

Art & ANTIQUES

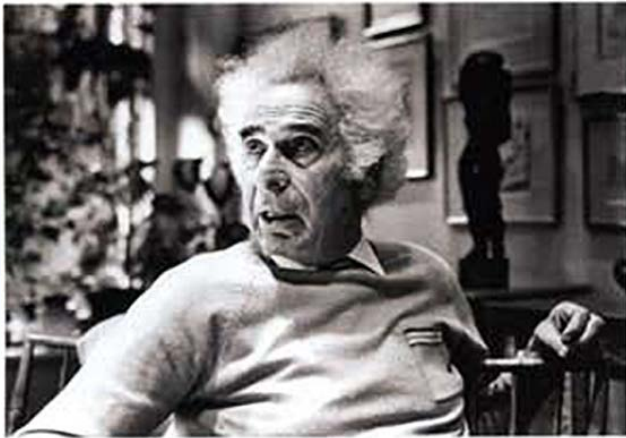
FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



CHAIM GROSS | ELLSWORTH KELLY | SHOP AMSTERDAM | PORTRAIT MINIATURES

THE 250 TOP COLLECTORS

THE HOME OF THE
SCULPTOR AND COLLECTOR
CHAIM GROSS IS A SNAPSHOT
OF THE NEW YORK ART SCENE
FROM THE 1920s THROUGH THE '50s.



MICROCOSM OF MODERNISM

BY JOSEPH JACOBS
INTERIOR PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILLY CUNNINGHAM

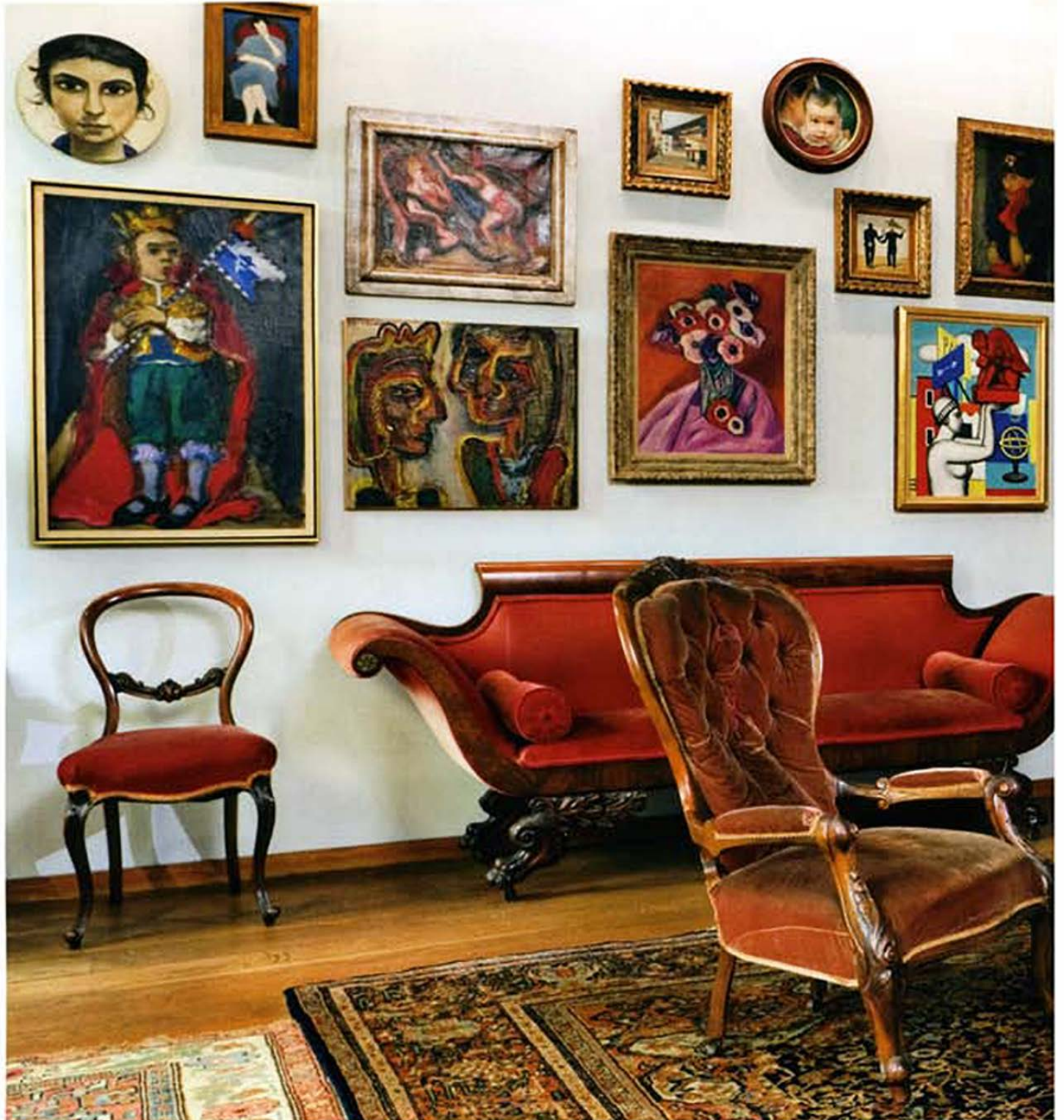


One of the more interesting artist's collections of the 20th century was formed by the American modernist sculptor Chaim Gross, who probably began accumulating in the 1920s while he was a young talent in New York and continued up to his death in 1991. His holdings, spanning such diverse areas as African and Oceanic, pre-Columbian and 20th-century American and European art, are still kept intact in Gross's 7,500-square-foot Greenwich Village house, which functions today as the home of the Renee & Chaim Gross Foundation in

New York, of which I am executive director.

The objects in Gross's fine art and tribal collections number in the thousands and are installed salon-style, or, in the case of the sculpture, crammed in cabinets, bookshelves and on radiator covers on the third and fourth floors, which were the family's living quarters. The first three flights of stairs are wallpapered with fine art, mostly American and European Modernism, while the last flight leading up to the roof is densely packed with African and Oceanic pieces. Closets are stuffed, and even the

In the third-floor living room: Moses Soyer, "Miami Gross" (second row, first from left), 1962, and Milton Avery, "Portrait of Chaim Gross" (second row, second from left), 1944. Chaim Gross, "Pineapple Lamp," c. 1935, and a Yoruba beaded crown (on left side table).



The third-floor living room contains such treasures as: Red Grooms, "Round Portrait of Mimi" (top, left), 1964; Marsden Hartley, "Anemones" (second row, third from left), 1929; Raphael Soyer, "Girl With Red Gloves" (top row, seventh from left), 1935.

elevator walls are covered with pictures. Obviously, Gross was a compulsive collector. But he acquired out of a deep passion for the art itself, and he was guided by an impeccable eye, one that sought out quality, not names and status.

Entering Gross's home is like entering a time warp. To a large extent the collection tells the story of the New York art world from the early 1920s to 1961. Gross arrived in the United



States in 1921 as a penniless Jewish immigrant from the Carpathian Mountains in Austria. In 1961 he moved from West 105th Street and bought his Greenwich Village home. At this point his major collecting slowed down and his collection was largely already defined.

By 1961 Gross had achieved fame and fortune. He had emerged as one of the nation's most famous sculptors, one of the great figura-

tive Modernists generally assigned by curators and critics to an artistic pantheon that included Gaston Lachaise, Elie Nadelman and William Zorach. Such major metropolitan museums as the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Brooklyn Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art avidly collected Gross's sculptures. He had been a "living exhibit" at the 1939 New York World's

Fair, where he carved sculptures during the run of the event and was featured in a *Life* magazine story in 1951. He had won award after award, including second prize at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1942 "Artists for Victory" exhibition. He had numerous shows at commercial galleries, eventually being represented in his later years by Forum Gallery in New York, which handles his estate today.

While Gross's new home had been built in 1838 as a stately townhouse, it had evolved into an art storage facility by the time it came to his attention. To acquire the building, Gross sold a painting from his collection, Joseph Stella's "Madonna of Coney Island," to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where the picture hangs today. Gross had stumbled across the work in a frame shop and like much of the art in his collection, he had paid a pittance for it: \$180 plus one of his own prints.

Gross's sharp eye constantly led him to work that was being overlooked or ignored, like the Stella. He made such radical purchases as "The Hunter," an oil by the self-taught African-American artist Horace Pippin, and O. Louis

Guglielmi's 1938 painting "The Hungry," acquired by trade with the artist's widow. He bought four Marsden Hartley oils, including the artist's last painting, at a time when Hartley was not fashionable. A large portion of Gross's collection came through trades. Social and popular, he was constantly exchanging work with his friends and acquaintances, who included such famous modernists as John Graham, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Max Weber, Milton Avery, Willem de Kooning, Fernand Léger and George Grosz. And, of course, he knew all of the major sculptors, including Lachaise, Nadelman (who was his teacher at the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design), John Flanagan, Zorach, Jacques Lipschitz and Alexan-

der Archipenko. His intimate circle included Raphael and Moses Soyer, David Burliuk and Peter Blume, artists who, along with Gottlieb, he met at the art school at the Educational Alliance on the Lower East Side, where he enrolled upon arriving from Austria. Other friends were Abraham Walkowitz, the surrealist Federico Castellon, the aging and overlooked painter Louis-Michel Elsheimius, the Precisionist Francis Criss, Robert Gwathmey and Stuart Davis. In addition to works by all of these artists, his collection includes early paintings and drawings by Louise Nevelson, who was his student at the Educational Alliance. And then there were the many smart buys, like the Joseph Stella: works by Picasso, Matisse, Toulouse-Lautrec, Henry Moore, Jacob Epstein, Amedeo Modigliani, Jean Metzinger, Ernst Barlach, Max Ernst, Roberto Matta, André Derain and Jules Pascin, to mention but a handful. Decades before it became fashionable, he collected works by African-American artists including Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden and Benny Andrews. Rounding out his fine art collection are paintings and sculpture by his daughter Mimi Gross, as well as paintings by her former husband, Red Grooms.

Because Gross was indifferent to art-world taste, he could collect realist images by Reginald Marsh, Raphael Soyer and Guglielmi and daringly hang them next to cutting-edge modernist abstraction by Graham, Gorky and de Kooning, expressionist works by Grosz and Hartley and unsettling surrealist images by Ernst and Castellon. And Gross did not just acquire signature works. In addition to a classic surrealist frottage by Ernst, for example, he bought a beautiful 1916 synthetic Cubist painting, the kind of image that most collectors would never consider because it pre-dates Ernst's mature work. Also in his collection is an early Stuart Davis oil from 1922, a Cubist work that Gross described by saying in a 1981 *Connoisseur* magazine article, "I love the beautiful design, the subdued colors and harmony." Many of Gross's pictures are portraits of Gross himself, by Soyer and Avery, for example, and a large number of works are inscribed to him. Minor artists hang next to the famous, while prints and drawings thrive alongside painting and sculpture. For Gross there was no hierarchy of style, artist, or medium. Collecting was about quality, and it was an addiction. "I get high on the feeling when I buy a good piece," Gross said in the *Connoisseur* article.

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Chalm Gross in his studio, 1980s. Facing: Chalm Gross's "The Novice" (at left), 1941, and "Victoria" (right), 1951, in the first-floor gallery with sunken studio.





A selection of African reliquary figures, including Senfo, Bamana and Fang. Chaim Gross working on a sculpture, 1950s. Facing: A collection of reliquary figures, including Fang, Kota, Osyeba and Nbaka, and an oval display of 13 Dan passport masks (on wall).

Here in Chaim Gross's home we get a representation of the *real* New York art world, not the one found in the art history survey books.

Lexington Avenue bookshop that had African art in the back room. Regardless of the source, by the 1940s Gross had acquired many of the major pieces in his collection, some of which he bought from Crowninshield when he dissolved his collection in the 1940s, including a great Ngbaka guardian figure, one of his two great Fang reliquary figures, two Kongo mirror fetish figures, a Teke fetish figure, a Dan mask and several Kota reliquary figures. From Weyhe he bought a Yaka mask that had been in the famous Himmelheber collection in Heidelberg. In the 1950s he bought the first of his three Benin bronzes. Overall he bought over a thousand African works, not counting the thousands of Ashanti gold weights—small bronze or brass sculptures illustrating African parables and used to weigh gold dust.

At first it may seem that the African material has nothing to do with the rest of Gross's art collection, until we remember the important role that tribal art played in the evolution of Modernism, beginning with Picasso, Matisse, Derain and Maurice de Vlaminck, among others. African art was a major influence on Modernism, and its practitioners thought of African artists as kindred spirits because of their emphasis on abstraction.

Here in Gross's home we get a representation of the *real* New York art world, not the one found in the art history survey books. On its walls are the artists of the period as well as their sources and influences. Gross's collection reminds us that the art world was not just Gorky, de Kooning and David Smith (whom Graham hired to make the bases for Crowninshield's African art), but it also consisted of the Soyers, Guglielmi, Burliuk, Graham, Joe Solomon, Castellon, Ben-Zion, Jacob Lawrence and Milton Avery, to mention but a few of the hundreds of artists represented in Gross's collection. We are reminded that Léger was in New York during the war and that Ernst, Grosz, Archipenko and Lipschitz were refugees as well. We are reminded that all of these seemingly diverse artists were in each other's studios, hanging out in bars and cafés, or in the case of Gross, sitting around a dining room table, which was a weekend ritual for the artist

and his family. We are reminded that the art world was small in 1960, these artists were in constant dialogue with one another and they talked about and looked at African art as well as that by great European masters such as Picasso and Matisse.

Lastly, we are reminded that the art world was infinitely more layered and interesting than history has led us to believe, and that in order to create a complete and accurate picture of the period, one that fully takes into account all of the historical, social and political forces molding American art, scholars are going to have to look at all of these artists, many of whom are forgotten or overlooked. Such a thorough perusal of the period would reveal such art-historical nuggets as a two-person exhibition of Chaim Gross and Arshile Gorky at the now forgotten midtown Guild Art Gallery in 1936.

Today's art history would seem to make Gorky and Gross strange bedfellows, despite the fact they were friends. But the truth is their aesthetic interests and social background overlap considerably. Both were Modernists, dedicated to abstracting and emphasizing a formalist vocabulary, and both received major commissions from the WPA. Both were refugees from a harsh Europe—Gorky fleeing from the Ottoman Empire's genocide of the Armenians during World War I, Gross escaping the brutal savagery of the Russian Cossacks during that same war. And both brought their European experience to bear on their art, in Gorky's case a nostalgia for Armenia and the powerful emotions stemming from the genocide (his mother died in his arms in a Russian refugee camp), in Gross's an art that attempts to correct the evils of the world by showing human supporting one another, often in the form of acrobats who heavily rely on one another to achieve their magical performances. Many of the artists in Gross's collection were, like Gross and Gorky, immigrants who worked for the WPA and struggled, like most New York artists, to eke out a living during the Depression.

Gross's walls are filled with fascinating stories that beg to be told, stories that will flesh out our understanding of the period, making us realize how rich and complex it really was. **ES**

