

Friday, December 22, 2000

Modern-day Medicis combine love of art with patronage

Orlando Business Journal - by [Noelle Haner-Dorr](#) Staff Writer

ORLANDO -- Their lives are splashed with vibrant colors. They stand in awe of the raw emotion in a simple brush stroke or chiseled image. They are art collectors.

Ford Kiene, Phil Rampy and Richard Kessler are three Orlando businessmen who are among the ranks of the \$10 billion art collecting industry, and even though each man describes his personal collection as "eclectic," the pieces within these collections are as diverse and dynamic as their owners.

However, collecting art is more than just an investment for Kiene, Rampy and Kessler. They also are art patrons -- modern-day Medicis -- working to boost the Orlando art scene.

At the heart of each man's passion is a desire to open the art world up to up-and-coming artists. They are using their business savvy to give these artists a chance to become the masters of tomorrow.

Ford Kiene

After only one art history class in college, Kiene was sold on the idea of collecting.

"I quickly developed an appreciation for those who can bring words and materials together to create emotion," says the president of City Beverages.

Now, after 25 years of collecting art, Kiene owns between 300 and 400 pieces, which adorn the walls and halls of his homes and offices in both Orlando and Seattle. He also has established himself as a magnet for the Orlando art scene with his interest and patronage of Central Florida-based artists.

A Salvador Dali enthusiast, Kiene leans toward the modern art genre, while collecting and supporting local artists such as Sherry Rikers, Cameron Moore, Patrick Pierson, David Burger and Edson Campos, as well as others.

According to Kiene, the once-fledgling Orlando art scene is making headway through the efforts of the city of Orlando, Orange County and the Orlando Visual Art League to develop a cohesive art community and to garner support from the business community for local artists.

"We must develop an education for the consumer and develop personal collections," says Kiene. "We need to be able to create by purchase some permanency for local artists in living space and in working space and, ultimately, in gallery space."

To this end, Kiene also is doing his part. His latest artistic endeavor -- Avalon Island -- is offering young artists the space to exhibit and sell their works. The new art gallery is located on the corner of Magnolia and Pine streets.

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Phil Rampy

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Walking into Rampy's Thornton Park town home is a step through the looking glass into an artistic wonderland -- three floors awash with light, color, texture and shape.

Over the last three years, the managing principal of Thornton Park Central LLC has collected 40 abstract yet distinctive pieces created by local, national and international artists. From cubist child prodigy Alexandra Nechita to New York's Leemour Pelli to Andy Warhol's famed assistant Steve Kauffman to local artists Bill Gallagher and Carl Knickerbacker, Rampy has covered the gamut of modern artistic talent.

Rampy fell in love with collecting while learning about the cubist movement of the 1920s and 1930s. "It was radically exciting stuff," he says.

Transferring this excitement into his own collection, Rampy focuses on artwork that evokes emotion and is ripe with political undertones. His primary goal is to collect pieces that impact him on a personal level.

"You have to think about what you like," says Rampy. "Art is the craziest part of your personality, so your art should capture your personality."

But Rampy's greatest contribution to art will be as a patron of the Orlando art scene with the construction of his new home. Designed like a large, open gallery space, the home will be a tribute to Central Florida's artists.

According to Rampy, it is difficult for younger artists to obtain the space to showcase their portfolios. As a result, he hopes to provide a venue for these artists to be seen.

Ultimately, Rampy is working toward sponsoring private sales and exhibitions to promote local artists and to help further the Orlando art scene.

Richard Kessler

Kessler is a collector's collector. He began as a child with Native American artifacts, and throughout his life, he acquired cars, paintings, sculptures, art glass and antique furniture, as well as watches, clocks, knives, swords and dolls.

"What interests me is the creative process of the artist, the genius of the artist," says Kessler.

His collections span his Grand Theme Hotels empire and family home in Isleworth. He owns paintings by LeRoy Neimann, Dean Cornwell, We Pect Key, Yuroz and Marianne Lerbs, mosaics by Laura DiNello, wood sculptures by Richard Hill, one of Jiang Tiefeng's Black Horse Monuments and countless others.

However, Kessler's true offering to the art community is his patronage to artists. He spends many hours touring galleries, and when he spots an artist with potential, Kessler invests his time and money in the artist, cultivating a career.

Says Kessler: "I am as interested in the art as I am the artist. I stumble upon one I really like and run with it. It is my way to support people who have an incredible talent."

Kessler's work with DiNello and Ho Min Zu, a Chinese artist, exemplify his regard for artists trying to make it. He took both under his wing, commissioning works for his personal collection in order to help them get a start.

This tradition continues with Kessler's newest hotel in downtown Orlando, the Grand Bohemian. Here, Kessler captures the spirit of art nuevo by bringing works by DiNello, Cornwell, Lerbs, Tiefeng, Key,

Hill and newcomer William Russell Walker into the Orlando art scene. It is Kessler's contribution to the current growth of the arts in the City Beautiful.

"What is going on in Orlando is encouraging," says Kessler. "We are starting from a low base, but the community leaders are working together to take the first steps forward."

www.WilliamRussellWalker.com