trademark hearing and later learned the stock market had dropped by 20 percent. It was Black Monday — Oct. 19, 1987. He and Celia were planning to buy a piece by the Italian futurist Giacomo Balla. They considered the stock market's impact, but they bought the piece anyway.

It turned out to be a good bet.

The memories are one reason David and Celia collected, but seeing their works on the museum's walls was a prelude to another: That's where the Hilliards think they belong. ■

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