

The Koons Collection



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The artist Jeff Koons in his Upper East Side home, which houses examples of his own collecting efforts.

By [RANDY KENNEDY](#)

Published: February 24, 2010

[JEFF KOONS](#), at 55, is one of the world's most famous living artists. And every night before drifting off to sleep in his home on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, he is able to survey the salmon-pink walls of his bedroom and commune with a small pantheon of the most famous artists of centuries past.

In one corner hangs an early-16th-century painted bust of a hollow-cheeked, very tender-looking Jesus by Quentin Massys, the first important painter of the Antwerp school. Across the way, perhaps reflecting Mr. Koons's love of mingling the sacred and the profane, a risqué Fragonard stares back, showing a young woman cradling a pair of puppies at her bared breasts. But for the most part this extremely private collection, piled up salon style on the walls, seems far more classicist than Koonsian, like an eccentric little gallery transplanted from the Met:

Manet, Courbet, Poussin and scholars' delights like Nikolaus Knüpfer and Cornelis van Haarlem.

Over his big flat-screen television, where a late [Picasso](#) now on loan used to hang, is an 1873 Courbet that Mr. Koons particularly treasures. It's a big, loving portrait of a mottled bull calf, glowering at the viewer with an unsettlingly human mixture of defiance and hamburger-meat fatalism.

"It looks like he's set up to be slaughtered," Mr. Koons said recently, smiling.

These days he is undoubtedly feeling kinship with his prize bull. Over the last several months Mr. Koons, who has always been a polarizing artist, has been at work in a role he has never assumed during his three-decade career, that of curator of other people's art. Last summer he accepted an invitation by the [New Museum of Contemporary Art](#) to organize an exhibition of works from the important collection of the Greek billionaire Dakis Joannou, a collection in which Mr. Koons's own work plays a pivotal part. That fact — along with Mr. Joannou's close friendship with Mr. Koons and Mr. Joannou's role as a trustee at the New Museum, though he is not underwriting the show or providing input — has caused some people, even in the insular contemporary-art world, to worry that the arrangement is too clubby.



Joshua Bright for The New York Times
Jeff Koons, far right, directing the installation of “Super Sister” by Liza Lou at the New Museum of Contemporary Art.

This was part of Mr. Koons’s motivation for sitting down recently in his Chelsea studio to speak in detail for the first time about his life as a collector of art, not just as a creator of it. It’s a subject he has generally avoided over the years out of discretion and privacy, but he decided to engage with it as a way to demonstrate his deep, idiosyncratic engagement with the history of art (mostly Western) and history’s very literal role in many of his new paintings. More than that, he said, he wanted to make the case that, for many years now, he has viewed creating art and thinking about the works of art he loves as increasingly inseparable activities.

“Art has this ability to allow you to connect back through history in the same way that biology does,” he said. “I’m always looking for source material.”

While the New Museum runs a greater risk to its reputation if the show is poorly received, Mr. Koons has a lot riding on it too, not least because he wants to do well by the institution, which gave him his first solo exhibition in 1980, and by Mr. Joannou, whose collection is influential and widely admired. But as someone

confident enough in his younger years to proclaim that he was picking up the mantle of Duchamp and Picasso and “taking us out of the 20th century” with his own work, Mr. Koons also wants to prove himself worthy of joining the ranks of well-known artists who have turned their talents successfully to organizing shows: Duchamp himself, in the 1920s and 1930s, with the Société Anonyme; Warhol, whose “Raid the Icebox I” at the Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design in 1969 is legendary; Joseph Kosuth at the [Brooklyn Museum](#) in 1990; and artists like Scott Burton, Elizabeth Murray and [Chuck Close](#) as part of the Museum of Modern Art’s Artist’s Choice series, inspired by a similar program at the National Gallery in London.

As he walks around his buzzing studio — which some visitors have compared to Santa’s workshop, but which has the bright, hygienic aura of a pharmaceutical lab or a high-end car-detailing shop, with more than 100 artists at work under Mr. Koons’s direction — his source material often blares out these days. Images of Roman marbles, mostly female nudes, peek out of his paintings. Dalí motifs abound. Warhol and the Venus of Willendorf and [Roy Lichtenstein](#) share unlikely quarters in other paintings. A strange stone carving in the shape of a vagina, probably part a Celtic fertility figure, that Mr. Koons recently came across on the Internet and bought (“I love to just look around on the computer after the kids go to bed”) was the centerpiece of another work in progress, being carefully painted by assistants on scaffolds.

But the art-historical dots that Mr. Koons connects in his own thinking about such works are plentiful to the point of teeming, and harder to see. The form of an inflatable lobster can simultaneously name-check Duchamp, Dalí and H. C. Westermann, the eccentric Chicago sculptor. A Dalí motif appearing in the new paintings, the image of a draped cloth from a 1969 work that Mr. Koons owns, leads him back to a painting he says he believes was the clear model for the cloth, “Venus Rising From the Sea — a Deception,” by Raphaele Peale, America’s first

notable still life painter (a work of whose Mr. Koons just missed out on buying at auction), which leads him forward again to Dalí's last painting, "The Swallow's Tail" from 1983, in which Mr. Koons said he can discern the form again, all but hidden.

Mr. Koons has collected since the beginning of his life as a professional artist, even before he could afford to pay for work. In the late 1970s, working in Chicago as a studio assistant for the painter Ed Paschke — working so hard to impress him, he said, that his fingers sometimes bled as he was stretching canvas — he traded a drawing for a Paschke print, which still hangs in his home.

By the late 1980s, as his star and his bank balance rose precipitously, he began to collect high-end work by artists he loved, like Lichtenstein, but he was forced to sell a lot of it during an acrimonious divorce and custody battle with his first wife, the Italian porn star and politician Ilona Staller. Those troubles, overlapping with a treacherous period in the late 1990s in which he and his backers almost bankrupted themselves trying to create elaborate stainless-steel sculptures, forced him to stop collecting altogether for a while.

But as his fortunes roared back in recent years, he began pouring a significant amount of his wealth into building a collection, joining high-profile contemporary artists like [Damien Hirst](#) and [John Currin](#) in concentrating heavily on old masters and 19th-century works. Mr. Koons's choices are stylistically and historically diverse but tend to share a preoccupation with the body and sexuality, which is also a major theme in Mr. Joannou's collection and Mr. Koons's take on it, in a selection of more than 100 works by 50 artists. (The creepily corporeal title Mr. Koons coined for the show is "Skin Fruit," a riff on a vulgar title of a work by the collective that calls itself assume vivid astro focus.)

Even by the standards of the art world, where language about art strays easily

into deep and enigmatic waters, Mr. Koons's way of explaining his own work is hard to take seriously, though he has always seemed to take it that way. With an ever-present warm smile and the comforting tones of a guidance counselor, he has spoken about how art "lets you kind of control physiology and the secretions that take place within the body," how his art operates in "a morality theater trying to help the underdog," how his balloon-based sculptures, at least sexually speaking, "really try to address whatever your interests are." In a profile of Mr. Koons in [The New Yorker](#) in 2007 Calvin Tomkins observed that "it is possible to argue that no real connection exists between Koons's work and what he says about it."

The same might be said of the way Mr. Koons explains his reasons for collecting. He does so with a boyish excitement, rapid-firing requests to assistants at big computer screens to pluck images from his own collection or from anywhere in millennia of art history. His grasp of the historical details he cites is often shaky, but such precision doesn't seem to matter much to Mr. Koons. His visual memory, on the other hand, often feels boundless, like a human version of Google image search. "I could do this all day," he said at one point during two long visits to his studio.

What drew him to the Courbet bull, which he bought at a Sotheby's auction in 2007, one of four paintings he owns by that artist? (Mr. Koons doesn't like to talk about prices, but since he buys mostly at auction, they are more or less public; the Courbet bull, for example, went for \$2.5 million, and the entire collection is easily worth more than 10 times that. It resides mostly in his bedroom for safety's sake; he and his wife, Justine, have four young sons and a fifth child on the way.)

"I like this type work," he said simply about the Courbet, then pointed to a brown patch on the bull's fur vaguely shaped like the state of New Jersey and explained that he stares at the patch often and wonders whether it might represent "some

form of, you know, soul or really a personal part” of Courbet’s own being. His main fascination with Knüpfer’s “Venus and Cupid” seems to be the spilled chamber pot at Venus’s side. Looking at a Manet nude, he talks about his appreciation for the “lack of violence” in Manet’s work and refers on separate occasions to a crease in the nude’s stomach, which he believes resembles a long-tailed sperm.

Lisa Phillips, the New Museum’s director, said in an interview that one reason she and the museum’s curators made the unusual decision to hand the Joannou show over to Mr. Koons was precisely because of his unconventional and compulsive way of looking at art, what the New Museum curator Massimiliano Gioni calls his “radical scopophilia.”

In work sessions as the show came together, Ms. Phillips said, he would use examples of work, new and old, “pointing to things that often would be the peripheral things in them, things that you might not see that were actually the things that were the most interesting to him — a monkey under someone’s foot, something like that.”

“He falls in love with these things; he’s obsessive,” she said, adding that as he began this month to install selections of work on the museum’s top floor — by Charles Ray, Tauba Auerbach, David Altmejd, Liza Lou, [Kara Walker](#) and others — she began to see exactly how unusual the show would look. “I don’t think many curators would have chosen those particular works to share that space.”

But some in the art world worry that because of the nature of Mr. Joannou’s collection itself, built primarily from the work of highly visible international art stars (Mr. Koons has selected only one of his own works), Mr. Koons’s adventurousness might have little room to play. Robert Storr, the dean of the [Yale University](#) School of Art and the organizer of the 2007 [Venice Biennale](#), said that

artist-organized shows often succeed because of the way artists find the “oddments” that trained curators, pursuing a more historical and formal mission, overlook.

“But in this case it’s very hard to see how the show could possibly result in that because this collection is already so much of a piece,” said Mr. Storr, who is also a painter, adding that in his opinion Mr. Koons’s taste in art is more unorthodox than Mr. Joannou’s, and that he would be more intrigued to see what Mr. Koons would do if invited to rummage around in the Met’s storage rooms.

It’s an idea that Mr. Koons would probably embrace with his trademark smile and some kind of pleasant, if strangely platitudinous, pronouncement. Standing in his studio next to an image of a radiant Poussin from his collection that practically leapt off a computer screen, he said, “When I view the world, I don’t think of my own work. I think of my hope that, through art, people can get a sense of the type of invisible fabric that holds us all together, that holds the world together.”