

DAVE SANDERS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Steven Korff in his Brooklyn home, where he keeps the more than 400 sculptural vases, bowls, sake cups and flasks that have made him one of the leading collectors in contemporary Japanese ceramics.

Up to His Neck in His Obsession

By **ROBIN POGREBIN**

Put your feet up on the coffee table, and you might knock over those pieces by Kakurezaki Ryuichi and Mori Togaku, or that vase by Matsui Kosei.

Splash around in the upstairs bathtub, and you're likely to spray water on the sculptures to your left or your right by some of Japan's most influential 20th-century ceramic artists.

This simple house in Flatbush, Brooklyn, is not only where Steven Korff and Marcia Van Wagner, a married couple, raised their two boys — now 18 and 21 — but where Mr. Korff keeps the more than 400 sculptural vases, bowls, sake cups and flasks that have quietly made him one of the leading collectors in contemporary Japanese ceramics.

Even Qatari royalty — Sheikha al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, chairwoman of the Qatar Museums Authority, and her husband, Sheikh Jassim bin Abdulaziz al-Thani, two of the most important buyers in the art market — have made their way to Brooklyn to buy from him.

Collectors who get most of the attention these days tend to spend millions on postwar and contemporary art that they display in their elegant homes, lend to museums or sell at auction. But there is another tier of collector that operates below the radar, acquiring obsessively in a particular category at a lower price point.

Mr. Korff is one. Yes, he sold Ken Price's 1964 "Pink Egg" at Phillips in 2014 for \$509,000, a high for that

artist at auction. And that same year, he donated five pieces to the Brooklyn Museum. But, in general, Mr. Korff just quietly crams his Queen Anne Victorian with the pottery he's grown so passionate about over the last 20 years.

"Nothing prepared me for getting to his house and seeing what he had," said Joan Cummins, the Brooklyn Museum's curator of Asian art. "I'd be pretty happy to have almost anything in his collection."

Ceramics cover every available surface in his home — the stereo, the radiator, the kitchen island, the cable box.

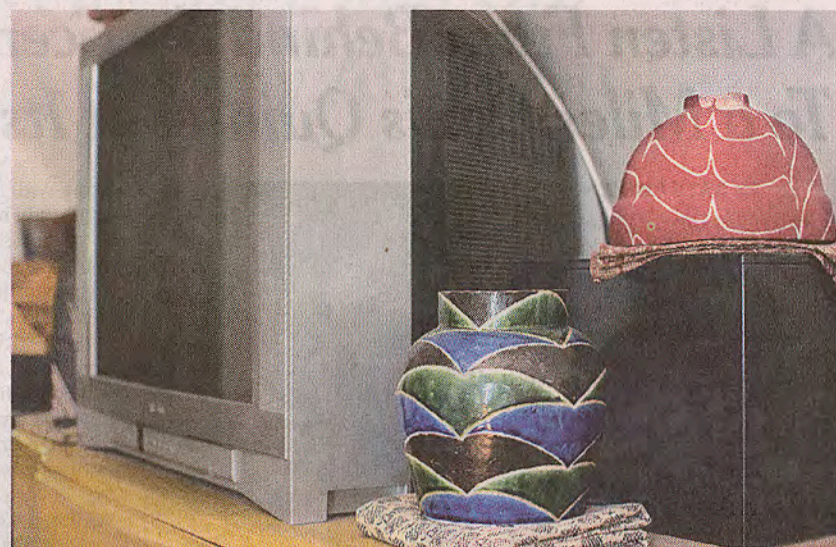
"He literally lives with his collection, as does his family," said Joan B. Mirviss, whose New York

"He literally lives with his collection, as does his family. If there's an inch, there's a piece of ceramic art."

JOAN B. MIRVISS,
gallery owner

Continued on Page 5

He's Up To His Neck In a Passion For Pottery



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE SANDERS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Mr. Korff is acquiring fewer pieces these days, feeling as if he owned examples of just about everything he'd ever wanted. And, he has to concede, he has finally run out of room in his Brooklyn home.

From First Arts Page

gallery specializes in Japanese art. "If there's an inch, there's a piece of ceramic art."

Alex Heminway, the director of design at Phillips in New York, said that to visit Mr. Korff's jam-packed home is to experience "the physical commitment required to be a collector."

"A general unease pervades, due in part to the feeling of being a bull in a china shop," Mr. Heminway said, "but, more significantly, due to the suspicion that one is looking too deeply into the well, one is eavesdropping on the soul."

To be sure, Mr. Korff lives and breathes this stuff — reading books about ceramics, checking the internet sites of ceramics dealers daily. "It's the first thing I do when I get up in the morning," he said. "It's all-consuming."

While he has never managed to get to Japan — Ms. Van Wagner works full time as a municipal credit analyst at Moody's Investors Service, and he's been a stay-at-home dad — Mr. Korff has established strong relationships with dealers there.

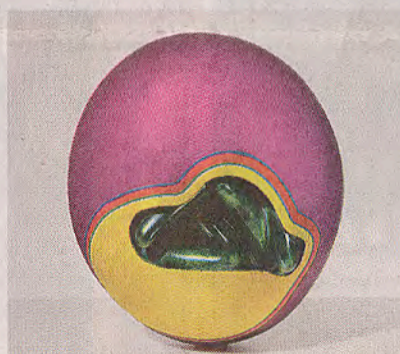
"Of all my clients, I don't know of any who study the market, know the history, are more connected than he," said Robert Yellin of the Yakimono Gallery in Kyoto. "He often gets information about what's going on in Japan before I do. The guy is totally, ballistically nuts, in the most positive way."

Mr. Korff sells his pieces only when he needs the money (the egg helped him save for his kids' college) or, occasionally, to trade up. "He refines, so he's constantly reassessing," Ms. Cummins said. "Do I really need this object? If not, can I turn it in for something I do need?" He does think very critically about the objects.

And then there are the boxes. Every piece of pottery comes in a signed, sealed wooden box, which is essential to its value. "If you don't have the box, it's worth half," Mr. Korff said.

So Mr. Korff has a box for every item in his collection, which he keeps stuffed in a closet in his third-floor attic. Heaven help him when he needs to retrieve one. "I have to pull everything out," he said. "It's a three-day event."

A growing interest in contemporary Japanese clay artwork among museums



VIA PHILLIPS

Ken Price's "Pink Egg," which Mr. Korff sold at auction for \$509,000.

around the country shows that Mr. Korff was ahead of the curve. Last year, museum exhibitions in five states focused on such ceramics, and four shows are coming up this fall, Ms. Mirviss said.

Wiry and diminutive (he's 5-foot-4), Mr. Korff, 62, grew up in New York City, where his mother taught modern dance, and his father taught drama in YMCA's. He spent his summers at Buck's Rock, a

creative work camp, since both parents were instructors there.

Mr. Korff's obsessive personality is also evident in his collection of vintage steel bikes from the 1970s and '80s — he owns 10 — which he rides exclusively. He cycles at least 40 miles a day around Prospect Park — except on Saturdays, when he runs six miles.

He got into collecting in his mid-20s, after spending about a decade as a drummer in a band called the Planets — "Punk happened, and we didn't happen," he said. He also worked as the manager of a video store and as a record promoter.

Although Mr. Korff's hair used to hang down to his buttocks and now is short and graying, he still bears a few signs of his hippie phase: the Birkenstock sandals, the stud in his left ear.

He started by going to flea markets, collecting affordable objects like kites and watches. Then he "got into anything that was Deco" and eventually opened a store in SoHo called Yesterday's Tomorrow that carried Eames furniture, Venini glass and Boomerang tables, but it lasted just two years.

Mr. Korff at first became interested in American ceramics and began buying

Ken Price, as well as Peter Voulkos, Robert Arnerson, Paul Soldner and Rudy Autio.

"I don't like things that are manufactured as much as handmade," he said.

Ultimately, he decided to focus on Japanese work, building a collection that is now worth from \$500,000 to \$800,000.

Mr. Korff has paid anywhere from \$200 for a sake cup to more than \$100,000 for a piece by Okabe Mineo, but generally spends between \$8,000 and \$20,000 per item.

Typically, ceramics collectors emphasize sculpture, Ms. Cummins said, but Mr. Korff "collects the way Japanese people collect — smaller wares that can be used for serving sake or tea."

Still, Mr. Korff is acquiring less these days, feeling as if he owns examples of just about everything he ever wanted. And, he has to concede, he has finally run out of room.

"Probably, enough is enough," he said. "I've reached the point in my life when I want to divest. I just want to have a much simpler life."

"Yes, I could get a few more pieces," he added, "but my inclination is not to."