

A Philadelphian's "Grande Passion"

by Joshua Gilder

Some people are born with an acquisitive urge very highly developed," explains Henry P. McIlhenny. "My parents had it and I inherited it." For a man prone to acquisitive impulses, McIlhenny is a model of apollonian restraint. His collection, begun more than 50 years ago in a flush of adolescent enthusiasm (while traveling in the Middle East at the age of 15 he persuaded his mother to buy him his first piece, a late-Egyptian figurine), still fits quite comfortably into his Philadelphia townhouse. But while his collection may be, in comparison to some, modest in number, it is anything but modest in quality.

David's monumental portrait of "Pius VII and Cardinal Caprara" presides over the living room; an Ingres, the "Portrait of the Comtesse de Tournon," lords it over the parlor from above the mantelpiece; opposite hangs "La Danse au Moulin Rouge," one of Toulouse-Lautrec's most famous canvases. These are kept company by two Delacroix, a portrait of "Eugène Berny d'Ouille" and the "Death of Sardanapalus," a later version of the one that hangs in the Louvre; two Chassériaus, a collecting rarity ("something of a cross between Delacroix and Ingres"); two Daumier bronzes; a Prud'hon drawing; a Seurat, van Goghs, Cézannes, Renoirs, Corots, a Courbet, and his favorite after many years, Degas. Each holds its own elegant place on the wall; each chosen with unflinching taste.

Well, almost unflinching taste. McIlhenny did purchase a Dali (he refers to it as "that horrible little Dali") that he soon regretted. How does he account for this uncommon lapse? "Well, in the Thirties it was very chic; and it was exciting and novel, the limp watches and everything like that." He sold the

Dali and bought in its stead a van Gogh "quill" drawing. It's a picture that obviously gives him a great deal of pleasure. "It's almost like a Rembrandt," he says. "I love the feeling of infinite space stretching off. . . ."

Except for his first painting, bought while still in college, an 18th-century Chardin still life, "The Hare" ("rather kinky, I suppose, for a sophomore to want a dead hare"), and an occasional foray into the early 20th century (he owns a painting and a drawing by Matisse, his favorite of this century, and two paintings by Rouault, whose work, however, has come to bore him), the kernel of Henry McIlhenny's collection is firmly rooted in the French 19th century. This specialization he attributes in part to the advice of Paul Sachs, his teacher and mentor at Harvard in the early Thirties, and co-director of the Fogg Art Museum.

"Sachs always said it's much better not to buy higgledy-piggledy all over the map. It's more interesting if you concentrate on one period. If you have an Ingres, for instance, then it's marvelous to have a Delacroix, because they add to each other. If you have a Degas . . . well, I wish that I had a good Mary Cassatt; and I'd love to have a good Manet, too."

Monets?

"Well," he muses, "that's tragic. They were so cheap in the old days; \$5-\$7,000. I thought there were so many of them running around, I might as well concentrate on something scarcer."

Why 19th-century art? "They're so habitable; the artists really painted for houses." And then there was another reason: "My parents owned a lot of Italian primitives and Dutch pictures that rather depressed me. You usually don't want to collect what your parents

do. They collected Oriental carpets and I *hated* Oriental carpets for years—still not too crazy about them." He looks down balefully at a small rug at his feet, the only bit of Orientalia in the house.

In other ways, however, the senior McIlhennys exerted a more positive influence on their son. His mother was an ally in his early collecting ventures, helping him with his first purchases, and concurring in Sachs's advice that it is better to buy one expensive painting that is first-rate, rather than a great many paintings of lesser quality. And both parents served the Philadelphia Museum as curators, the career that Henry McIlhenny decided to pursue very early.

In fact, the stewardship of the Philadelphia Museum seems to be something of a family affair. The late John D. McIlhenny, son of the founder of the family fortune, was president of the Board of Trustees from 1920 until his death in 1925, when Mrs. McIlhenny was made a member. The next generation followed in their path, with Henry McIlhenny assuming, on his graduation from Harvard, the curatorship of Decorative Arts, a position he held for 30 years, while his sister, Mrs. John Wintersteen has been a trustee for many years. Henry McIlhenny plans to leave his collection to the museum.

The collection has remained remarkably consistent—though he has sold a few pieces: the Dali and an early Picasso, "The Blue Clown"—"It's very famous, but I found it tiresome; very sentimental and obvious." (McIlhenny once bought a print directly from

The parlor: (from left) Chassériaus's "Mme. de Balsan," Renoir's "Les Grands Boulevards," a Prud'hon drawing, Courbet's "Zelie" (above), a Seurat study.





Picasso. He was at the artist's studio and was attracted by a series of prints Picasso had just finished. "Picasso told me to take these two, because they're the two signed upside down, and they may be more valuable one day.") Also, in order to expand into the townhouse next door, he sold a late Renoir, "The Judgment of Paris." Delicately sensible of a social responsibility in dispensing his collection, McIlhenny obviously felt a twinge of guilt over this—but he notes that the Barnes Foundation nearby already owns over 200 Renoirs, and many excellent late ones.

Perhaps the most imposing of McIlhenny's treasures is the David portrait of Pope and Cardinal. "Well, of course, it isn't the sort of picture I'd like to have in my bedroom," he says. (His bedroom is hung with a number of paintings by Landseer, a 19th-century English Romantic painter who specialized in hunting scenes, stags at bay, and such. When he bought them, Landseers were considered something of a joke among critics but have since become quite valuable.) Davids have never been easy to come by in the 20th century, not even in the Thirties when McIlhenny decided

he needed one to cap his collection. "Pius VII and Cardinal Caprara" was previously owned by the Marquis de Ganay. "At the time, in 1937, there was a Communist fear in France, and the Ganays, who had aristocratic connections, wanted dollars."

McIlhenny says he feels sorry for old Pius VII, coming all the way to France for Napoleon's coronation, and then being so humiliated—during the ceremony Napoleon grabbed the crown from the Pope's hands and placed it on his own head. He also has a definite opinion about the Comtesse de Tournon, in the Ingres portrait. "First of all," he says, "she really must have been an old bitch. She went to Rome [where Ingres painted her] and I'm sure she ruined her son's winter. It's a marvelous picture because she was such an interesting-looking woman. You feel she was hypercritical—very discerning—wouldn't put up with any nonsense... not a pretty woman, with that great big fleshy nose, and she's obviously hiding the wrinkles around her neck by wearing that ruff... and it looks almost like a wig, though it may not be."

Overall, McIlhenny prefers living

with an interesting portrait, rather than with one that is merely good looking. Courbet's women, for example, he describes as "calves that have been hit over the head with a mallet."

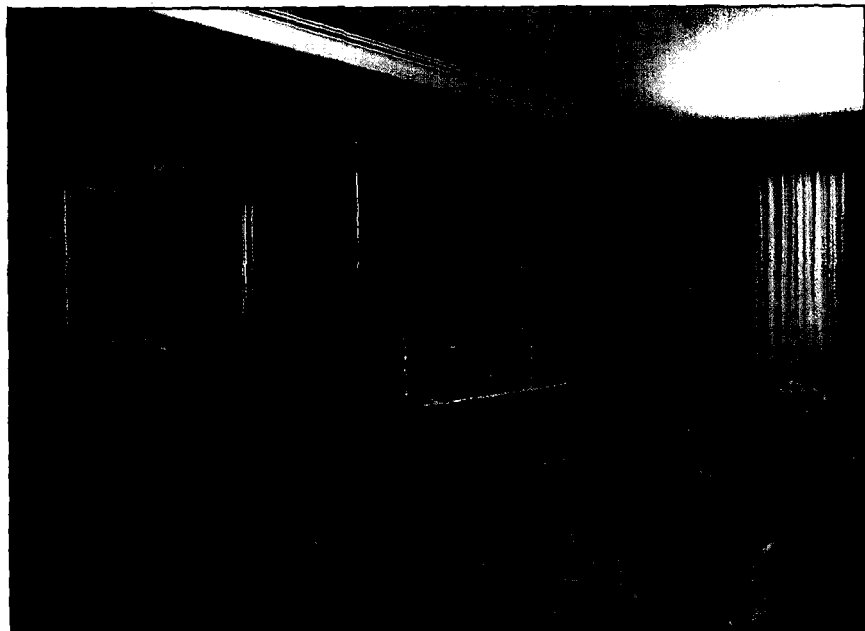
What's his favorite picture? "From a *collecting* viewpoint the Ingres is terrific, because it's so rare. The only other privately owned Ingres of any importance still belongs to the Rothschilds. Then the Degas ["Le Viol"] is without doubt my most fascinating picture." Said to be based on the Zola story, *Thérèse Raquin*, it is a somber interior scene, full of a dramatic foreboding uncommon to Degas. "The Lautrec is the most famous, and it is unquestionably one of his major canvases. But the picture that touches me the most is the van Gogh ["The Rain"]. It's the most emotional." McIlhenny traveled to Saint-Rémy in southern France and looked up the house van Gogh was staying in when he painted "The Rain"; but "the room that he painted it from was occupied, so I didn't get to see it."

Thanks to his generosity, McIlhenny's collection is accessible to the public every summer when the greater

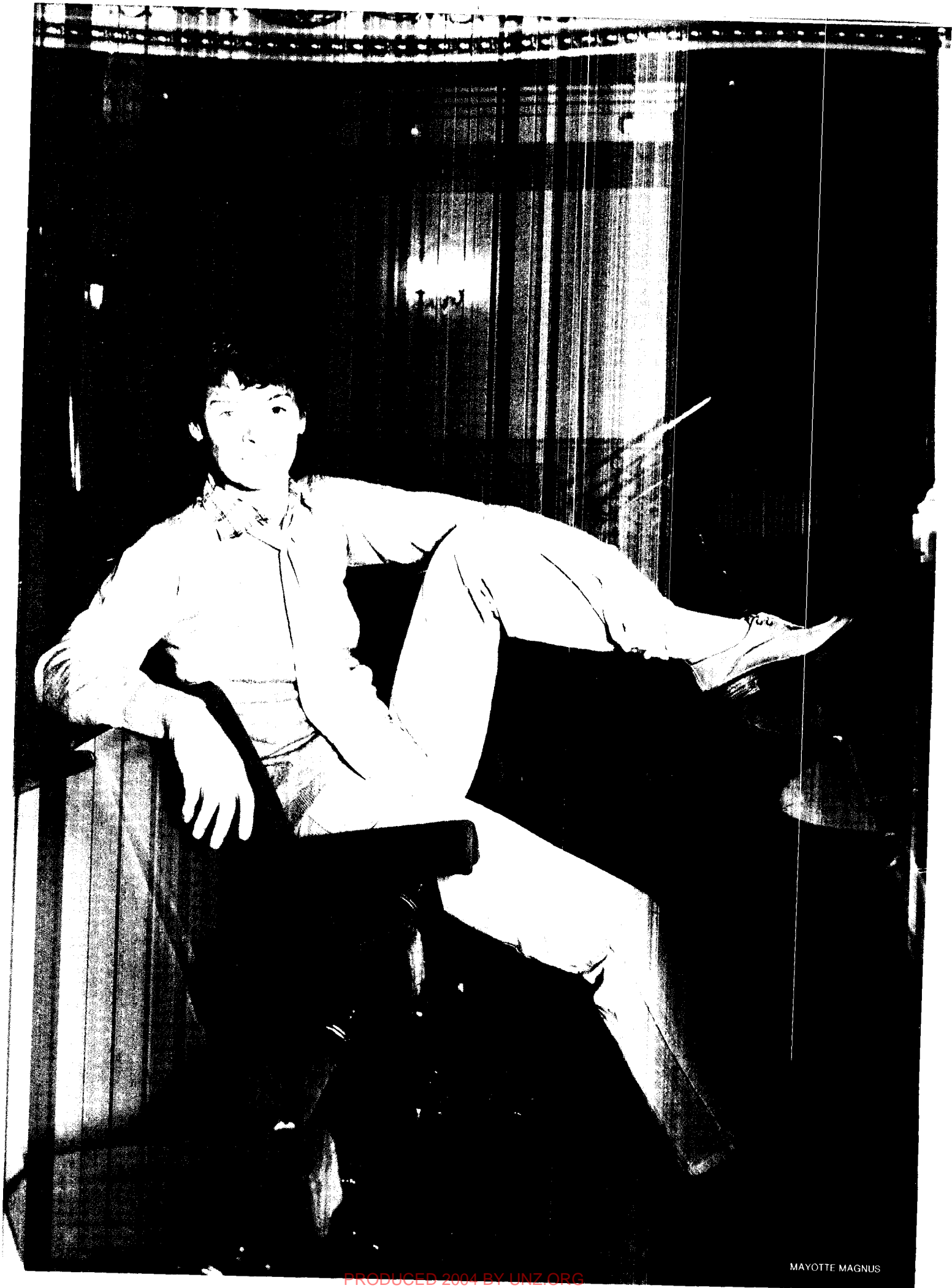


portion of it goes on display at the Philadelphia Museum. At other times his collection has traveled as far as San Francisco. Does he worry about security? If you've gone public once, he explains, there's no point in hiding anything away; though if he were starting life all over again, knowing what he does today, he'd probably be more discreet. Still, he notes all those suspicious dealers' houses in Geneva "with seven Cézannes in the front hall, and not even a maid. . . ."

Nor would he be able, if he were starting over again, to collect on the same scale. He mentions the Jasper Johns that sold to the Whitney for \$1 million. "How can collectors, unless they're Croesus, buy good works of art today? It's rather depressing. In the old days, you could run to New York and— he points to the Matisse drawing, a study for "The White Plumes"—"I bought that Matisse when I was an undergraduate at Harvard for something like \$900. You *could* do it, you see. You could save up \$900 somehow or other. But today it's a very difficult problem. The people who really like works of art can't afford to buy them." ■



Opposite: Henry McIlhenny sits in his living room before Degas's brooding "Le Viol," flanked (left) by van Gogh's quill drawing of Saintes Maries and (right) Cézanne's "Mt. Sainte-Victoire." On the table (left) his first purchases, late-Egyptian figurines; before him (middle of table) a Renaissance bronze. The furniture, Charles X. **This page:** two views of the parlor. **Top:** Renoir's portrait of Mlle. Legrand, "La Fillette Attentive," Ingres's drawing "M. Jai" and portrait "La Comtesse de Tournon." **Below:** (from left) Delacroix's "Death of Sardanapalus," Toulouse-Lautrec's "La Danse au Moulin Rouge," van Gogh's "Rain."



MAYOTTE MAGNUS

PRODUCED 2004 BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED