

# How to Hire an Art Adviser

Whatever you call them, advisers can make or break your collection.

By Margaret Littman

## WHO ARE THEY?

Art adviser. Independent curator. Consultant. Buyer. Aesthetic confidante. The titles are different and have varying degrees of affectation, but the job behind the nomenclature is the same: someone who can help you buy the gem you didn't know existed and prevent you from overspending on the one everybody is talking about.

"Art adviser" is a really general term," says Renée N. Vara, a fine arts specialist with Chubb Collectors Services in New York City, part of the Chubb Group of Insurance Companies. "Basically, an art adviser is someone who is in the trenches, knows the landscape and can help you understand what you are buying."

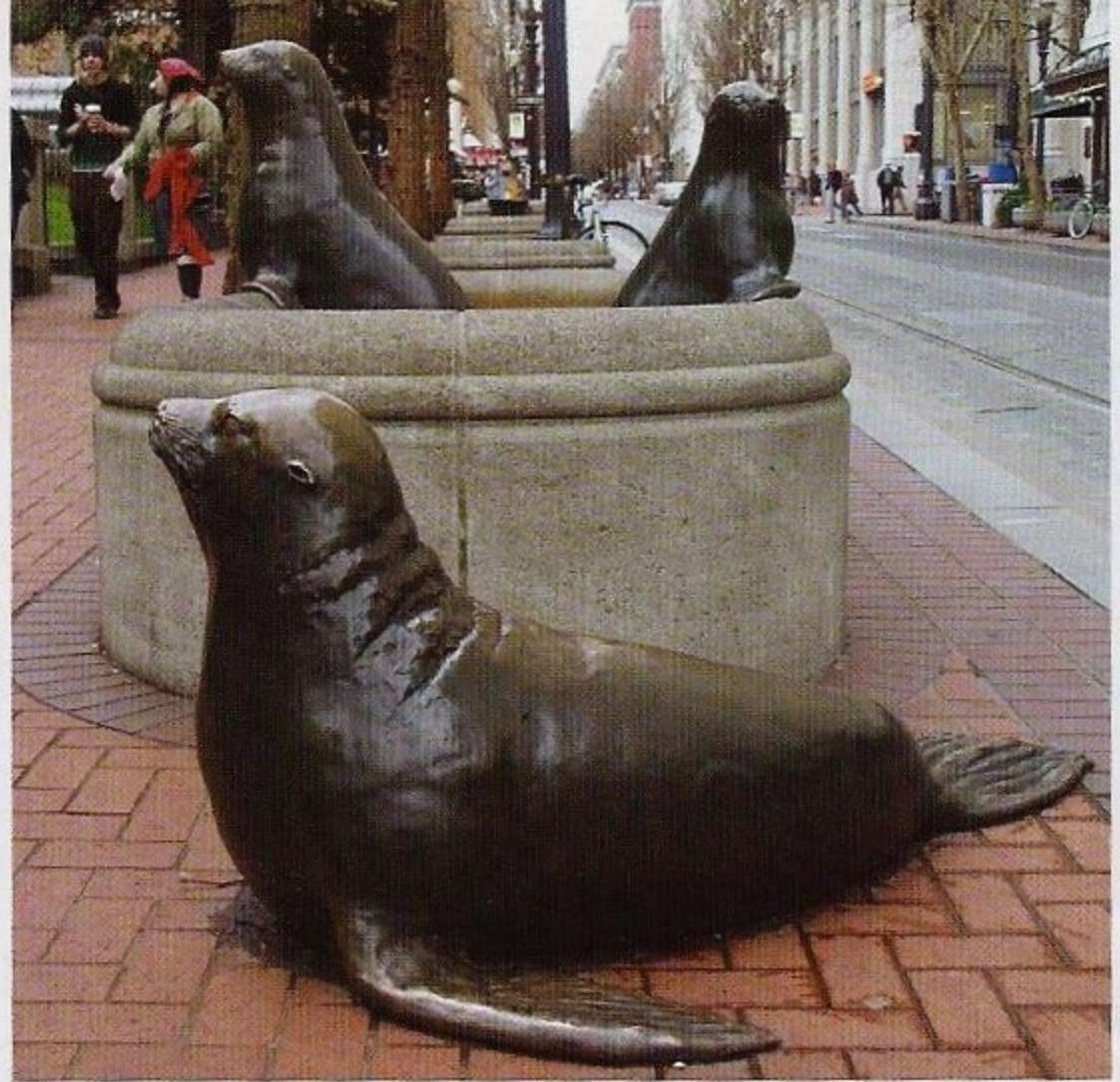
You don't want "someone who took four art history classes and thought it was fun," as Vara says happened during the heady days in the 1990s, or someone plucked out of the phone book. Here's how to find, interview and evaluate an adviser who will

be both your advocate and devil's advocate for the good of your collection.

## WHERE TO START:

### ■ Ask around.

Inquire at museums, galleries and auction houses; ask collectors, professors and associations for names of advisers. You don't need to give a stranger all your personal details, but a few specifics will help narrow the field. If the same name frequently comes up, call him or her, urges Lisa Koenigsberg, director of Programs in the Arts at New York University's School of Continuing and Professional Studies.



### ■ Have a mission.

Are you looking to accumulate art as an investment? To amass *the* premiere collection in a particular specialty? To purchase just one fine piece to adorn your bedroom? All of those collecting goals are valid, but not every adviser can help you accomplish them. The better you understand your objectives, the better you can communicate with a prospective adviser.

### ■ Research.

Cynthia McKay, president and CEO of Le Gourmet Gift Basket Inc., uses advisers for both her Castle Rock, Colorado-based business

*The city of Portland, Ore., relied on adviser Thomas Paul Augustine to acquire Georgia Gerber's animal sculptures (above). Impath Inc. turned to Art Advice to acquire more than 125 vintage photos (below) of Central Park.*

and her Parker, Colorado, Mediterranean-style home. McKay is a former attorney, not an art expert, but before she called her first adviser she read up on the Southwestern art in which she was interested. Having a basic understanding of what makes a piece valuable or flawed helps McKay have more meaningful conversations with advisers.

## IN THE INTERVIEW:

### ■ Evaluate experience.

Advanced degrees in art history, antiques and/or foreign languages can be a helpful measure of an adviser's knowledge, but education also can mean continuing education programs in art advising, appraisal and related topics. A resume or





curriculum vitae should highlight these credentials, but don't stop there. "Education alone can't do it," stresses Thomas Paul Augustine, art director for Lawrence Gallery in Portland, Oregon, and an art adviser with more than 30 years of experience. "You'll get someone good when you add energy and enthusiasm to education. If you look at experience alone, you'll shut out the young genius."

### ■ Find a "legal eagle."

Your adviser should know how to check the provenance of any work and the laws regarding its acquisition. Laws vary with respect to acquiring Old Masters, antiques and pre-Columbian art. A mistake by your adviser could be your nightmare down the road.

### ■ Check the network.

Unless you want to pay the highest prices at auction, hire an adviser with the contacts to know when a collector is retiring or de-accessioning his collection, or what pieces won't be included in a public estate sale. Contacts also can help a new collector gain clout with exclusive dealers.

### ■ Belabor the bottom line.

A savvy adviser should be willing to negotiate payment terms and discuss contracts. Decide if you want to pay a retainer, a percentage of sales or an hourly rate (a costly method if travel times are included). The contract should include

a trial period to allow you to ease into a relationship. A corporate adviser might agree to do one floor, for example, before committing to the rest of the office. It's also fair game to ask if they'll pass on their discounts to you, Koenigsberg says.

### ■ Sweat the small stuff.

If your adviser can't pack and ship your art to you safely, then what's the point of buying it?



*Plateau Indian dolls (above), c. 1880s, acquired by Robert B. Pamplin Jr. The noted collector aggressively investigates all his purchases.*

### ■ Encourage ethics.

Obviously, you want your adviser to be aboveboard, but asking "Are you ethical?" is likely to get a politician's answer. Robert B. Pamplin Jr., a Portland, Oregon, collector of American Indian and Chinese artifacts, says this is an even more difficult task than finding an ethical real estate agent or lawyer. "Anything with the nature of art opens itself to the opportunity for misjudgment,

because it is based on what one sees in something." Pamplin relies on recommendations of other trusted sources, such as finding Chinese antiques experts by asking the U.S. Department of Customs, who uses them for such evaluations.

### ■ Assess compatibility.

Even when the adviser is building a corporate collection, rather than an individual one, compatibility matters, according to Susan E.

"If I show someone a piece and the client says, 'My kid could have done that,' then I say, 'That's not for you then,' and move on," Greenberg says.

### ■ Embrace serendipity.

"A lot of times people fall into things. I've lucked out on a lot of wonderful people," says Pamplin. "If you try to make this too difficult, you can miss out on that." Trust your instincts. □

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

■ **American Society of Appraisers**, 555 Herndon Pkwy., Ste. 125, Herndon, VA 20170. (703) 478-2228. [www.appraisers.org](http://www.appraisers.org).

■ **Appraisers Association of America Inc.**, 386 Park Ave. S., Ste. 2000, New York, NY 10016. (212) 889-5404. [www.appraisersassoc.org](http://www.appraisersassoc.org).

■ **Architectural Arts Co.**, 6410 Dykes Way, Dallas, TX 75230. (972) 392-2121.

■ **Art Advice Corporate Art Consultants**, 200 E. 33rd St., New York, NY 10016. (212) 683-5611.

■ **Chubb Collectors Services**, 55 Water St., New York, NY 10041. (877) 602-4822. [www.chubbcollectors.com](http://www.chubbcollectors.com).

■ **Lawrence Gallery**, 903 N.W. David St., Portland, OR 97209. (503) 228-1776. [www.lawrencegallery.net](http://www.lawrencegallery.net).

■ **Programs in the Arts, New York University**, 10 Astor Pl., Room 502-D, New York, NY 10003. (212) 998-7137. [www.scps.nyu.edu](http://www.scps.nyu.edu).

Greenberg, president of Art Advice Corporate Art Consultants in New York City. "You know almost instantly if you are going to click." You're looking for someone whose aesthetic taste meshes with your vision, of course, but also someone whose sense of humor and penchant for punctuality is a good fit with your own. Don't think twice about running the other way if an adviser is condescending.