

The Art of Acquiring: A Portrait of Etta and Claribel Cone

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In this century, galleries and museums have seen a marked rise in the appreciation of their role, as art lovers better recognize curators' skill in finding vibrant works, but there is still one neglected component in an artwork's journey from vision to opening night: The collector.

Although a few collectors are remembered, most are largely forgotten in writings on art history, with space given to more luminous dealers or critics instead. Gabriel, a journalist who writes on arts topics, rights this injustice in a minor but crucial way by resurrecting the memory of Etta and Claribel Cone, two independently wealthy Jewish sisters from Baltimore who acquired one of the most important collections of modern French painting in the world.

With sparkling prose, Gabriel traces the lives of the Victorian pair, from their privileged upbringing to the rise of their passion in collecting Picasso, Cezanne, Renoir, Degas and Gaughin. Most striking is Etta's contribution to the life of Matisse, whose work she collected before anyone else even took him seriously, adorning her apartment's walls with his (at the time) scandalous nudes. Although neither sister married, and were considered by many of their circle to be rather uptight spinsters in dress and behavior, they collected with daring, indifferent to the shock of their contemporaries over the sensuality in the works they admired. When they died, the entire collection was given to the Baltimore Museum of Art, and this year marks the fiftieth anniversary of that bequest.

More than just a catalog of the sisters' collection, the book is also a lively and fascinating look into the lives of Victorian women and the constraints they had to overcome to achieve their desires. For anyone with an interest in art history, or good storytelling, Gabriel's biography proves an excellent acquisition.

ELIZABETH MILLARD (July / August 1999)

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