



GEORGE ABRAMS

INTERVIEWED BY GERDIEN VERSCHOOR, DIRECTOR CODART

On November 3, 2017, the American collector George Abrams was awarded the Knighthood in the Order of Orange-Nassau. Mr. Abrams received this decoration for his important contributions to the study and international promotion of Dutch art, particularly Old Master drawings, in the United States.

Abrams, a Boston based attorney and long-time member of the Tefaf Board and Chairman of the Prints and Drawing vetting committee, built up, along with his late wife, Maida Stocker Abrams, what is widely recognized as the finest collection of Dutch drawings ever brought together in North America.

From the earliest years of their collecting, Maida and George Abrams have shared their drawings with a wide audience. The collection has been exhibited in the leading museums in Europe and the United States, including the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Fondation Custodia in Paris, and the Harvard Art Museums. In 1999, Maida and George Abrams made a major gift of 110 Dutch drawings from their collection to Harvard, including works by Rembrandt, Goltzius, and Van Ostade. And just this past November,



Consul General of The Netherlands, Dolph Hogewoning with Knight in the Order of Orange-Nassau George Abrams

Mr. Abrams announced an additional gift of 330 drawings to Harvard including works by 125 different artists from the Low Countries.

In 2012, Gerdien Verschoor interviewed George Abrams for CODARTs eZine (no. 1, Autumn 2012). At the request of TEFAF and to celebrate Mr. Abrams royal decoration, they have agreed to shorten and update the interview for this catalogue.

Mr Abrams: the decision to build up a collection of drawings (rather than paintings) was unusual when you started to collect in the 1960s. Why did you focus on Dutch drawings?

Maida and I were drawn to the spontaneity and directness of drawings. We loved the fact that Dutch drawings often depict the world around us: people, animals, landscapes – palpable, touchable things we could see and to which we could relate. In the United States, serious interest in Old Master drawings really developed only in the 20th century, and initially with an emphasis on Italian and French drawings. Dutch drawings were considered a little pedestrian. But we happily went off in our own direction.

Did you make a deliberate decision at some point to build up a collection? When did you actually begin to call yourself a collector?

No, it really wasn't a conscious choice. We just went about buying drawings we liked during the 1960s. In 1968, Frank Robinson organized an exhibition for six museums in the US of a part of our drawings together with a catalogue. By that time, we realized we were collectors.

Can you speak of a "Maida" and a "George" part of the collection or of typical "Maida" or "George" choices?

Maida was more drawn to people and portraits at first. I was too, but along the way I began to appreciate landscapes. Gerbrand van den Eeckhout's exquisite *Woman Doing Handwork* was one of Maida's favorites, and I was swept up by the two stunning and rare Cornelis Vroom drawings we acquired, one of which is his *River Scene*. Each of us had the power of veto, but usually we agreed on our choices. The advantage of collecting together is that you have different views and that you see other things. Luckily, we knew each other's taste pretty well after the first year or two.

CORNELIS VROOM
River Landscape
Brown ink on cream antique laid paper
18.1 x 24.2 cm
Circa 1622-23
Maida and George Abrams Collection, Boston, Massachusetts.



You like to speak about the two levels of a drawing: the "material" and the "spiritual." Could you tell us about the spiritual level, with one concrete drawing as an example?

It is possible to look at a drawing and see the physical side but not feel anything more. But when I look at a drawing, Jacques de Gheyn's *Gypsy Mother and Child*, for example, I feel much more. Look how they interact - De Gheyn has done far more than merely depicting a mother and child. He has captured their whole relationship. That is what I mean when I talk of the magical side of drawings, the spiritual aura that really wonderful drawings can radiate.

How would you characterize your collection?

Our collection has a number of area concentrations. We loved Rembrandt and the people around him. We thought it would be hard for us to collect in this area, but surprisingly we managed to build up a group of nine or ten Rembrandts and about 90 others by his students and circle. We also concentrated on the early draughtsmen around Goltzius and De Gheyn. In the early landscape area we were able to find drawings by Pieter

Bruegel the Elder, Esaias and Jan van de Velde and others. Another concentration was centered around Adriaen van Ostade, his brother Isaak, Cornelis Bega, Cornelis Dusart and other genre artists. We also put together a large group of watercolor still-life artists running from Joris Hoefnagel to Aart Schouman and Jan van Huysum. By choice we are weakest in the Italianate Dutch and seascape artists.

You are not only a collector and a lawyer, but you also believe in supporting cultural institutions, especially museums and network organizations such as CODART. You have also held advisory roles as a long-standing trustee of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and you have served as a longtime Chair of the Drawings Collection Committee at the Harvard Art Museums.

Yes, and all my museum involvements have been important to me. I have always wanted to encourage and help as many people as possible to have direct contact with art. Such contact can provide life-changing, humanizing experiences, and I would like to do as much as I can to make access available on a wide scale.



REMBRANDT
Four Studies of Male Heads
 Brown ink and brown wash on cream antique laid paper
 12.6 x 15.8 cm
 Circa 1636
 Maida and George Abrams Collection, Boston, Massachusetts



GERBRAND VAN DEN EECKHOUT
A Woman doing Handwork
 Brown ink and brown wash on cream antique laid paper
 17.9 x 14.6 cm
 Circa 1655
 The Maida and George Abrams Collection, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Promised Gift, 25.1998.55



JACQUES DE GHEYN II
A Roma Woman with a Child
 Brown ink and black chalk on light tan antique laid paper
 16.2 x 13.1 cm
 Circa 1608
 The Maida and George Abrams Collection, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Promised Gift, 25.1998.10

Recently, you announced the extraordinary gift of 330 16th- to 18th-century Dutch, Flemish, and Netherlandish drawings to the Harvard Art Museums. The Museums stated that your gift brings tremendous depth and breadth to the museums' holdings. But how does it feel for you to abandon so many beautiful works of art?

There is a little sadness in giving up drawings which have been a part of my life for many years. Every drawing has its own story. Where did it come from? How was it acquired? From whom? How does it fit in the overall collection? It took so long to build the collection and I do not really want to break it up. But when you face reality, you can not keep the drawings forever.

The drawings in many ways fit together and tell a story about art and the 17th century. Harvard and its Fogg Art Museum seemed to be the perfect long-term home for the collection. Harvard has been a center for the study of Old Master drawings for over a century. The students, the scholars, the history of interest: all made it easier to part with my drawings.

The Boston – based collectors Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo and Susan and Matthew Weatherbie initiated the establishment of a Center for Netherlandish Art. The CNA will be a study center devoted to collaboration and partnership between the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) and academic and museum partners in New England and around the world.



HENDRICK GOLTZIUS
Seated Woman
 Brown and black ink and white opaque watercolor
 1596
 The Maida and George Abrams Collection, Boston, Massachusetts

How do you see this initiative and in what way are you engaged in the CNA?

The Van Otterloos, Weatherbies and I have been talking about setting up a center for Netherlandish art for over ten years and I am very happy that they have joined with the MFA in Boston to carry out these plans. They asked me to join with them, but after a great deal of thinking I decided it made more sense to keep the drawing collection together at Harvard. The painting field and the drawing field are very different. Drawings must be carefully protected from overexposure to light and too much handling. They are intended to be personal and intimate works of art calling for one-on-one study, or small group studies – a much more personal experience. However, there will certainly be a great deal of interaction between the MFA and Harvard and there is no doubt that Boston will be a great center for Dutch art in the future. It is very exciting to see this all happening, in large part because of the Van Otterloos and Weatherbies vision!

A more extensive interview with George Abrams, as well as a selected bibliography of the Maida and George Abrams Collection and a list of exhibitions to which Maida and George Abrams were major contributors can be found in the CODART eZine (Autumn, 2012).



NICOLAES BERCHEM
A Standing Man Seen from Behind
 Black and white chalk on blue paper
 Circa 1660
 The Maida and George Abrams Collection, Boston, Massachusetts



PAUL BRIL
Wooded Landscape with Travelers
 Brown ink and brown and gray wash over black chalk
 1600
 The Maida and George Abrams Collection, Boston, Massachusetts



JACOB MARREL
Four Tulips
 Watercolor and gouache over graphite on vellum
 Circa 1637-45
 The Maida and George Abrams Collection, Boston, Massachusetts