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The Unlikely Medicis: A Documentary Profiling Herb & Dorothy Vogel

Sophia Stein · Thursday, October 24th, 2013

The original *Herb & Dorothy* documentary introduced world-renowned art collectors Herb and Dorothy Vogel to the world at large. For fans, as well as newcomers, comes director Megumi Sasaki's follow-up film, *Herb & Dorothy 50X50*. The thing that is remarkable about the Vogel's story is how Herb, a retired postal worker, and Dorothy, a librarian, using their instincts, charm, and humble salaries alone were able to amass a contemporary art collection worth millions of dollars. The sequel tracks the launch of the National Gift Project, "Fifty Works for Fifty States," created by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, wherein one museum in each and every one of the 50 United States was gifted a mini-Vogel collection of 50 artworks. Having worked their whole lives as civil servants, rather than selling off a single piece of their collection, the Vogels elected instead to give back to the people of the United States with this gift of 2,500 priceless works of art. Ruth Fine, Curator of Special Projects in Modern Art, The National Gallery of Art (2002-1011), has aptly dubbed the Vogels, "The Unlikely Medicis."

It was my mother's insistence that prompted me to watch the original documentary. I was a newlywed at the time, and I was secretly hoping that the film might inspire my husband to begin collecting art with me. While he remained reluctant to become a collector, we were both inspired by Herb and Dorothy's perfect partnership. Their commitment in cultivating a shared passion seems to have been the key to their profound and sustained relationship.

When I heard the concept for the gift – 50 works of art, gifted to 50 galleries — I thought, all this artwork can't be great?! This new movie must be about who gets what – the in-fighting, the disputes, the competition to satisfy the wants of each gallery. Of course, the new documentary is not about that at all.

With *50X50*, director Megumi Sasaki's intention was to create "a road movie for art," connecting eleven museums in one film. Hearing the different curators discuss the works, seeing the variety of approaches, and all the talent that is out there all across the United States is somewhat of a revelation. Outside the big metropolises, I think we often forget to visit museums. When you go to New York or Paris, you're going to go to the museums, but it may not be the first thing on your itinerary when you visit Fargo, North Dakota, for example. Sometimes, however, it is those smaller collections where you can really focus on seeing that which is set out before you. That people should not have to travel far from home, that cultural riches should remain accessible to all, is the achievement of a democratic ideal.

At the end of the film, when the names of all 50 museums that received the gifts trickle down like drops of rain flooding the map, the emotional impact is pronounced. If you believe that a life well-lived entails significantly and positively impacting the world during your allotted days, then

certainly the Vogels have nobly achieved this ideal. The film makes the case for the Vogels as true American heroes.

I recently had an opportunity to talk with art collector Dorothy Vogel and film director Megumi Sasaki about art, collecting, and transitions, in the context of the latest film, *Herb & Dorothy 50X50*, at the Roxie Theater in San Francisco, where the film was screening.



Herb & Dorothy Vogel, collectors.

Photo courtesy of Fine Line Media.

Sophia Stein: Were you and Herb collectors of art before you were married?

Dorothy Vogel: I collected post-cards when I was very young. At one time, I collected shopping bags and bookmarks. I still collect books. I buy them, and I intend to read them, but I don't, so I'm still a collector. I didn't collect art before my marriage. The first thing Herb ever bought was a lithograph by Picasso. It was a limited edition lithograph of a bull's head, and when the Museum of Modern Art issued a book of Picasso lithographs, they featured it on the cover. So it was a good choice that Herb made very early on. Herb always used to say that he didn't know if his collecting ability went up or down after that.

S2: Can you recount your famous "rules for collecting"?

DV: We bought what we loved. We just bought what we wanted. We didn't have rules. Of course, we didn't have an unlimited amount of money, and we only really had so much space. Those aren't really rules; those are just conditions that we had to abide by. We were very free in what we did – which is the advantage of being a private collector. We didn't have to go to a board for approval. We didn't have to have a consensus. If one of us liked something, and the other one didn't, we got it anyhow.

S2: The National Gallery held special significance for you and Herb?

DV: We went there on our honeymoon, and that's where I got my first lesson in art from Herb. I didn't know anything about art when I met my husband. When we dated, we went to movies, the theatre, out to dinner, but Herbie didn't take me to art museums or galleries until after we got married. Before I knew Herb, the Brooklyn Public Library (The Department of Art and Music) had framed reproductions that you could borrow. (I don't think they do that anymore.) I had borrowed a very abstract work by Kandinsky. I didn't know Kandinsky from anybody, I just liked it! Also, I had bought a reproduction of "The Rabbi" by Marc Chagall. When Herb came over to my apartment, he noticed them right away. I knew that Herb was painting, himself, and after we got married and he moved in, we put up Herb's paintings.



Herb & Dorothy Vogel, in their youth.

Photo courtesy of Fine Line Media.

S2: At the end of the film, we see a portrait that Herb painted, hanging alone on a white wall in your apartment. Is that a portrait that he painted of you?

DV: He said that he had me in mind ... this was before we were married.

S2: So the works you were collecting went from under your bed and into the National gallery. What was the emotional impact of seeing your collected works on display in the National Gallery for the first time?

DV: They didn't hang them. They took them to Washington, into a depository. From there, they made certain selections that they entered into their own collection. We knew from the outset, that we would have to find a venue for the remainder of the artworks. Once the works we had gifted to the National Gallery were out of the apartment, we started adding more. So when you see the large

numbers of works in the collection [over 4,000 pieces in total], they weren't all in our apartment at the same time.

S2: The gifts were allocated in accordance with very specific guidelines.

DV: With each gift, Ruth Fine tried to represent the whole collection on a small scale. There are certain artists whose work we have in-depth. Those were chosen for each venue. There is a big portion of Richard Tuttle's, they all got Charlie Clough, Edda Renouf, Robert Barry, Daryl Trivieri. Most of them got Lucio Pozzi. Ruth tried to make it so that when you go to see one exhibit, you see a mini-version of the whole collection.

S2: What was it about Herb, do you think, that informed his acute perception and discerning eye for art?

DV: Herb's first interest was nature. He loved animals, birding, and plants. I think that his interest in nature, somehow transferred over into art.

S2: In the film, we witness Herb grow quieter as the years pass. Ruth Fine teases him about this, and Herb cheekily responds, "Well, Ruth, somebody has to listen."

DV: I think, at the end, his mind wasn't the same. If you noticed at the gallery in New Jersey, when Herb was directing how to install the art in that little part of the living room, he was very sharp. He came alive then. You had an indication of how brilliant he was. In his heyday, he could go to any exhibition and make it better. A lot of artists used to consult with Herb when they were installing a show. He was a pro at that.



Herb & Dorothy, a little later.

Photo courtesy of Fine Line Media.

S2: What did Herb teach you about art?

DV: Everything. I always like to say, I learned about art by looking at it, not by studying slides. To this day, I have never read a book on art history. So I learned from Herb, from the artists, and by looking.

S2: What do you think you taught Herb? How was he influenced by you?

DV: I encouraged him. He had someone to appreciate the art with. He didn't really collect like that before I met him. He owned a few things, but nothing like what we had together. I think that it was our merger, our marriage, that brought out his interest in collecting. We always bought furniture with buying art, in mind. For example, the headboard in our bedroom was intentionally flat, so that we could hang things above it. We bought one of those little glass partitions for storing precious things. Other people might have bought display racks for magazines, from the beginning we always bought furnishings that would enable us display art.

S2: In Jason Stieber's description, you were the perfect archivist, keeping files on the artists, newspapers clippings, announcements, and snapshots –

DV: Well, I'm a trained librarian. The thing is, my husband had studied art history, and he knew the importance of keeping documents. He was the impetus for keeping all these records. I was just very good at doing it.

S2: Is there any one exhibition in particular of the Vogel works that stands out in your mind?

DV: I am amazed by what we had! All of them are special. They're all a little different, yet, there is a certain consistency — because it was just two eyes that had collected them. The collections are installed in different environments — in schools, in city museums, on college campuses – by

different curators with a lot of different approaches. In New Jersey, the curator wanted to replicate how we lived. She put up the artworks in a simulated living room with a stuffed cat and an artificial fish tank. I picked out the couch from an Ikea catalogue. The exhibition in Hawaii was exotic. At Yale, they featured works from their own collection that were similar in style alongside ours, and they published their own catalogue. This was in addition to the master catalogue that was published to accompany the whole project.

S2: Megumi, upon seeing the Vogel collection perfectly lit and framed in a museum exhibition for the first time, you commented: “I felt as though I had been documenting a famous actor behind-the-scenes for four years without ever having seen him act onstage.”

Megumi Sasaki: Herb and Dorothy were invited to the Indianapolis Museum of Art for the first museum exhibition of a mini-Vogel collection, six months after I finished the first documentary. That was the first time I saw all 50 works of art, curated. I felt like I was in the middle of that Vogel universe, which was so absolutely beautiful. I had never experienced that while I was shooting the first film. That made me feel like I wanted to go more in-depth about their art and collection with a second film.

S2: Have you been inspired in your personal habits, by your intimate association in documenting Herb and Dorothy?

MS: I’m not the kind of person who collects things; I like to keep my apartment simple. I am very happy to go and see art in museums and galleries. Making the second film, surprisingly enough, made me want to start painting and drawing again. I remember that I had wanted to be an artist when I was a kid. I was studying oil painting, but when we got a crazy new teacher in the eighth grade, I became discouraged, and stopped. So I realized that I’ve been a blocked artist, for a long, long time.

DV: It was in you.

MS: It was in me. My mom was always taking me to art exhibitions. In Japan, they would exhibit paintings by Renoir and Van Gogh in a makeshift gallery, a room on top of the department stores. They don’t do that any longer. They have enough gallery and museum spaces now. I have become interested in painting and drawing again.

DV: We have to see Megumi’s work now.

MS: Oh ... [We all share a big laugh.] That’s a little bit of pressure.

S2: In what ways have Herb and Dorothy redefined for you, what it means to be a patron of the arts?

MS: We all have this perception that you have to be wealthy or be some kind of socialite to be an art collector and patron of the arts, but it is totally not that. I think that art in any culture, can and should be supported by every one of us. It doesn’t take a lot of money. It doesn’t take a PhD in art history. We can simply say, we like it or dislike it. Herb and Dorothy taught me how accessible art is.

S2: Like Herb and Dorothy, you curate what we look at, Megumi. Do you feel an affinity as a film director to what Herb and Dorothy were doing as curators of art?

MS: Herb and Dorothy are collectors. I did not try to portray them as more than art collectors, but the greatest art collectors! To artists, they might be like curators. To a lot of people, they might be educators. They might be philanthropists, but that was not their intention. They simply collected what they really liked, and it ended up that they were able to share an amazing collection with the whole world.



Herb & Dorothy Vogel examining works of art.

Photo courtesy of Fine Line Media.

S2: Dorothy, do you think that you had an addiction to collecting?

DV: I wouldn't use the word addiction. I think it was just passion. I know we got carried away, sometimes. But we were always able to afford what we bought, so it was controlled. We lived within our means. We did buy art "on time" [meaning they paid over time], but we always paid. We didn't go haywire. It was a controlled passion.

S2: In your experience what is the difference between appreciating the art and owning the art?

DV: My husband had to own it. When we bought art, he always wanted more, more, more. I would have been happy with just one or two things. He was the one who was more of a hoarder. It was just a good feeling, to own it. We didn't feel power in any way. We just felt good.

S2: The gratitude of the artists whose lives and careers you have helped to shape is palpable. Martin Johnson said, "If they took you in, you became one of their children." Is there a particular relationship that stands out for you?

DV: The type of art that we collected was not really readily accepted by the general public. The people who appreciated our collection were other artists. We didn't have friends over. Our friends were the art people. Mainly artists, rather than other collectors, we knew other collectors casually, but we were in a different social category than a lot of them; we socialized with the artists. Even though Edda Renouf is in Paris, she phones about once a month. Bob Barry calls every week. Charlie Clough calls every week. I still remain in touch with a lot of them. Not as many as I used to, because they are all getting older. And they are beginning to, unfortunately, die, like Will Barnet died last year. Stephen Antonakos just died. So it's sad.

S2: In a way, the film is about the end of life and how to create a meaningful transition and legacy.

DV: It's sad, but it's life. As I get older, I'm not socializing as much as I used to. I don't go to openings much, unless it's a close friend. I go to a few museums with friends. I don't really go by myself. It's something I did with someone else. I like going to a museum with someone else.

Herb & Dorothy 50X50 is currently playing in theatres throughout the United. [Details here.](#)

To join the conversation on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) or [watch the official trailer.](#)

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