

16

AMERICAN

art

PREVIEWS OF MAINSTREAM ARTISTS'  
UPCOMING SHOWS COAST TO COAST

FEBRUARY 2007

COLLECTOR



## INTERIOR DESIGNER

# Collecting on a budget with a limitless imagination

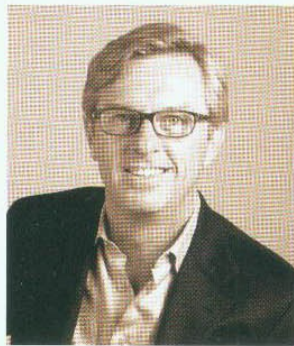
By Eric Cohler

Stephen Elrod, creative director of Lee Jofa, a nationally known purveyor of home fabrics, trims and furnishings, is not your ordinary collector. In fact, he wasn't much of a collector at all until recently. He had a modest collection of antique textiles purchased on his travels, but nothing that marked him as a true collector—nothing that could be “seen.” Most of his collecting had been “inside his own imagination.” With a tiny budget and no clear sense of where to begin, he had initially built a collection in his mind's eye. He is a man who loves color, pattern and texture and who has helped create Lee Jofa's success through a discerning palate and a sense of how printed fabric, wovens, embroidery, suede and leather all interrelate.

In his “collection,” he saw vivid abstracts, soothing landscapes, sepia tinged photographs and sculpture. It wasn't until the past two years, however, that he actually put aside a modest amount of savings and set out to transform his virtual collection to a real one. As an interior designer and advisor, I was fortunate enough to help Stephen with the genesis of what I believe will become one man's unique mission—collecting the best works available at affordable prices. An oxymoron? Perhaps; only time will tell. I sat down with Stephen shortly before Christmas in his tiny New York apartment to discuss his vision. A vision that includes works by Elaine DeKooning, Jean De Botton, Robert Motherwell, Thomas Struth and Phil Stern.

**Eric Cohler:** It's been gratifying helping you pull this collection together. I was able to play Virgil and take you to galleries, auctions and art shows all over the Northeast. Everything looked so exciting and new to you. It was refreshing to see art through someone's uncorrupted eye.

**Stephen Elrod:** Well, it was new to me, and at the same time, it was like catching up with old friends. In my mind I had this idea of what I wanted to collect and had been playing curator for years. I just hadn't had the resources or the courage to flip the switch. But it was time.



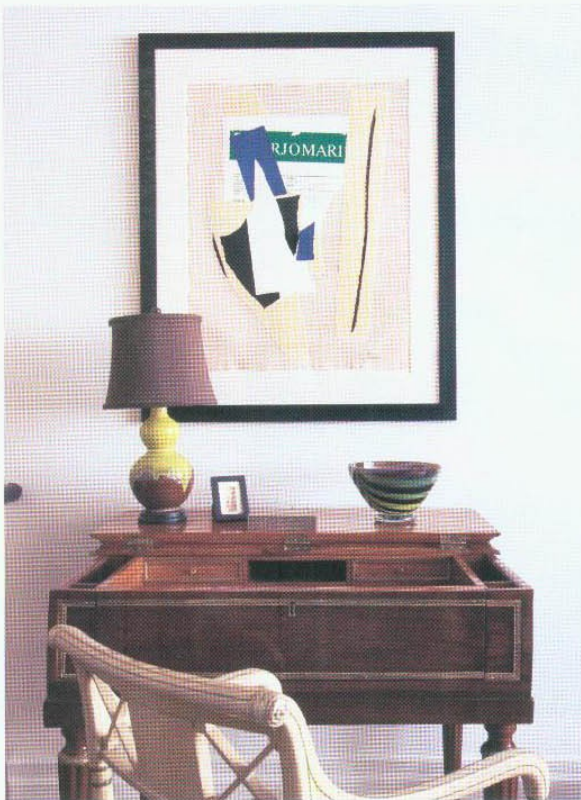
Stephen Elrod, creative director of Lee Jofa



A series of small works, all different sizes and hung at different levels, is a great idea for a staircase, which becomes a prominent architectural element within a small space. This group includes works by Alastair Gordon, Duncan Hannah, R. Batterton, Michael Wayne and Henry James Albright.

Above couch is an abstract painting by early 20th century French/American artist Jean De Botton.





This hallway credenza is a natural location for a work by Robert Motherwell.



These three prints by Arshile Gorky, one of the bright stars of the American Surrealist movement, were found at a flea market in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

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**EC:** So you had a sense of direction? A map of where you wanted to go?

**SE:** Yes and no. I knew that I wanted the collection to be eclectic and layered, but I didn’t want it to become complicated and cumbersome. The last thing I need is to become enslaved to a collection, and I’ve seen it happen.

**EC:** As have I. What I enjoy most about working with you is your sense of editing out the extraneous and honing in on the best work that you can afford. I remember that we had to pass on quite a few things due to budget, but that you always came up with an alternative that you liked as much if not better.

**SE:** That’s because I found out early in the game where to look. Dealers will often have smaller works and objects that they are saving for themselves in their store rooms or private offices, and if you fall in love with something they’ll usually sell it to you. It’s all about showing a genuine passion. I have bought quite a few pieces on time and through auctions where I can use a credit card. Not a habit to encourage, but once in a while it’s helped me get to that next level.

**EC:** Speaking of levels, where does one begin when putting together a collection from scratch? What words of wisdom can

you impart?

**SE:** For me it began with the purchase of a Sara Genn painting and a Bill Armstrong photograph from Nightingale Gallery in Watermill, on Long Island. I had seen the artist’s works at The Affordable Art Fair in New York a few months before. There is so much to see under one roof. I literally spent two days walking around, soaking it all in— looking and learning. Museums are of course an amazing resource as well, but the art is unattainable.

**EC:** Unattainable, agreed, but a fantastic place from which to draw inspiration and to taste the flavor of different schools of art.



Paintings by Jenny Nelson and Roger Shepherd go perfectly above this 1965 Elaine De Kooning.



Unusual fabrics and styles create a nice contrast with abstract and minimalist paintings. The painting above is by Tim Woolcock.

**“What motivates me is assembling a collection that is the culmination of many years of looking at beautiful objects, of learning about these and of seeing them in my mind. Now I’m fortunate enough to see them on my walls.” — Stephen Elrod**

I also recommend studying catalogues and reading periodicals.

SE: Good point. Magazines and journals are a terrific resource. I try to read as much art theory and art criticism as possible. It’s especially interesting to read the review of an art show after I’ve seen it myself. I compare notes. Sometimes critics are way off base and other times right on the mark.

EC: It’s the same with movies and the theatre.

SE: Don’t even get me started on that topic. What is most electrifying for me is to find a work that just resonates. I may not know exactly why, but I know that I have to try and

add it to the collection. And nothing was purchased to go with anything else. I bought my art and sculpture merely because each particular piece spoke to me.

EC: That’s the mark of a true collector.

SE: Yes, I suppose so. It’s something that starts deep within my mind and then is given voice when I make the purchase and take it home. Before hanging a work, I like to look at it from different angles and decide if it should hang alone or be grouped with another picture. Sometimes I’ll think about this for days before putting a nail in the wall.

EC: You’ve done an incredible job hanging the work and grouping it with your furniture.

SE: Well I did have a little help in that department.

EC: Only a little. Most of the decisions came from you; I was merely a sounding board.

SE: And you taught me about lighting the art from above with wall washers and museum quality art bars. I have dimmers on all of my lighting, and I can control the amount of light depending on the time of day or mood that I’m trying to create.

EC: Now that you’re on your own, I see that

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you’ve added a beautiful Anita Hufington torso and three Arshile Gorky prints since I was last here.

SE: I picked the prints up at a flea market in Bucks County and the torso came from the O’Hara Gallery in town. Collecting is equal parts balance, proportion and line—things that I learned from the textile business.

EC: Any other words of wisdom for new collectors?

SE: Be bold. If you love it, buy it. I’ve never overspent on one piece; and for a rather conservative investment by the art world’s standards, I’ve put together a rather sophisticated little collection. I like to keep things spare and uncomplicated in life and this translates to my home as well. If one’s budget is small, start small. Don’t bite off more than you can digest or +you’ll get yourself into trouble.

EC: What kind of trouble?

SE: Either a financial morass or you’ll end with something that you wish you hadn’t bought. That happens to all collectors at some point, but it’s better to wait until you can afford the right piece—whether we are talking \$500 or \$5,000—than to buy the wrong piece based solely on price.

EC: I agree with you completely that when it comes to art the cost is relative. But how do you suggest that a person takes that initial plunge?

SE: It’s not always easy. I was apprehensive for years; immobilized by fear that I’d make a costly mistake. It was almost impossible to commit at first.

EC: How did you overcome this?

SE: By staying educated, staying focused and making sure that I had fun as well. I also saved enough money to make the initial purchases so that I didn’t have to finance them. Do I think that my collection will ever be world class, probably not, but to me it’s all about living with objects that give me



Above the couch is a painting by Canadian artist Sara Genn. Genn is a young painter with a passion for design and color relationships. She works mainly in acrylic and oil on canvas.

pleasure. Who knows? I may have the next Picasso or Cindy Sherman somewhere on my walls, but that’s not what drives me. What motivates me is assembling a collection that is the culmination of many years of looking at beautiful objects, of learning about these and of seeing them in my mind. Now I’m fortunate enough to see them on my walls.

EC: And to me that is an essential part of a life well lived. ●

*Eric Cobler, president of Eric Cobler Inc., holds a Masters Degree in Historic Preservation from the Columbia School of Architecture. He won a Designer of the Year Award in 1998 and in 2000 the D&D Building in New York recognized him as one of the 26 leading designers in the U.S. Eric has appeared on CBS Morning and Evening News and CNN Style and he is a featured designer on the Home & Garden TV Network*





Sharing the library space is a figurative sculpture by New York artist Anita Huffington purchased at the Jonathan O'Hara gallery.