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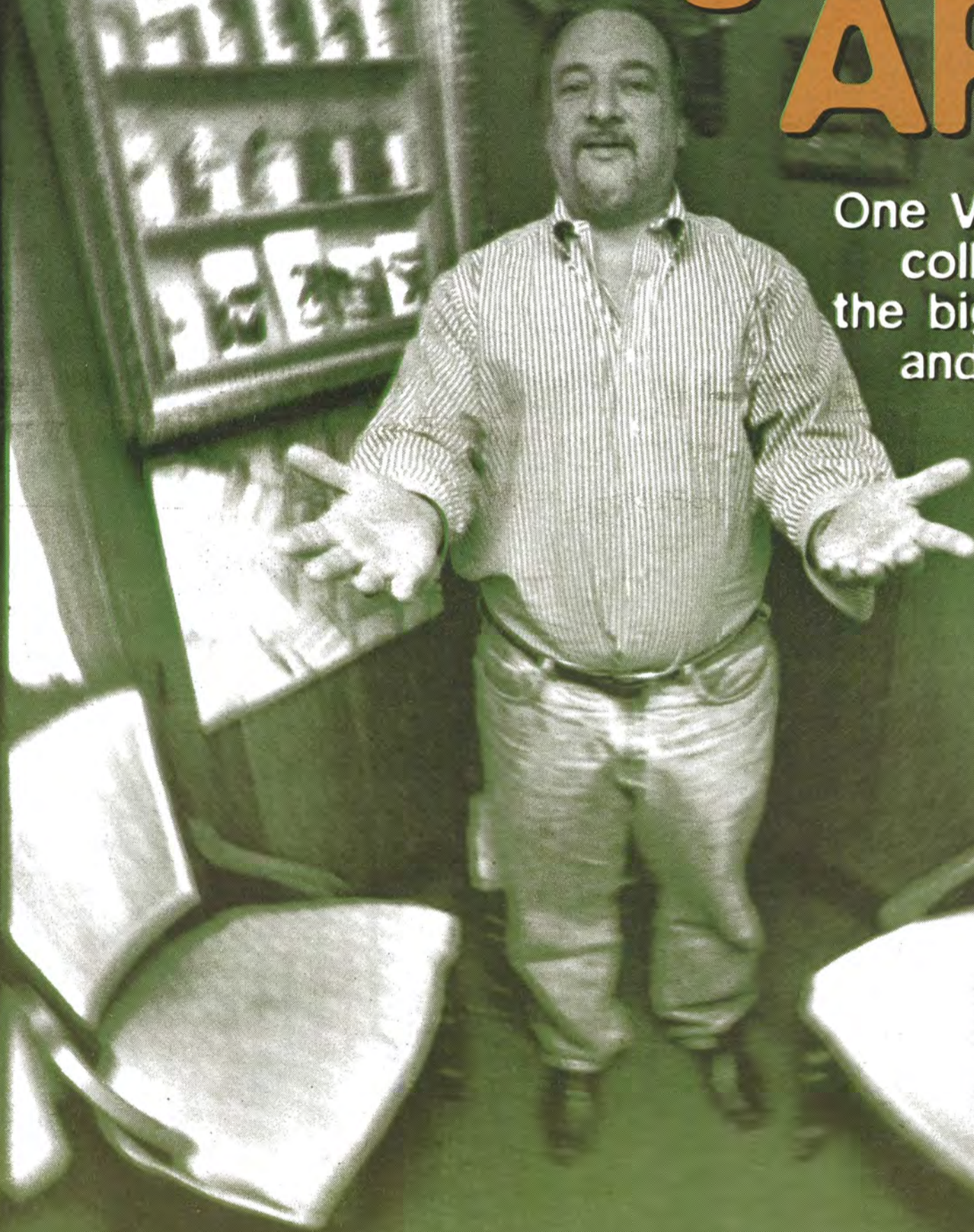
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SEVEN DAYS

got ART?

One Vermont
collector sees
the big picture —
and buys it, too

BY PAMELA
POLSTON
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Mark Waskow

got ART?

**One Vermont
collector sees the
big picture —
and buys it, too**

BY PAMELA POLSTON

You could say it all started with the mole crab. When Mark Waskow, then age five, found a mysterious critter in the Pelham Bay near his Bronx home, he did what any budding scientist would do: He took it to the American Museum of Natural History for identification.

Everyone knew it was a crab, but the museum staff didn't know what species it belonged to, Waskow says. Finally he found himself in the fifth-floor office of an eightysomething entomologist — the kind of classic field researcher who knew everything, Waskow recalls. The old man provided a species name, but was less intrigued by the creature than by the curious lad.

"He was so taken by my interest and enthusiasm that he invited me back and told me to talk to the department of education," Waskow says with typical candor. "They were starting weekend workshops for young people. At the age of seven I started teaching classes to people my age and a little older." By the time he was a teen, he had his own office at the museum.

The scenario signaled at least three things about Waskow: his voracious desire for knowledge, his unflagging, enterprising pursuit of a goal and his need to categorize. But while his boyish interest in creepy crawly things and classification systems augured his eventual studies in entomology and invertebrate zoology, it wasn't necessarily a clue that Mark Waskow would, almost four decades later, become the biggest art collector in Burlington, Vermont.

Born with the collector gene, Waskow began amassing objects as a child, starting with tokens and bottles and moving on to art glass, Statue of Liberty and World's Fair memorabilia and just about anything

insect-related. But the attraction to visual art began just a couple of years ago, long after Waskow had abandoned a scheduled academic career for a far more lucrative one in insurance. The Waskow Group, headquartered in Burlington, specializes in corporate investment strategies for tax planning and employee benefits. "In the early to mid-'90s I was empire-building," Waskow says. "Now my business exists to support my art collecting."

Forty-three-year-old Waskow may be known for suit-and-tie financial transactions in some quarters, but he's got a growing rep among artists, gallery owners and other collectors as a man with a plan. Make that a *vision*. And that's not just to create the largest personal collection of artwork in the area and hopefully inspire other potential collectors to do the same. Waskow also intends to archive the contemporary history of Vermont's visual art scene, and to "put Vermont on the map as an art destination."

It's a tall order, but someone's got to do it. And half an hour with the indefatigable, fast-talking collector — still child-like in his enthusiasm — convinces you that if anyone could achieve all three of those goals, it's him. In less than two years, Waskow's collection of artwork, mostly by Vermont emerging artists, already numbers in the hundreds — 230 pieces in the gallery, about 140 at home, and a few hundred more unframed works in a massive, 10-drawer flat file. And that was last week's estimate. When Waskow likes an artist's work, he tends to buy in multiples, causing his collection to grow by leaps and bounds, and providing quite a pleasant windfall for the artist. "When you buy 50 works in a week," he says, "that's *collecting*."

The only thing Waskow is reluctant to talk about is what all this art is worth, though after some prodding, he acknowledges it may be approaching half a million

dollars. "I would steer away from a monetary evaluation," he says. "None of this is about money; it's about being surrounded by what you like, about pleasure and doing what you want to do." Waskow also doesn't want to give the impression that only the wealthy can buy art.

Collecting is also about helping others, he adds, and, given his predilection for emerging artists, he's actually able to help out quite a bit: Their work simply doesn't cost that much yet, and the relative bar-

fortunate enough to have a job that pays me to be in the art scene; Mark's buying his way into it, as it were." Spengemann admits that he questioned Waskow's collecting in the beginning — wondering whether it was more about the act of collecting than about the actual art. He's subsequently changed his mind.

"Mark speaks eloquently about Vermont artists; he knows their backgrounds," Spengemann notes with obvious admiration. "He talks with conviction

"If there were more Mark Waskows, arts organizations wouldn't need to exist."

— Pascal Spengemann,
Firehouse Gallery

gains are not lost on Waskow.

Furthermore, "people remember you when you've helped them out early in their careers," he notes. Though Waskow admits he's spent up to 10 grand on a single piece, most of the collection consists of smaller works by still-unknowns — in the bigger picture, anyway. For the most part, he's averse to dropping big bucks on single works — and name-brand artists — because "I don't want to commit that much resource base to one thing. I don't really buy into the 'value' system created by the gallery world," Waskow adds. "I tend to think an artist's work is best when they're emerging — they're at their most creative and fresh."

That hasn't prevented him from becoming a familiar and welcome face at local art galleries, however, around exhibits of more established artists. "In this arts scene in particular it's been great having someone who gets art that's abstract, cutting-edge, not just your typical pretty scene," remarks Stephen Doll, curator of the Doll-Anstadt Gallery. "It's important that a community has someone who fills the role of buying it. It's very exciting for artists to have someone like that around, because they can go outside the boundaries, stretch a little bit and be compensated."

Sculptor Leslie Fry agrees; she calls Waskow's appetite for acquiring art — including several pieces of her own — "voracious." And she means that in a good way. "I hope Mark's enthusiasm for buying and collecting art in Vermont inspires others to do the same," she says, "and at the very least takes away any scary sacredness about appreciating art and taking it home."

But money isn't all that matters to the artists, either, Waskow says. He believes simply paying attention and getting to know artists and their work provides "psychic income" that's just as valuable as the financial boost. "I spend a lot of time with the artists and give them encouragement," he says. "The feedback provided by a collector can be important because it can help them to crystallize their thinking as they develop." Of course, the pleasure goes both ways: Waskow acknowledges that artists are a most interesting, creative species. "Artists spend more time asking questions and working them out in their lives. They also have a lot of energy, and I respond to that energy," he says. "I love watching the developmental process of a young artist."

"Mark and I have a lot in common," posits Pascal Spengemann, curator of Burlington's Firehouse Center for the Visual Arts. "We're both art groupies. I'm

about what he likes. He's single-minded and efficient — that's not a term you usually associate with collecting. And he goes to three times as many openings as I do." He speculates that Waskow is "demystifying" the process of collecting. And certainly his "psychic" input often includes practical advice about distribution and marketing — something right-brain types often find overwhelming.

"He doesn't really believe in arts organizations; he wants to support artists directly," observes Spengemann. "He's like patrons the way they used to be. If there were more Mark Waskows, arts organizations wouldn't need to exist."

Waskow's own "gallery" is a rented office space in downtown Burlington that is already bursting with two- and three-dimensional works on the walls, displayed on antique tables or in glass-covered cases. It also includes a number of his earlier obsessions, such as bug artifacts, superhero figures and pop-culture doodads. He will show the works by appointment, but not to other buyers. "I don't collect to resell," Waskow says adamantly. "I just like to be surrounded by art."

He also loves to give the tour, complete with as much as a visitor wants to know about each artist. Waskow reveals what he calls his "near-photographic memory" as he rattles off the artists' names, histories and influences and titles of the works — just recalling their names at this point would be an achievement. The annotations along the way are telling:

"I love his dark, gothic sensibilities," he says of New York-based Vermonter Eric Kidhardt. "I have his very first painting he ever did."

Calling New Hampshire assemblage artist Greg Brower "insanely brilliant," Waskow notes his good sense of composition. Brower uses "discarded and post-industrial materials," he notes approvingly. "A lot are personal, dealing with topics he's going through in his life."

"It's strong work," he says of Burlington abstract painter Tom Lawson. "A lot of artists can't make the leap from small to large, whereas Tom's work holds together well. He has a lot of obvious influences from the masters — Picasso, Miro, Kandinsky — but he's put his own stamp on it."

It's impossible to pin Waskow down to a favorite among all his works; that's like asking him to pick the child he loves best. But he's liberal with compliments to the

artists and boasts with near-paternal pride about their achievements. Waskow is clearly delighted with his discoveries.

The collection also points to another — and, perhaps, previously unknown — talent of his own: packaging artwork. "I believe the presentation of a piece is as important aesthetically as the piece itself," Waskow says. "A lot of artists don't take the time to properly frame their work, but it really improves the work and makes it more sellable." While he's happy if an artist has made the effort, "I happen to have a knack for framing," he states matter-of-factly.

Jennifer Koch can vouch for that. Proprietor of Frames for You and Mona Lisa Too in Burlington, Koch has been blessed with all Waskow's business. "He goes in phases, but I always have something going," she attests. "His requests are not normal, either, not run of the mill." It's not uncommon for Waskow to have an idea for a frame that doesn't really exist, Koch says, "and my challenge is to create it. It's been fun for me because I am so intrigued with collections. He gets so excited and enthusiastic about everything he buys."

With his first gallery space at capacity, Waskow has just rented another one on the next floor up. His Burlington apartment is quite full already, and his business office has long been crammed with his collections of insurance memorabilia and other historic items. "This is a good indication of how focused I am when I'm into something," he says.

Waskow's focus, and intensity, were never in question. During his stint at the Natural History Museum, he was exposed not only to the vast family of invertebrates but also to New York's rich tapestry of visual arts. His mother had been a commercial artist and took her only son frequently to galleries and museums. Waskow says he inherited none of his contractor father's skills as a "high-level handy man" — but it appears some of that industry and resourcefulness rubbed off.

Waskow went to Cornell University at age 16, on a full scholarship, and spent summers on research in the White Mountains — his introduction to New England. He finished college at 19, with a degree in entomology and invertebrate zoology, but it was a close call: Waskow fell ill with a rare form of pneumonia just before graduation — and before his black-belt exam in Tae Kwon Do. "I'm the only person who has survived it," Waskow says of the adenovirus 21. "When I did survive, people thought I wouldn't be able to walk uphill. Of course, I went back to Tae Kwon Do. When people tell me I can't do something, I go do it better."

Circumstances conspired to deter Waskow from a life of studying bugs, however. For one thing, his father had passed away during his first year at college, and the death revealed that his family had no life insurance and little savings. Then there were Waskow's hospital expenses. A large phone bill was the last straw. About this time Waskow saw an ad that seemed to offer a way out. "It said, 'Stop! Ask yourself what you'll be doing in five years,'" he recalls. "The ad was about insurance, and I had this problem that had to do with lack of insurance and planning."

Waskow quickly figured out that, even at the top of his field, he would make about \$40,000 a year, and it would take years to get there. "So I started what proved to be a marvelous career in life insurance," he says. "From 1979 to 1985 I did it. By the end of '81 I was the top salesman for that company internationally. By the end of '82 I was top district manager. By the end of '85 I was completely burnt out."

That's when Waskow decided to go independent; after an initial affiliation with National Life, he went on his own in 1987. The career change also brought him to Vermont. Throughout these years, Waskow collected, and his preferences evolved. "In the early '80s I sold about 40,000 bottles and used the proceeds to get about 800 to 900 really good bottles. Now I'm more interested in Vermont bottles and glass perfume bottles," he says.

And though Waskow claims he's cutting down on his non-art collecting, "cutting down" is a relative term. As in, "I've reduced my World's Fair memorabilia to only 30 or 40 categories. I used to buy hundreds of Statue of Liberty items a year; now it's only 50 to 60 a year. Tastes change and get more sophisticated — or at least different," he observes. "I'm paring down as my vision gets tighter and more refined."

Waskow says his 11-year-old son Alexander has promised to continue the Statue of Liberty collection, though right now he's more interested in Pokémon, and



ONE-MAN SHOW Waskow at his gallery

has already been-there-done-that with Star Wars and Power Rangers. So far, four-year-old Destiny has not exhibited the collecting gene. "But she can dance," Waskow exclaims — the proud papa is reportedly no slouch on the dance floor himself.

Divorced nearly three years ago, Waskow has his kids every Wednesday and every other weekend. "When I'm with them I feel like the luckiest man in the world," he gushes. And whether or not they yet share his latest passion, their room at Dad's house is filled with art.

One thing Waskow did pare down was his waistline: During his "empire-building" years he had ballooned to 276 pounds — on a 5'9" frame. But along with learning about art, Waskow seems to have acquired a new zeal for self-improvement — this from a man who already reads eight to 10 books weekly, and needs

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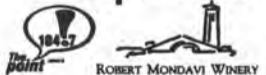
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next to no sleep. He's cooled it with the martial arts, but Waskow hired a personal trainer, dropped the unhealthy poundage and, with typical overachievement, works out four to six times a week — with plans to enter a bodybuilding competition. It's just as well; he's going to need all the strength he can get to transform Vermont — better known for cows than contemporary art — into an "arts destination."

**"When you buy 50 works in a week, that's collecting."
— Mark Waskow**

"People don't come to Vermont with the expectation of a cultural experience," Waskow laments. He'd like to change that. Artist Michael Oatman, a Vermonter who now teaches at RPI in Troy and the University at Albany, says that Waskow "is interested in creating this corridor between Vermont and New York and parts in between — I'm taking him to three or four studios around here of artists I think are good. In a strange way," Oatman continues, "it seems like Mark is creating the infrastructure" for an arts market in Vermont.

In addition to his art visits in the Green Mountains, Waskow makes the round of galleries at least once a month in New York City, as well as frequent trips to other galleries and studios around New England. It was Burlington art dealer and former gallery owner Pat Parsons who, early on, encouraged Waskow to go to New York to inform his taste. "I'm not trying to be elitist about New York, he just has to hone his eye," she says, "so when he's judging other pieces he'll have a set of standards to go by."

Parsons believes Waskow "really wants to focus on Vermont and basically become a dealer on some level, or a middle-man. He wants to get Vermont out there, which is fabulous, but it's a tough world. No one is going to say, 'Oh, a great Vermont artist,' but just 'Oh, a great artist.'"

For his part, Waskow says, his trips to New York have only confirmed for him that "Vermont artists stack up well" and deserve to be marketed and collected. "My secret goal," he confides, "is to create one big art and antiques arcade out of Church Street."

"One of the things that makes Mark so unusual is to have that kind of collector in this community," says Janie Cohen, curator and assistant director of the Fleming Museum. "In smaller markets people tend to do smaller collections, and to focus

on one thing. I feel like he's single-handedly supporting the arts community here."

Waskow knows it takes more than one, and he believes the others are already appearing. "My theory is you can link the rise in contemporary visual arts in Vermont with the rise of exhibition space," he says. He

applauds the near-simultaneous emergence of Firehouse, Doll-Anstadt and the Rhombus Gallery — of which he's the board chair — the Men's Room Artspace and other exhibition venues around Burlington, as well as the South End Art Hop and the First Friday Art Trolley, as events that help make art more of a "scene."

And he's keeping track of it all: Waskow's mania for collecting includes a growing archive of Vermont's contemporary visual arts history. He saves, for instance, the art listings and reviews from this paper every week, along with any other article about art he can find. He has tracked down past show announcements from galleries around the state and is now working on reassembling the art history of the '80s, before galleries like Passepartout in Winooski and Webb & Parsons in Burlington disappeared, leaving a brief lull in exhibition activity.

"If I have my way, Vermont will become an art destination, then they'll ask, 'So how did this start?'" Waskow speculates. "Or someone will become famous and they'll ask about their background. And no one will know, so I'm trying to create a central repository of all the institutions, exhibit cards and reviews."

"For me that's one of the most novel aspects of what he's doing," Oatman says of Waskow's archives. "Mark is also unusual in that he wants to know everything about the artist. He has an incredible visual memory — he's a detail guy. It's an interesting connection to his background as an invertebrate zoologist — he's got a genealogy of the works in his collection."

"Mark sees this as a particularly vibrant time in the visual arts in Vermont," comments Marc Awodey, an artist, poet and art critic for *Seven Days*. "By seeing this with such an innocent eye he is also making it happen. He introduces many artists to others whom they've never heard of, and by his collecting and studio visits he is pollinating the garden like a bee among flowers. He'd like that bug analogy." ⑦