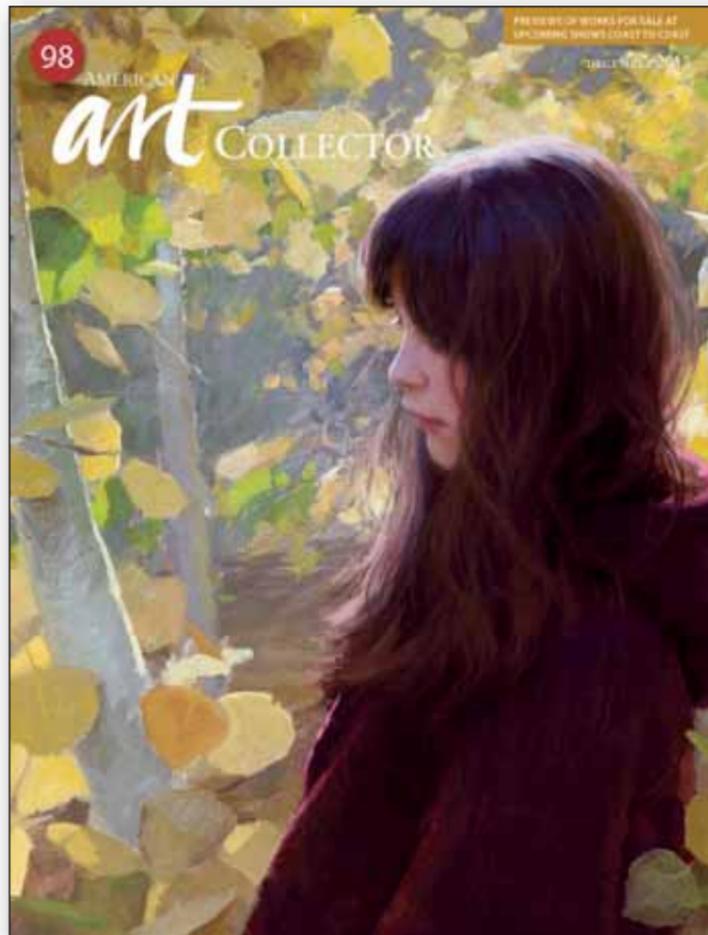


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PERSONALIZING A COLLECTION

These New York-based art collectors seek out works that resonate on an intimate level.

By John O'Hern | Photography by Francis Smith





The living room contains a portrait of the husband's mother by Ramiro from 2006, and *Cherry Blossom* (2005) by Paul Rafferty.



“I met these friends, who became collectors, when we were just out of college,” Laura Grenning, owner of Grenning Gallery, explains. “They were just starting to build a collection when I made the risky move to leave my Wall Street job, to study painting, and then open an art gallery. They were my very first clients in 1997.” Grenning Gallery in Sag Harbor, New York, has been championing classical realist art since its founding. Grenning, herself, is an occasional painter and studied at the Florence Academy of Art before she opened the gallery.

Her clients were both born on Long Island and returned there to bring up their children in a community setting.

Their grand house is a central meeting place for an extended family, in addition to being a home for the couple and their seven children. It is the setting for “a warm traditional family life,” according to Grenning. The collectors have personalized the large formal home with family portraits, a grand piano that all the children have learned to play, and a large dining room that hosts gatherings of family and friends every Sunday.

“They have curated everything,” Grenning explains. “Much of the art has been purchased

or commissioned through the gallery. They also have a fine collection of American furniture and artifacts.”

John O’Hern: What style of art are they most interested in?

Laura Grenning: Initially they were more interested in the more expressionist painters I represent, such as Paul Rafferty and Beth Rundquist. Their choices have been toward the romantic and the traditional but always with a personal connection. Every piece has to ring true in her heart.

Paul Rafferty’s large painting *Peonies and Japanese Screen* was a Christmas gift to her husband. I had helped her hang it just before Christmas. With the Christmas tree in the room and the excitement of the day he didn’t see the painting at first. When he opened a card from his wife there was an image of the painting and the message “Look up!”

Other paintings also have a personal connection. For instance, Rick Piloco’s *Sagaponack Pathway* is a reminder of their being married on Long Island. Ramiro’s *Angel* reminded them of one of their daughters. Ramiro was paying homage to artist Abbott Thayer (1849-1921) and his wonderful



Clockwise from top of opposite page: *Peonies and Japanese Screen* (2010) by Paul Rafferty hangs in the living room; *Nativity Scene* (2011), a commission painted by Ramiro, hangs in the family's chapel; Beth Rundquist's *Blue and White Pitcher* (2003) and her *Blue Hydrangeas* (2002) hang in the dining room; *Angel* (2004) by Ramiro and a portrait by Ralph Earl (1751-1801) hang in the dining room; *Sagaponack Pathway* (2002) by Rick Piloco hangs across from a 2011 portrait of the wife's mother by Ramiro.







Opposite page clockwise from top: Portraits of the children painted by Ramiro between 2000 and 2008 hang in the stairwell; *Beach Scene, Crescent Beach* (2002) and *Via Reggio, Bango Aurora* (2002) by Nelson White hang on the stair landing. Below are *Poppies* (2002) by Beth Rundquist and her *Field of Irises* (2002); The New York-based home of these collectors featured an array of fine art; A portrait of the husband's mother painted by Ramiro in 2006 has found its place near the piano. **Above:** *Spring Blossoms* (2002) by Beth Rundquist.

paintings of angels. He brought the idea of angels into the 21st century and the painting brings a sense of warmth to the room and humanizes its scale. Rundquist's *Spring Blossoms* reminds the collector of her sister and her childhood.

JO: Speaking of Abbott Thayer and historical paintings, please tell me about the Ralph Earl (1751-1801).

LG: After looking at their furniture collection I encouraged them to think about important earlier American artists and introduced them to Earl who was an itinerant portrait painter. Earl painted on the East Coast and, as a loyalist during the Revolutionary War, he escaped to England where he painted with Benjamin West.

They're thinking about early 20th-century painters, now.

JO: There are a number of paintings by Ramiro in their collection. Please tell me about them.

LG: They have been collecting Ramiro for many years. I advise collectors about the importance of being patrons for young artists, to buy into an artist's career and to support them any way they can.

They first commissioned Ramiro to paint

their two eldest children. He lived with the family and returned to paint the younger children as they came along. He also painted the couple's mothers. Ramiro uses natural light and evokes a timeless quality in his portraits.

I ask that all commissioned portraits from the Grenning Gallery artists be done in the traditional way with perhaps five two- to three-hour sittings. Ramiro had been painting portraits for 10 years when he began working with these clients and over the years they all became close.

JO: How did that work with the children?

LG: Ramiro asked the children to choose something important to them to hold while they were posing. They loved it. One daughter has a flute, the oldest son has a guitar (at that time he wanted to be a rock star). The next has a basketball, another a baseball bat, a third has his golf club, and finally another holds his violin. Finally, the youngest is holding a stuffed animal. The children and the parents all learned a great deal about the process of painting by watching an artist at work. I think it has created an appreciation that will stay with them throughout their life.

The couple also commissioned Ramiro to decorate their chapel, and the first phase includes the *Nativity Scene*. He is currently working on several saints based on the members of the family to complete that room.

It's been an absolute pleasure helping them to find visual solutions for a close family moving into a grand home. Through art, they've been able to personalize their home. ●

John O'Hern, who has retired after 30 years in the museum business, specifically as the Executive Director and Curator of the Arnot Art Museum, Elmira, N.Y., is the originator of the internationally acclaimed Re-presenting Representation exhibitions which promote realism in its many guises. John was chair of the Artists Panel of the New York State Council on the Arts. He writes for gallery publications around the world, including regular monthly features on Art Market Insights and on Sculpture in Western Art Collector magazine.

