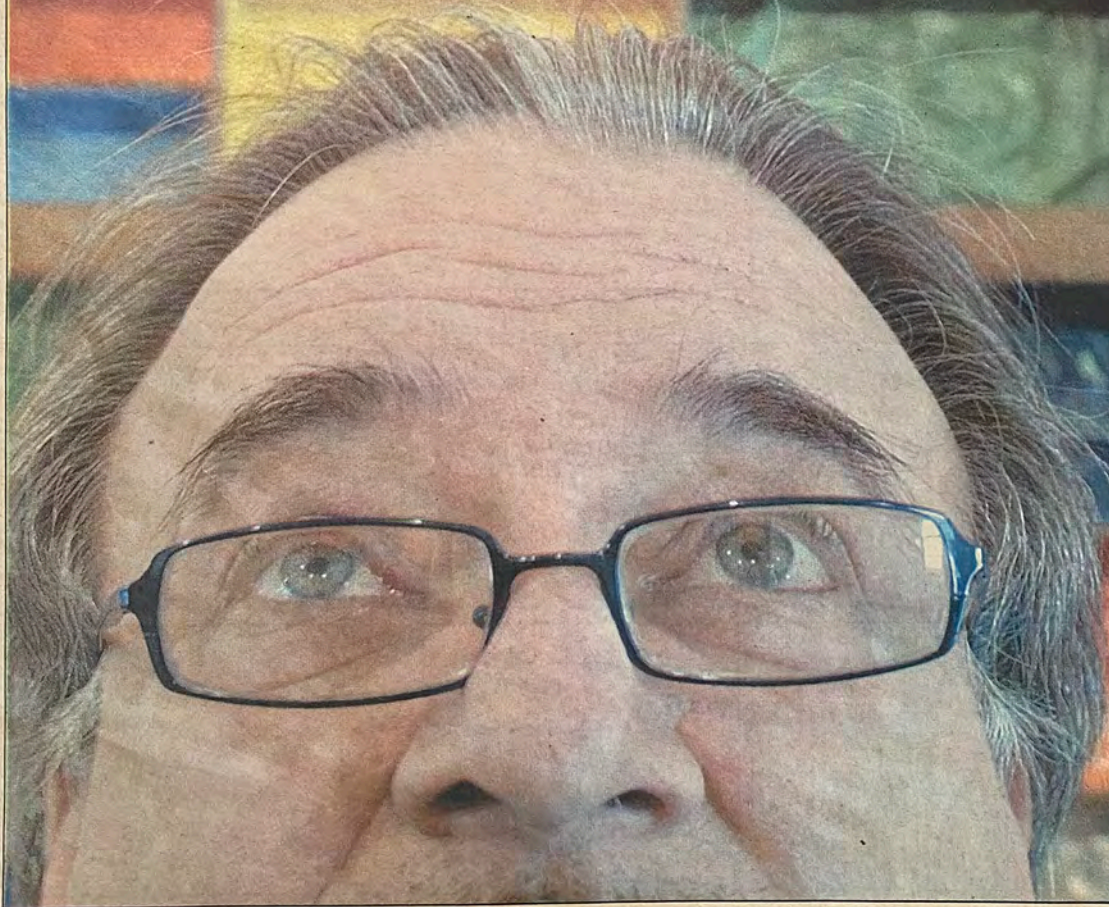


Vermont Sunday Magazine

# The artful collector

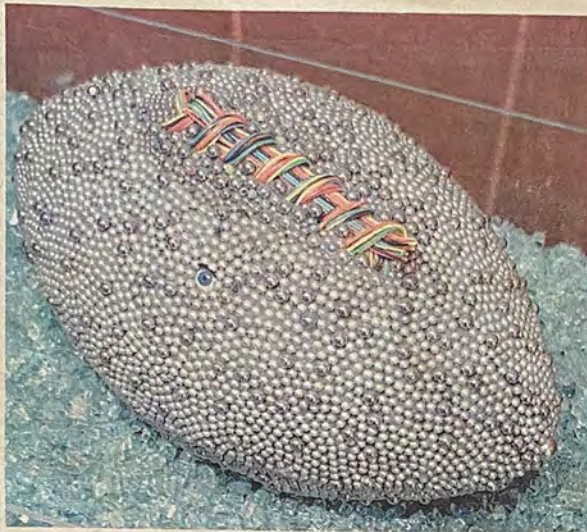
Mark Waskow has thousands  
of artworks and one big dream

BY ANNE GALLOWAY



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PHOTOS BY JEB WALLACE-BRODEUR

A sample of some of the objects in Mark Waskow's extensive collection.

# The artful collector

Mark Waskow has thousands of artworks and one big dream of a museum



Art collector Mark Waskow stands in one of the many rooms that house his thousands of artworks in northern Vermont.

PHOTO BY JEB WALLACE-BRODEUR



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Art benefactors can be viewed as esoteric types with bottomless pockets, super-rich individuals who found museums or create singular collections that reflect their impeccable taste. The Rockefeller and Guggenheim families come to mind.

For wealthy patrons of the arts who amass works worthy of display at, say, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, money would appear to be no object.

It's safe to say that art collector Mark Waskow doesn't fall into such a stereotype. He's no blueblood investing millions in the art market. Rather, he's a self-made man of upper middle class means who has single-mindedly plowed much of his discretionary income into works by little-known, often obscure artists.

In just eight years, Waskow, who lives in Barre, has become one of the most important art benefactors in Vermont. He has built one of the largest private collections of artworks in the state, a total of 8,000 pieces, much of it produced by Vermonters. Waskow, who is constantly on the lookout to buy more, says he plans to continue to buy 500 to 1,000 artworks a year.

And he needs a place to put it all. Waskow houses his collection in four locations in northern Vermont (he won't divulge where for security reasons), and he wants to bring it all into one, permanent, 30,000-square-foot warehouse or institutional space, preferably in Barre.

His museum, which now exists only in his visionary imagination, would be called The Waskowmum. He is raising money through a friend's nonprofit entity to conduct an initial feasibility study; he says the whole project could take five to eight years to complete. If he is successful, The Waskowmum would be the largest institution that exclusively collects contemporary art in northern New England.

Waskow, 49, is energetic and fast-talking, and is neither flashy nor pretentious. He wears casual clothes, polar fleece vests, jeans. His hair is cropped short; he sports a well-

trimmed goatee that is turning a slate gray. Of medium height and slightly burly, Waskow blends in well and might easily be taken for your average science professor or computer whiz.

But ask Waskow why he wants to go to all this trouble, and he'll give you an answer worthy of any highbrow, high-profile collector: for posterity. He says he is holding his collection of art in trust for the public. He wants people to experience the provocative power of contemporary art — the way it forces viewers to question assumptions about life and the nature of art itself.

"I feel like I'm the guardian for this material until it goes into the public domain," Waskow says.

And though he has a small collection of what he calls "anthropomorphic" works on display at one location for an occasional public viewing, it pains him that he can't now display his entire collection in a single venue. He first needs The Waskowmum.



I went to one of his art "storage" sites recently to learn about his collection, and I felt a bit overwhelmed by the sheer number of pieces he had displayed in a rabbit warren of rooms. Waskow has built additional interior walls to create more space for his artworks. In salon style, he presents a floor-to-ceiling arrangement of paintings, collages, sculptures, drawings and mixed-media works. He collects artists'

books, and in one room alone there are hundreds of drawings. Other artwork is piled along the floor, leaning against the walls; more sculptures and ceramics are placed everywhere on small tables and plinths. In

nothing I could do to quite prepare you for this."

And there wasn't. I was afraid to take off my wool coat for fear of knocking something over (and for the record, klutz that I am, at one point I almost did send a sculpture flying).

Everywhere I looked there was something new to see: paintings by Ethan Azarian, Marc Awodey, David Powell, Catherine Hall, Dug Nap; drawings by Ed Koren; mixed media sculptures by Carleen Zimbalatti, Greg Brower, Dave Huber, Axel Stohlberg and Jen Koch.

Waskow's tour was punctuated by his enthusiastic descriptions of how he purchased each piece, and by his descriptions of the lives and works of the artists.

In addition to the artwork, we encountered some of his other collectibles, such as cereal boxes featuring action figures, antique insecticide cans housed in a Victorian glass case, a large cardboard advertisement featuring a Power Ranger figure.

We ended up lingering for a while in the bathroom, which features an early absurdist painting by Ethan Azarian called "Cow Refugees." Waskow is especially fond of this painting. It features long-horned cows and miniature houses arranged at random in a flat space. As I asked what he thought the painting was about, Waskow stood on the toilet to adjust the ceiling light fixture so we could see the painting in better light. He broke the seat in the process, but didn't stop talking. "That's a great question," he

said as he handed me a dead light bulb. "Why does it have to be about anything?" He went on to talk about what he liked about the painting, namely the perspective, the way in which Azarian plays with the shadows, arranging them in different directions so the viewer can't place the light source.

In a nearby hallway, we admired one of the first works of art he purchased, in 1998, a painting by Catherine Hall called "Pool of Narcissus," an abstract, moody painting in lavenders and blues.

In another room, we studied Tania Kupczak's mixed media image of a woman sleeping, a collage made up of old Vogue magazines.

In the "Ultimate Last Supper" by Jen Koch, Japanese beetles take over a place setting, covering every square millimeter of the fork, knife, spoon and bowl encased in a glass-covered, fabric-lined wooden box.

Most of the works Waskow has bought tend to have conceptual content, and they are representative of every medium, although he admits that his collection is weak in two areas: photography and "aesthetic," or beautiful, paintings.



Waskow looks like a scientist, and in fact is a former scientist. He also is a voracious reader, an untraditional athlete (competitive pingpong, weight lifting, taekwon do, ultimate Frisbee) and an insurance and finance expert.

"I've always felt it's important to get substantial expertise in things I get involved in," Waskow says.

At one point or other in his life, he has given himself over completely to each of these endeavors. He's universally described by friends and acquaintances as single-minded, persistent and fiercely intelligent. And Waskow is a communicator. In conversations, his mind moves so quickly it's often difficult to keep up with him, though he tends to be incisively direct. If you don't catch something, he's humble enough to fault himself for not explaining it well enough.

Waskow has always been a collector. To date, he has a total of 30 different collections. He buys business cards, advertising memorabilia, glass bottles,



PHOTO BY JEB WALLACE-BRODEUR

A detail from Greg Brower's work "I Had a Nightmare as a Draftsman"

### Mark Waskow wants people to experience the provocative power of contemporary art — the way it forces viewers to question assumptions about life and the nature of art itself.

fact, it's difficult to walk around without feeling as though you're about to knock into one of Waskow's treasures.

I was awestruck as I walked in the door of one room on a recent morning. By way of introduction, Waskow said: "This may be your first encounter with compressed matter." And as he saw the look of visual overload on my face, he continued, "There was





PHOTO BY JEB WALLACE-BRODEUR

Art collector Mark Waskow looks through drawers of drawings in one of the rooms that house his thousands of artworks.

hand tools, flashlights, scissors, red-handled kitchen utensils and anything to do with world's fairs, New York City subways, the Raid Bug, Mr. Peanut, the Michelin Man and the Brooklyn Bridge. And while art is his current obsession, he has never stopped collecting all that other stuff. He picks new items up at flea markets and antiques stores.

"Everybody collects something," Waskow says. "I think it's a universal tendency, but I think a lot of people don't recognize their collections."

Waskow, who grew up in Brooklyn in a poor family, was obsessed with stuff right from the beginning. At age 3, when most children are just learning to string sentences together, Waskow, already reading comic books, started his first collection. It consisted of rocks and minerals. By the time he was 4 he added shells to his repertoire. By age 5, he was some-

thing of a natural history prodigy. He began using taxonomic keys to identify arthropods — animals with segmented bodies and jointed limbs, such as insects, spiders and crustaceans — and he saved each new find.

Once while at Pelham Bay Park, a 2,700-acre waterfront park in the city, he found the fateful creature that led to a long association with the American Natural History Museum.

"I found this thing and I tried to ID it, but I couldn't," Waskow remembers. He thought it was a mole crab, but he wasn't sure.

He went to the museum to see if one of the scientists there could help him, but no one seemed to know.

Eventually, he says, he found himself on the fifth floor in the office of John Pallister, the museum's senior entomologist. Waskow discovered what the

arthropod was — it was, in fact, a mole crab — and he found a friend.

Pallister gave the boy a key to the fifth floor, and for three years Waskow worked with the octogenarian scientist. Once Waskow was school age, he disappeared into the museum for hours after classes and on weekends.

His parents didn't quite know what to make of him, he recalls. He was an only child and by the time he was 10 he was spending his summers in southern states and the Caribbean collecting bugs with scientists at research stations attached to the museum.

He went to Cornell University at age 16, where he embarked on a degree in environmental studies with a concentration in entomology and two minors in microbiology and organic chemistry. He spent summers in New Hampshire participating in the

Hubbard Brook Research Project. He was involved in studying the insect eating habits of birds. His job was to examine bird vomit for the numbers and types of insects they had partially digested.

"My nickname in college was 'Bugman,'" Waskow says.

By age 19, Waskow had finished college and had decided not to become an entomologist, because he couldn't make enough money at it.

The revelation came to him with his first phone bill. Waskow soon came face to face with what he calls the great truth: "You have to pay to take up space in the world." And so began the scientist's journey into the world of high-pressure sales.

He did a stint at McDonald's working as a maintenance man for three franchises before he found his calling at a nearby Montgomery Ward's depart-

ment store in Ithaca, N.Y. He began selling large appliances because he thought it could be lucrative. Within a few months, he says, he had outsold the store's top salesman.

"I could see that commissions were the way for me because there is no relationship between time and money," he recalls.

His next job was with Combined Insurance, and it was perfect for Waskow's irrepresible personality. ("I got to talk to people and they paid me.") At first he just sold life insurance policies, and then he became interested in estate planning and investments. The company moved him to its Burlington office in 1982.

Three years later, he talked himself into a job at National Life in Montpelier, and in 1989 he began his own financial consulting firm, which offers institutions, businesses, non-profit organizations and indi-



viduals advice on employee benefits, retirement funds, estate planning and health care. He is divorced from his first wife, with whom he had two children.



But all of this is in his previous life, B.A., before art, as he puts it. In 1998, he went to the Art Hop, a two-day celebration of the arts in Burlington. The experience had a profound effect on him and he immediately opened his checkbook to make some purchases.

Today, he is on the board of the Center for the Book Arts in New York City, and he is a prime mover behind the Art Hop exhibition weekend.

And while he works two days a week as a financial consultant, he devotes the rest of his time to art. He says he hasn't taken a non-art-related vacation in nine years.

"I'm really focused on developing a world-class collection of art, and I recognize that since I don't come from inherited wealth, the only way for me to do it is to direct all of my discretionary resources to collecting," Waskow says.

Still, Waskow doesn't like to pontificate on the art of collecting, or explain why he is attracted to particular works. What he's likely to say on the subject is simply: "If I like it, it's good."

When I asked him to name a few pieces he likes most, he said: "(That's) like asking, 'Who is your favorite grandchild?'" He looked around, and added, "I like all of this stuff. ... I like being surrounded by eccentric, cool things."

Though he refuses to point to favorites, he does point to a "closet of shame," where he hides 100 or so works that he bought in fits of enthusiasm early on as a collector and that he has now decided aren't worthy of exhibition in his private "storage" areas.

In general, Waskow eschews realistic landscape and figural paintings; they just don't resonate with his sensibilities. He says he buys art that "invokes, invites or suggests critique."

Waskow takes this argument back in time. He goes so far as to say that Hudson River School paintings that celebrated mountains, rivers and the grandeur of the New World were representative of what was going on in the 19th century,

but that they aren't relevant as art today.

The conversation has shifted, he says. "In my opinion, (Marcel) Duchamp (the surrealist who laid the groundwork for abstract and conceptual art) gave all modern artists permission to be artists. He set up a framework for interpreting and thinking about what is going on now."

Art, he says is, "a moving target." Waskow says lowbrow art such as graffiti, tattoo and outsider art are bubbling up. They are part of a running "commentary on what's going on in society."

And that perhaps explains his obsession with contemporary art. Waskow is a talent hound. He likes to discover artists you've never heard of, people who

could be called emerging artists — except that Waskow says many of them haven't evolved even that far yet. They are, as he puts it, "submerged artists."

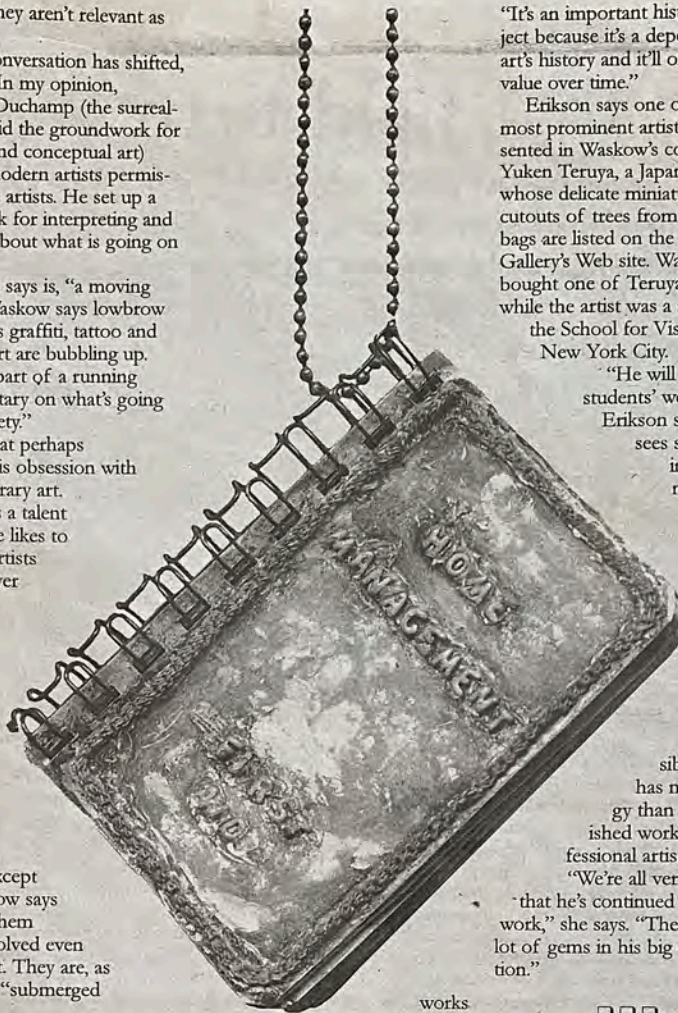
"I'm looking at work so new that most institutions haven't even registered it yet," Waskow says.



Waskow has what Rick Kadour, an editor for *Art New England*, calls a "voracious appetite" for new work. In the first year of his vocation as an art collector, Waskow bought 2,000 works, largely by Vermont artists, and in many cases he purchased entire bodies of works by individual artists. After that initial burst of energy, Waskow continued to buy art in great quantities, nearly 1,000 works per year, and on average, he owns about eight works by each artist in his collection.

"My collection is Vermont-centric," he says. About 35 percent to 40 percent, or about 3,000 pieces, are by Vermont artists.

These days, he is also buying



works by artists in New York, Montreal and Boston, and he

plans to go on a national tour of great art cities — San Francisco, Los Angeles, Taos, N.M., Detroit, Miami, Portland, Ore., and Sante Fe, N.M. — this year to broaden his collection.

Kadour says Waskow is the only individual collecting contemporary Vermont art on this scale. He calls the collection a "cross-section of now."

"It's very heavily focused on emerging artists, but it also has rather significant Vermont artists," Kadour says. "It's definitely a collection in development, but at this point in its life, it's exactly where it should be."

Ruth Erikson, curator of the Firehouse Gallery in Burlington, calls Waskow one of Vermont's most avid collectors. "It's a very eclectic and deep collection of contemporary work," she says.

"It's an important historical project because it's a depository of art's history and it'll only gain in value over time."

Erikson says one of the most prominent artists represented in Waskow's collection is Yuken Teruya, a Japanese artist whose delicate miniature paper cutouts of trees from paper bags are listed on the Saatchi Gallery's Web site. Waskow bought one of Teruya's trees while the artist was a student at the School for Visual Arts in New York City.

"He will often buy students' work,"

Erikson said. "He sees something in it. It's more economical,

more accessible and it has more energy than the polished work of a professional artist."

"We're all very grateful that he's continued to buy work," she says. "There are a lot of gems in his big collection."



Despite Waskow's experience and enthusiasm the creation of his dream museum, The Waskowmium, will be no easy task.

"I think that it's a financially difficult proposition," Erikson says. "But I'd love to see his work on display and accessible to the public. To make the collection a cohesive museum experience, it would have to be edited, otherwise it will be a cabinet of curiosities. It's so specific to his personality and that's how great museums get started, but the best museums draw from multiple collections, so that they have relevance. One hard thing is it would be a museum of him. But I wish everyone could see it, and I think it's a great proposition. ... I'd give him money."

Waskow is beginning to ratchet up his fund-raising efforts for Phase I, which would include studies to determine

whether the museum would be a draw for Vermont, where it would be best located and how continued funding might be arranged. Waskow is also looking to document his collection through photographs and a registry, a database that would include descriptions of each piece. Once the registry is created, he hopes to lend pieces to art institutions on a regular basis.

Phase II would involve acquiring real estate. Waskow envisions the museum in a 25,000- to 30,000-square-foot existing structure that he would retrofit. Phase III would consist of finalizing the refurbishment of the structure and hiring a staff.

Waskow says he expects the first two phases to take at least five years.

David Fairbanks Ford, founder of the Main Street Museum in White River Junction, has offered to establish a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization for The Waskowmium. "He's a mover and a shaker, and he's very civic-minded," Ford says. "If I can do my little museum, I'm sure he can do his venture."

Kadour has no doubt that The Waskowmium will happen.

"If you look at the landscape, he's the one who will do it. It will reflect his personality and his approach to the world, but it will be done."

At this point Vermont artists don't have adequate access to the broader public and to the kind of critiques that create the sort of buzz and recognition that help artists establish reputations, Kadour says. The Waskowmium would be a lifeline for the arts community because it would give artists' work a place of permanence and a sense of longevity. He points to the Cornish Colony Museum in Windsor as an example of an institution that has kept the works of Augustus St. Gauden and Maxfield Parrish alive.

"Mark's Waskowmium can play that role with contemporary Vermont art," Kadour says.

"In 20 years, people will have an understanding of what was happening in Vermont art" in the 1990s and early 21st century because of Waskow's collection, Kadour says.

*Anne Galloway is the editor of the Sunday Rutland Herald and Times Argus.*