

CREAM OF THE CROP

Despite making their first serious acquisition only six years ago (a set of Arcimboldo's *Four Seasons*), Anita and Gary Klesch have cultivated a collection of Old Masters – and, notably, Mistresses – that is the envy of many a museum

By Susan Moore
Interiors photography by Ben Blossom



1. *The Four Seasons*, 1572, Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1525–93), oil on canvas, 75.5 × 56.9cm (each panel)

In a very short space of time – just six years – Gary and Anita Klesch have built up a collection of 16th- and 17th-century European paintings that is, much to the American couple's surprise, already attracting the attention of some of the world's leading museums. One reason is the collection's rare group of works by women artists still largely unrepresented in most national holdings. Another is the number of 'rediscoveries' in the collection, whether of artists, previously undocumented paintings or works whose long-hidden secrets have been revealed through conservation or new research. Although prescient in light of current interest in 'Old Mistresses', this focus was unplanned. In fact, the entire collection could be described as serendipitous.

'We never made a conscious decision to start a collection,' Anita Klesch explains when we meet at their picture-lined home. 'It just evolved.' Like many a collecting adventure, this one began with a one-off purchase. This was a set of *The Four Seasons* by Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1525–93), court painter to three consecutive Habsburg Holy Roman Emperors and master of the compellingly bizarre composite portrait head (Fig. 1). Here, Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter are represented by artful arrangements of seasonal flowers, fruits and vegetables and, in the case of Winter, a gnarled old tree with ivy for hair and an oyster serving as a mouth.

Although this was a surprise gift to Anita from Gary, it was one that left little to chance. 'If you are going to dip your toes into unknown waters, you do it with guidance from people you know,' Gary says. 'I went to a friend, [art dealer] David Koetser, who I had known for 20 years. In the business world I am known as a due-diligence freak. I have to know everything about the companies I am buying. I am not casual about buying anything, nor do I let my emotions get in the way of discipline.' What did he do after admiring the Arcimboldo paintings on the dealer's art-fair stand? 'I just Googled "art experts on Arcimboldo" and found Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann at Princeton. I asked him to take a look at the paintings for attribution purposes and check the ultra-violets and X-rays, as I had no idea what I was doing.' Kaufmann gave them a green light, also pointing out that this set, painted in 1572, is the only one remaining in private hands. Anita continues: 'We were very comfortable with our first purchase, and so delighted by it, that we bought another painting the following year – a Pieter Claesz still life – but we did not make any other purchases until 2017.'

It does not take long to realise that Gary and Anita Klesch negotiate the art world as a team, each bringing different experiences and skills to the table. They met at university in Cleveland, Ohio. 'My first memories of art are going to the Cleveland Museum of Art as a child,' Anita recalls fondly. 'I grew up in an area called Little Italy which was within walking distance of the museum. Often on Sunday afternoons after a family lunch, my mother and my aunt and all the children would walk over to the museum. I loved going there. Even as a teenager, when most kids weren't going to museums or galleries, I would go on my own. When Gary and I moved to Paris in 1978, and to London in 1980, I thought I had died and gone to heaven.'

In the 1990s, Anita studied art history at University College London, focusing on Elizabethan art, which fascinated her, before going on to take a masters and a doctorate at Birkbeck College. 'Shall I tell you the title of my PhD?'



2. Gary and Anita Klesch, photographed in front of Guido Reni's *Assumption of the Virgin with Angels and Saints* (left) and Titian's double portrait of Guidobaldo II della Rovere, Duke of Urbino, and his son (right)

3. *Portrait of an Unknown Noblewoman*, c. 1560–65, Sofonisba Anguissola (c. 1532–1625), oil on canvas, 181.5 x 98.5cm



she offers, laughing. "A Golden Age or Crisis? The History of Art in the Age of Information Technology." I went back to Vasari, who used the technology of print to create the discipline of the history of art, and then moved forward to digital images. When I was studying, art historians were kicking and screaming and refusing to give up their slides and projectors. It took about 10 years, but they had no choice in the end. The old technology became obsolete.'

It might well be that her businessman and investor husband – he describes himself as an old-fashioned entrepreneur, 'a dying breed' – used to kick and scream about going to art galleries. 'Gary has come into my camp slowly and surely, and I think he can hold his own against anyone in the art industry now because he started to enjoy it and wanted to be informed. He reads around subjects that interest him.' The catalyst was not so much that significant first purchase as their introduction to Kaufmann. 'He is a great guy,' Gary says. 'When he knew I had really got into Caravaggio, he suggested we all go to Rome and see all the Caravaggios. I think we saw 27 in one day.' It was a mind- and eye-opening experience.

The next two purchases were, coincidentally, portraits by women artists. Still lifes, Gary decided, did not really do it for him. First came a full-length portrait of an unknown Spanish noblewoman, a painting with an impressive provenance (including Cardinal Joseph Fesch and Walter Bromley-Davenport) that had long been wrongly described as a portrait of 'Mary' of Austria – meaning Anne, fourth wife of Philip II – and attributed to Antonis Mor. Scholars are now of the opinion that it is the work of Sofonisba Anguissola, painted around 1560–65 after Philip II had invited the artist to the Spanish court as lady-in-waiting and painting tutor to his wife Isabel de Valois. Viewed at the end of a long vista, the portrait is the presiding image of this interior (Fig. 3).

Of far smaller scale but no less imposing a presence is the *Portrait of Martino Martini* (1614–1661), an Italian Jesuit Missionary in China, signed and dated 1654. Michaelina Wautier (c. 1617–89; Fig. 5) is a fairly recent rediscovery, her work usually conflated with that of her painter brother Charles. After 20 years of research done by Katlijne Van der Stighelen, she was accorded her first retrospective in 2018, at the Museum aan de Stroom (MAS) in Antwerp. This portrait was probably commissioned by her patron, Archduke Leopold Wilhelm of Austria, Governor of the Spanish Netherlands, during Martini's short stay in Brussels.

Of impressive intellect as well as physical stature, Martini created the first atlas of China, wrote the first grammar of the Chinese language published in Europe and attempted a history, chronicling the fall of the Ming dynasty first-hand. Here he is dressed in the Manchu costume of the new Qing regime, his given name, Wei Kuang Guo, inscribed in the upper right along with its transcription in Latin. 'We were drawn to the image, and to the story, although we did not know who he was at the time,' Gary admits, gazing at the portrait in admiration. 'He was a brilliant, brilliant man.'

'There were only a handful of women artists who were recognised in their time, or who could compete with men,' he continues as we move on to marvel at the bravura handling of Judith Leyster's young trio in *Merry Company*, of around 1629. 'Wautier was one, Leyster is another. She is as good as Hals and her work was often mistaken as being by him.' In fact, this was once believed to have been painted



4. *Allegory of Patience*, c. 1552, Giorgio Vasari (1511–74), oil on canvas, 197.8 x 107.8cm

5. *Portrait of Martino Martini* (1614–1661), an Italian Jesuit Missionary in China, 1654, Michaelina Wautier (1617–89), oil on canvas, 69.5 x 59cm





6. *Judith and Holofernes*, c. 1610–15, Giuseppe Vermiglio (1587–1635), oil on canvas, 68.6×58.6cm

in collaboration with Hals. A second Wautier, *A Young Man Smoking a Pipe*, is out on loan, but the couple's signed and dated Lavinia Fontana – the solemn, full-length *Portrait of Count Gentile Sassatelli* of around 1581 – also holds its own in a dining room closely hung mostly with portraits. The couple generously lent all five works to 'Women's Histories: Artists before 1900' staged last year at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo. Hardly surprisingly, the couple were the biggest lenders to the show.

Another strong woman makes her presence felt here. This is the biblical Judith, about to strike the second blow to decapitate Holofernes in Giuseppe Vermiglio's recently rediscovered canvas of around 1610–15, unveiled at TEFAF Maastricht in 2015 (Fig. 6). The piece is one of the first reworkings of a painting by Caravaggio – in this case his painting on the same subject in the Palazzo Barberini – in which the Milanese artist gives the composition and treatment his personal stamp. 'It has to be love at first sight for me,' Anita comments. 'Even though it is a very violent painting – shocking even – the colours, the facial expressions and the quality of the painting are beautiful.' 'I look for wall power,' Gary says: 'strong, powerful images.' They are both drawn to the image, not to the name of its artist.

'I find myself discovering artists that I did not know at all or knew very little about,' Anita continues. 'As a result, I do more and more research on them. We like to connect the dots.' Connecting the dots, and research in general, is important to this couple. The art historian Carlo Falciani's investigations into their well-documented *Allegory of Patience* by Giorgio Vasari (c. 1552; Fig. 4), now recognised as the prototype of the painting in the Palazzo Pitti in Florence, was so fascinating that they thought it should be published. *Vasari, Michelangelo and the Allegory of Patience* (Paul Holberton Publishing), which discusses among other things Michelangelo's role in helping Vasari find a suitable allegorical figure to represent this virtue, had its virtual book launch in November.

The painting next in line for research is a hitherto unpublished and unexhibited recent acquisition. *The Assumption of the Virgin with Angels and Saints* is an early work of c. 1595–1601 by Guido Reni (Fig. 2). It joins a group of

devotional works by Lorenzo di Credi, Domenico Cresti, Joos van Cleve, Il Sodoma and Francesco Bassano the Younger.

Condition is another important consideration for the pair. 'We have walked away from a painting many times after a disappointing condition report,' Gary insists. Nonetheless, they are not averse to availing themselves of the services of conservators whom Gary describes as the 'unsung heroes of the art industry'. One such is Matthew Hayes, whose study and painstaking conservation of Titian's *Double Portrait of Guidobaldo II della Rovere, Duke of Urbino (1514–1574), and his Son, Francesco Maria II (1549–1631)*, was also responsible for a re-dating of the canvas to around 1555 (Fig. 2). It will be the subject of another book. Gary also admires the work done by Larry Keith – head of conservation at the National Gallery in London – on Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, a painting for which they were the underbidders at auction in Paris in 2017. Months later the painting was acquired by the National Gallery, and its nationwide tour was gamely underwritten by the collectors. 'Larry Keith had vision,' Gary says. 'What he did with the painting was miraculous. It was too early for me to have that kind of vision.' The couple also agreed to place Vasari's *Allegory of Patience* on long-term loan to the gallery, where it is currently on show in Room 10.

Making the collection accessible is another goal, through loans, publications, and planned podcasts on its website. Currently, five works are lined up for exhibitions. Among them is Rubens' *Portrait of a Young Woman Holding a Chain*. It is off to the Rubenshuis in Antwerp for three years, though it will return for a show at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London. Ever since the couple saw the painting in an exhibition in Venice last year, they have been in hot pursuit, finally securing it at auction last July. 'We are now at a point where each time, each year, we up the game a little more,' Gary says. 'We are extremely focused, and extremely disciplined about not buying paintings outside our chosen time frame. Even so, there are a number of artists that we would like to see in the collection.' On this cliffhanger, Gary receives a phone call and, after polite apologies, the interview comes to an end. **A**

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