



THE GREENBERG GALLERY

Ronnie Greenberg in his Clayton gallery with a Robert Rauschenberg painting in the background.

THOROUGHLY MODERN RONNIE

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In the past year, the local art scene has seen change, with some longtime gallery owners shifting their focus. But St. Louisans continue to benefit from two of the art field's most respected leaders. If Emily Rauh Pulitzer, founder of The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts and featured on page 100, is influential in museum art, public works, and architecture, then Ronnie Greenberg is one of the people most responsible for bringing extraordinary works of art into the private lives of collectors, at home and abroad. Earlier this year, Greenberg closed his Grand Center gallery space, but in mid-August moved into a new location on the ground floor at 230 Bemiston Ave. in Clayton.

I caught up with him between trips to Expo Chicago and Pisa, Italy, where he is traveling to see one of his paintings by Andy Warhol on display at the local museum. Greenberg is himself a private collector. He started his collection in the late 1960s and continues to this day, amassing works by artists from the 1960s to the present. The new Greenberg Gallery is close to completion and passersby are welcome to stop in and take a look. In the future, Greenberg will assemble shows but for now art connoisseurs will have the opportunity to look at works both on the wall and in books from his vast library. The gallery is smaller in size than his previous space—a rarely seen Robert Rauschenberg piece hangs in the gallery's lobby—but it's Greenberg's knowledge that will offer big rewards.

Despite changes in what is considered fashionable in the art world, Greenberg continues his commitment to the same artists who first inspired him, including Warhol, Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, and Ellsworth Kelly. Yet, he is also working with younger, contemporary artists, including Englishman Nate Lowman whose abstract version of Marilyn Monroe hangs in his office. "Younger artists tend to be more speculative, but people like to buy what's going on in the moment," he says. "My tendency is to watch an artist, wait until they've developed something interesting. That's when I feel I'm ready to buy."

Greenberg says that having prior knowledge of what's happened in art is key to knowing which artists will flourish. "You build on your knowledge to help create the stars of the next decade. In this field, you're always looking ahead." Greenberg's daughter, Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, a New York art dealer and owner of Salon 94 at her residence on 94th Street and on the Lower East Side, is especially good at navigating the very contemporary, cutting-edge market. "We're constantly talking; today I've already talked to her twice," he says. "We buy art together, and I also buy from her. I use her expertise."

The story of how Greenberg discovered art is an unexpected one. It began in an art-lover's city, under unusual circumstances. After completing a business degree at Washington University, Greenberg was called up by the Air Force National Guard and sent to France as a member of the Missouri Guard. While overseas, he worked as a news correspondent for the Stars and Stripes and on assignment for the St. Louis Globe-Democrat.

“I had a lot of time on my hands,” he says. “So I was in Paris quite a bit.”

On one particular sojourn, Greenberg mistakenly walked into an art gallery on Rue du Faubourg Sainte-Honoré, thinking it was a bookstore. Owned by the art dealer Maurice Covo, their meeting was the start of Greenberg’s art education. During the year-and-a-half he spent abroad, Greenberg and Covo grew to become good friends. “He and I talked quite a bit about art. He would send me into the museums to see certain things,” he says. “I ended up spending an enormous amount of time with him and his family.”

By 1970, Greenberg was back in his native St. Louis with a new understanding of how the center of the art world had suddenly shifted from Paris to New York City. By the time he met the Manhattan art world powerhouse Leo Castelli, who represented many of the best artists from that time, Greenberg was committed to a career in art. Castelli, who could make or break careers, became a mentor. “He told me that if I opened up in St. Louis, he would give me all of his artists.”

And he did. In 1972, Greenberg mounted his inaugural show at his first gallery featuring works by Roy Lichtenstein. The show moved collectors to pay \$5,000 to \$10,000 for a major piece of the artist’s work. “But the prices have risen dramatically [since then], and I’ve priced myself out of most of the St. Louis art market,” he says. Most of Greenberg’s clients are in other American cities and around the world.

When it comes to art, prices are set according to the law of supply and demand. “If there’s too much demand, that places a lot of pressure on paintings and prices go up,” he says. When Greenberg started out, he knew most every dealer and collector. Then, they were mostly in North America and Western Europe. Today, clients are all over the world. “Besides Europe, they are in Asia, South America, China, Russia,” he says.

Buy the best quality that you can afford, is Greenberg’s advice to collectors. Quality is defined by a work’s rarity, the date a painting was created, and even the colors used are important to determining value. However, historical pieces, meaning older works, are usually the most valuable because they were created at a time when the artist was first developing his or her style. “There are only six, early Warhol Marilyn Monroe’s on the 40 inch square canvas. After that came the Reversal Series, and there were hundreds of those,” says Greenberg. “It is the early originals that top collectors are interested in buying.”

Aspiring collectors should do their homework before investing, no matter how much they’re drawn to a particular work. “Go through a museum, figure out what you like and what you don’t like. Then, buy a book that encompasses the art you’re interested in, whether that’s pop, abstract, or realistic. Find a dealer that you have a rapport with and live with the painting for a while. Living with a painting is very different than seeing it hanging on a wall somewhere. Remember that quality should be the number one item collectors look for.”

Many of Greenberg’s pieces are on loan to other places, decorating walls in galleries and museums the world over. There’s the Warhol in Pisa, a Lichtenstein in Paris, a Morris Louis in London, a Richard Diebenkorn in the de Young Museum in San Francisco. “I think it’s the responsibility of the owner to share his or her artwork with museums. A lot of owners don’t do that. But I believe there’s a need for pictures to be seen by a lot of people.” 