

TAKE ME TO YOUR READER

MARY MIERS meets the New York collector and bibliophile Donald Oresman, whose Renaissance-style library is home to a unique art collection formed on the theme of reading



HERE'S a certain Ahabian monomania about me: once I started, I became pretty relentless,' says Donald Oresman, comparing his passion for collecting to Captain Ahab's single-minded pursuit of Moby Dick. The retired corporate lawyer has an urbane manner and, as a former newspaper reporter, seems completely unfazed by the intrusion of a journalist into his New York home, which was remodelled in 1996 as a Renaissance library. On the table between us are volumes of literary criticism, contemporary fiction and poetry; some 2,000 volumes line the room—a mere fifth of the book collection that he and his wife have amassed, the larger part of which resides in their country house at Larchmont on Long Island Sound. Mr Oresman, however, is not referring to the contents of his library; we are discussing the unique body of readers that inhabit it.

For in this apartment, and its neighbour on the same floor which Mr Oresman also owns, is a remarkable collection of about 1,800 works of art, each of which depicts a person or group of people reading. 'When Patricia and I first married, we bought art from wherever we lived—almost always contemporary, very eclectic,' he tells me. 'One day we were in a gallery and we saw a large picture by Jim Dine called *Nancy Reading*. We both liked it very much and so we bought it. A few weeks later, in a different gallery, we saw another large portrait—this time of the poet Frank O'Hara reading at

Private Reading Room, a cut and cast glass sculpture by Lucy Lyon, 1998







Donald Oresman on the balcony with *Finding Fitzgerald* by Susan Manchester, 1999

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a desk in a river of his own words. Since I have a kind of file-clerk mentality, I suggested that, rather than buying from time to time just what we liked, it might be fun to start collecting readers. That was 20 years ago.'

In Mr Oresman's view: 'If you're going to do something, you should do it in depth. There are lots of pieces I see that I admire, but they are not relevant to my collection, so I bite my tongue and move on.' But within his chosen parameters—he no longer collects any other art, only depictions of readers, and nothing pre-dating the 20th century—the range of material is astonishing. There are readers here in every conceivable media, ranging from pen-and-ink drawings and cartoons, gouaches, prints, lithographs, photographs, watercolours, oils and acrylics to works in needlepoint, painted leather strips and ceramics. Sculptures run from conventional bronze, stone and cast iron to plastic, papier mâché and glass, and there are even some made of balsa wood, light bulbs and scrap metal.

'Some works may not be top quality,' says Mr Oresman, 'but if something resonates with me and I don't think it's preposterous, I buy. I'm an impulsive buyer—it takes me about 30 seconds to make up my mind. I don't agonise; I'm probably excessively decisive.' I ask him how often he rejects a reader: 'All the time—probably three or four times the number I actually buy.' His wife, Patricia, has a significant input, 'although she doesn't have the

same acquisitive nature as me'. He shows me one of her favourites—a reader in charcoal by the German socialist artist Käthe Kollwitz—stressing the important influence his wife has had on his taste.

Mr Oresman says that he is not trying to shape the collection to a particular vision, but rather to establish what the past century has had to say about people reading. Few works he buys are abstract, but his explanation for this is that 'art that is anti-intellectual is unlikely to be about reading'; Cubism is about as abstract as he gets. But the collection, which now runs to an 11-volume catalogue, is unconstrained by geographical boundaries and includes works from South America and Japan, although about 95 per cent is American or European. 'It's the image that I'm interested in—period,' he says. 'I don't care whether it's by a famous or an unknown artist, all I care about is the image.'

The list of names in the former category is certainly impressive: Picasso, Matisse, Giacometti, Cocteau, Chagall, Léger, Balthus, Diego Rivera, Gwen John, Aubrey Beardsley, Max Beerbohm, Roger Fry, Eric Gill, Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell and Henry Moore all feature. Among American artists are well-known names such as Thomas Hart Benton and Reginald Marsh, and many from the famous Ashcan School active round the turn of the last century. 'Photographs have to be fairly adventurous to interest me, otherwise they're verging on journalistic stuff,' he says. The collection includes works by Bernice Abbot and Henri Cartier-Bresson.

The 'unknowns' range from Depression-era artists to contemporary students, the former having produced an enormous body of material as a result of the Federal Art Project, which was set up in 1935 to support artists. 'At that time abstraction had not carried the day in the US. I managed to buy their work relatively cheaply because they have never become famous, although many were fine artists who deserve a better reputation.' Among the contemporary names, Mr Oresman

Detail of the library room with Käthe Kollwitz's *Man Reading* (1917) in the foreground



particularly admires the young black artist Whitfield Lovell—a very strong figure, obviously academically trained'. 'Mr Lovell draws in charcoal on boards taken from old shacks in the deep South, and then varnishes them and adds some relevant physical object—Mr Oresman's example features a pile of books mounted on a little wooden pedestal.

Although he does not commission dealers, Mr Oresman concedes that 'they're the ferrets—I couldn't have put this collection together without their help. I've always been interested in art, and I go to some of the galleries and art fairs, and always to the major New York shows where most of the leading 20th-century dealers are represented. But I don't go haunting the galleries or hunting through *catalogues raisonnés*. I treat the whole thing in a serious but at the same time accidental, casual way. Some of the works in the collection I've discovered myself, but mostly they were found by dealers familiar with my interests.'

He cites only one occasion where he suspects that a dealer suggested to a significant living artist, whose work he knew Mr Oresman admired, that they paint a reader; the result now hangs in the collection. 'But I'm not interested in buying things for ridiculous prices,' he says; 'I'm not Croesus; this is a relatively modest collection.'

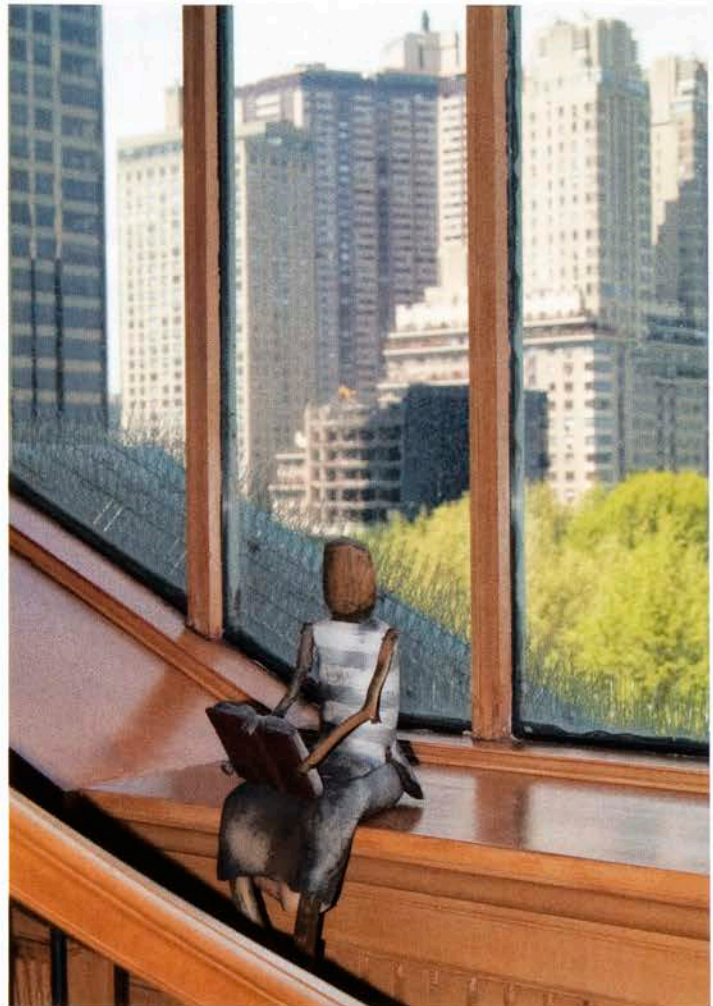
About 300 works are displayed on walls and other surfaces in the two apartments; some hang on hinged wall panels which open out, or on sliding panels designed to reveal the pictures in successive layers. Others are stored in built-in portfolio drawers under the stairs, or in boxes secreted in cupboards under the bookshelves.

All this has been designed with an attention to detail typical of the work of the New York-based architects Fairfax & Sammons, who created the elegant panelled library-living room from what had been a plain white studio with all the aesthetic appeal of a squash court. Richard Sammons, a leading contemporary architect working in the Classical tradition, redesigned the main space as a Renaissance library, with a coffered ceiling, alcoves formed by projecting pediment-ended bookshelves, and a chimneypiece painted to resemble black-veined marble. To lighten the north-facing room he had the joinery made in new maple wood and the existing dark timber of the staircase and pedimented main window 'fauxed' to match.

A spiral staircase modelled on that in the chapel of San Lorenzo in Santa Fe, New Mexico, is balanced by a circular study area on the other side of the window. This is at mezzanine level, where library galleries on the flanking walls lead to a bedroom with curved cupboard doors echoing the forms below. Mirrored panels have the effect of opening out the space and making it feel more like a rotunda.

Although he owns houses in Westchester County and Vermont, Mr Oresman prefers to spend most of his time in this library home at the heart of his native city. Here, he can look out over the long, green canyon of Central Park surrounded by his books and in the company of his hundreds of silent, carefully chosen reading companions. 🐦

Photographs: Ian Bradshaw.



Sitting Reader, of ceramics and cedar twigs, by Liz Wolf. (Below) Fairfax and Sammons's spiral stair, modelled on one in the chapel of San Lorenzo, Santa Fe, New Mexico

