

# Partners

Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo have welcomed many friends to their waterfront home in Marblehead, Massachusetts people who had no idea that the lovely paintings in every room are among the finest in the world. Now that their collection is on view at PEM, their friends, and the rest of us, can see why. Rose-Marie, who is Flemish, and Eijk, who is Dutch, collect only the finest works by the finest painters from their homelands. Here, they talk about their partnership in art.

## WHAT TYPE OF RECEPTION DID YOU ANTICIPATE FOR YOUR EXHIBITION AT PEM?

R-M: I was nervous about it. Forty-four paintings from the collection were just at the Mauritshuis in The Hague. The Dutch know this art like they know themselves. I didn't know how the American public would react. But during the opening events, the rooms were abuzz. Everybody was in a wonderful, festive mood. People came and told us how beautiful they thought it was. They went out of their way to come over and shake hands and thank us, and thank us again. It was amazing.

## YOU'VE BEEN PARTNERS IN COLLECTING FOR 20 YEARS. WHAT'S THE DIVISION OF LABOR?

R-M: We look together, and when we have agreed that a particular painting would fit in the collection, then Eijk does all the negotiating. He's the dealmaker. If we are lucky enough to be successful, then it's my job to catalog it, insure it, ship it properly. I also arrange the loans to other museums. I keep the archives. And I find the place where we hang it. I'm the decorator.

E: I have input where we hang paintings, but that's not really my thing. I like the search and the negotiations. Ultimately, negotiations are easy. You pay too much, and then you get it!

R-M: We have fun doing the research together, finding artists' other works and how they compare to what we're trying to

acquire. Our adviser, Frits Duparc, for example, will call and say, "Look in the xyz book on page such and such and you will find a painting that compares." That's fun, when the books are all over the dining room table.

## IS THERE A ROMANCE TO COLLECTING AS A COUPLE?

R-M: It's a partnership. Where other couples maybe watch television together, the two of us pore over art books, or he'll read something to me, or I'll do the same. It's fun together. Going to different museums all over the world is great. When we're together with friends, we spend a lot of the time talking about art. Even if we're talking about something else, we quite often fall back to talking about a particular painting. Yesterday, Frits started talking about a collection in Sweden. It came out of the blue.

## HOW DO YOU BECOME FAMILIAR WITH A PAINTING?

E: I hang transparencies up on the windows to really soak up the image, the composition. Sometimes, if you have an image you're not sure about, after several weeks it dies on you. You don't see it anymore. If it's a good image, it grows. It keeps attracting your attention. If I have a chance to review an image that long, I like to see that happen. If it doesn't, we'll pass on it. We don't have to have it.

## HOW QUICKLY CAN YOU MAKE A DECISION?

E: We had a day to decide about the Heda (*Still Life with*



*Still Life with Roses in a Glass Vase (detail), ca. 1619, Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder. On view through June 19, 2011, in Golden: Dutch and Flemish Masterworks from the Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo Collection.*

*Glasses and Tobacco*). The dealer called to say he bought it in Italy and was willing to hop on a plane and bring it straight to us. We made a deal right here, and then he left. It came straight out of a castle and went to nobody else.

## WHAT'S THE STORY BEHIND *STILL LIFE WITH ROSES IN A VASE*?

E: The dealer had it for more than a year and I knew Rose-Marie really loved that painting. We were in London for the December sales and it was close to her 50th birthday. I called the gallery in advance and told them to put a big red dot on the painting and tell Rose-Marie it was sold.

R-M: I was disappointed. The dealer said he had sold it the day before. I thought, oh, if I'd only been here two days ago



*Still Life with Glasses and Tobacco* (detail), 1633. Willem Claesz Heda. The Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo Collection.

we might have got it. The next day we were invited to his home for lunch. His little daughter, then 5, came over to me with a paper bag, and said, "Mummy and I have this present for you." She handed me a bag with the painting inside. I thought it was a copy. A prank. It was a shock.

E: This is one of only six where Ambrosius Bosschaert did a still life with flowers in a niche where you can see through, see outside. Most times, artists would have a black background. His most beautiful one is in the Mauritshuis. It has a landscape in the background. But we couldn't get it. Frits, who was director there, wouldn't let it go. (Frits added: That's the masterpiece by Bosschaert.)

#### WHEN DID YOU GET YOUR LATEST ACQUISITION?

E: A few weeks ago. It's by Adriaen van de Venne, of a man in front of a mirror, doing his hair. An allegory of vanity, particu-

larly male vanity. It's done *en brunaille*, which means done entirely in shades of brown. It's an artist who was famous for not only his skills but also his ability to impart humor and sarcasm in his paintings. He did a lot of politically motivated caricatures, usually mocking someone. He was the Zed of his day.

#### WHAT IS YOUR DREAM ACQUISITION?

E: A Joachim Wtewael. He was a mannerist painter from Utrecht of which we have no examples in our collection. It's on copper. A beautiful scene with Adam and Eve at the moment Eve is persuaded to take the apple. I would love to have had that. I was very disappointed it got away.

R-M: We're dreaming about another painting right now, but the dealer won't let it go for the money.

E: And there's a third we're thinking about. In a way it's good that you can't get them all. We've long since run out of space.

#### THIS IS THE FIRST TIME YOUR COLLECTION HAS BEEN SHOWN ALL TOGETHER?

R-M: Yes. It is very exciting. When you see everything in the galleries, it goes on and on and on. You think, wow, that's a lot of paintings. But when it's in your house, it's different. It's just in your house. The three portraits of women, the tronies, by Jacob Backer, Jan Lievens and Salomon de Bray, really stand out in that lighting in the gallery. They hang beautifully together.

#### HOW DOES YOUR COLLECTION FIT WITH PEM?

E: It does because of the museum's collection of Chinese export art, the porcelain. That connects up with the Dutch experience of the 17th century.

R-M: We wanted to share our collection there so many people could see it.

#### DO YOU EVER LEARN NEW THINGS ABOUT YOUR PAINTINGS?

R-M: That happens regularly. In The Hague, a Spanish journalist asked us if we knew what flag was shown hanging in the church in *Interior of the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam*, by Emanuel de Witte. She told us it was a Spanish flag, which of course made sense in the 17th century, with Spanish involvement in the Netherlands. But we had never realized that.

E: In the Koedijk, the *Barber-Surgeon*, there's a brush that I never noticed had bristles on both ends. I don't know how a barber surgeon would use this brush but there must be a reason. I never examined it close enough to notice. In Maria Schalken's *The Artist at Work in Her Studio*, we couldn't quite figure out what the small white thing is on the easel shelf. Now we see it's like a Q-tip. It would be put on the end of the painter's stick they put against the surface to steady their hand, so it wouldn't scratch. And there was a question about this, a peg for the easel, or is it something else? We finally decided it's a compass. Another question Frits and I will not agree on yet, is what is this shelf above? He thinks it's to prevent dust from falling on the wet surface. And I think it's not about dust, it's about lighting. You turn it to prevent the sun from hitting the surface while you're working on it. If you put these questions out there, more people will start thinking about them.

## DID YOU GROW UP AROUND ART?

E: In a way. I went to school in Amsterdam so we were near museums. From when I was very little, we'd walk with the class to the Rijksmuseum, and once every few months be given a lecture. There's also one painting in the collection that came from my grandfather. Claes Moeyaert's *Esau Selling His Birthright to Jacob*. It hung in the dining room in Amsterdam, behind me, so I never got to see much of it. My younger brother inherited it but decided he didn't like it. He finally called me to take it off his hands, and I had it cleaned. Over the years it had developed layers of soot. Now you see these pleats in the tablecloth and you see this basket Moeyaert painted over. The same with this coat. He had it higher, closer to the face, but decided to change that. You see the process. It's great fun. We also had a copy of Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* hanging in our house. But I think the Mauritshuis had the copy (laughs) and we had the real thing.

R-M: I grew up on a small farm and went to a good school that took us around to museums in Antwerp. I remember the day I was with my class and our teacher was going out of her way pointing out all the farm figures in a painting by David Teniers. His *Temptation of Saint Anthony* is in our collection.

## WAS IT AN ADJUSTMENT TO LIVE WITH THIS CALIBER AND VOLUME OF ART?

R-M: It's like flower arrangements or furniture. It's part of our life now.

## HOW HAS YOUR LIFE CHANGED SINCE YOUR COLLECTION HAS BEEN AVAILABLE TO THE PUBLIC?

R-M: We've always wanted to be very anonymous. Up until now, people didn't know what we had. Even people we've had in the house didn't know what we had hanging on the walls, or that it was important enough to be shown in a museum. It's all new to friends who have known us for years. I miss that anonymity a little bit. Yesterday at the hairdresser, people said, ah you're the one with the paintings.

## IS THERE A PAINTING IN EVERY ROOM?

R-M: Yes. Even above the doors. The Heda (*Still Life with Glasses and Tobacco*) is in the kitchen above a Dutch cabinet. It's decorative as well as part of the collection. The dining room had all the marine paintings. It all looks really good.

## HOW DO YOU COPE WITH THE BARE WALLS NOW?

R-M: I don't think I could stand living like this very long. If the house wasn't going to be renovated I'd run out and buy posters.

## IS THERE EVER A LULL?

In unison: Never. Never.

E: We do not believe in lulls.

Interview conducted by Lisa Kosan, PEM director of editorial and design.



Barber-Surgeon Tending a Peasant's Foot, ca. 1649-50, Isaack Koedijk. The Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo Collection.