

# The Collectors of Lieuwe Kingma,

By Renée Steenbergen

There are as many collectors as there are ways of collecting.

Among the eighty collectors I interviewed for my doctoral dissertation on private collectors of modern art in the Netherlands, there was a 21-year-old law student, but also a married couple of law practitioners who had been collecting for fifty years.<sup>1</sup> There were entrepreneurs with rather sizable budgets, as well as persons with a meager budget from disability insurance benefits, who had developed fine collections through ingenuity and resourcefulness.

You have the young, impulsive aficionados, who in their teens use their pocket money to buy their very first etchings, and you also have the cautious art lovers, who start by borrowing a piece of art from art stock libraries to see what they like. There's the hunter who goes in pursuit of specific, important objects, and there are the shoppers who prefer to buy several small objects at one time for a good price. One of the most likeable 'types' is the social collector, who cherishes the personal encounter with the creator of an acquired work. Art lovers like these hardly ever buy a work of art without knowing the artist, as they see him as the key to the piece itself.

In reading the essays in [this catalogue](#) by admirers of the work of Lieuwe Kingma, one will notice that, without exception, they all mention the encounter with the artist as a decisive moment in the acquisition of his work. One is a teacher who meets Lieuwe at a birthday party. They hit it off and he visits the artist to look at his work, and immediately buys something. A couple stays over at Julie and Lieuwe's place together with some friends, sleeping in the guest room right next to the studio. When they leave, they are carrying one of Lieuwe's paintings with them. Even an elderly neighbor, well on in years, soon buys a canvas from the artist living next door to her.

An acquisition of this kind leaves a particularly strong impression: that of the artwork itself, and that of the human being behind it. Sometimes it develops into a lifelong friendship, including the celebration of the birthdays of each other's

children - the contact remaining intact, in spite of borders and relocations.

The [exhibitions](#) that Lieuwe and Julie have been organizing in their own home for the past 20 years have contributed a great deal to the cultivation of personal ties. Several collectors extol the natural surroundings in which they view the art: not at a sterile gallery with white walls, but a living room where they can take in the paintings at their leisure while sitting together, talking and eating. It is an intimate encounter with art, to which beginning buyers are especially sensitive. 'He was my eye-opener,' says a teacher about his meeting with Kingma, and an entrepreneur calls Lieuwe his 'catalyst', the one that inspired him to start buying art.

Another aspect is the fact that Kingma's oeuvre is not seen as difficult or removed. Classic subjects like landscapes, still lifes and nudes are also accessible to laymen, and buyers appreciate that. Among the key words used by the collectors to describe the experience of his work are: warm; color(ful); intimate; honest; heartfelt; recognizable; uncomplicated; classical; timeless; inspiring.

'I'm not a connoisseur,' a female diplomat says, while an entrepreneur remarks: 'I would definitely not call myself an art expert.' And yet, with some thirty paintings, he is by now the largest collector of Kingma's work. (At the same time, he's business-minded enough to regard his acquisitions as a 'good investment potential'.) Sometimes the love of art was instilled in one's early years, as in the case of a bank manager who bought a painting of a [tree in bloom](#).

'May it simply be beautiful?' is the rhetorical question above one of the contributions in this book. Of course it may - there is probably no better reason for collecting art. Decorating one's house has also been the initial motive of major collectors who now own collections consisting of only big names. Everyone began with 'something to hang above the couch' - there's nothing wrong with that. After all, you should want to have the work around you, to be able to live with it.

'I buy art using my intuition,' writes the wife of a former bank manager who bought art together with her husband. 'I love beautiful things,' says another admirer of Lieuwe's work. That's the difference with professional buyers, museums and company collections. For private collectors the pieces of art get to be like housemates. They are right there, in your most intimate living environment, yet they are not lost among the furniture, the television and the children.

Art has the peculiar quality of being able to hold its own amidst the tumult of family life. Enough moments remain for the piece of art to suddenly move you again - in the evening after work, when the children are in bed, or just in between, in passing. 'Paintings are like relationships,' said one collector quoted in my book. 'Every now and then you need to feel again why you chose for that person, what is so great about him or her. Otherwise you will not be able to put up with each other for very long.'<sup>ii</sup>

'I must want to put it up in my house immediately,' said one female collector. A retired diplomat named 'hominess' as the most important value of the works she owns. Her job and location always changed, but the paintings traveled with her, as one of the few stable factors that gave her a feeling of continuity. She pays little attention to fashions and big names. Lieuwe's admirers are not trend chasers.

An often-mentioned motive of buyers is the recognition they experience when seeing 'their' painting. The general manager of an international company who traveled all over the world recognized the village of his own youth in the 'portrait' of [Grijpskerk](#), the village of Lieuwe's childhood years. Others also mention the shared Friesian background, manifested in the love of sailing and water.

The landscape of one's childhood can be the stimulus. For a former hotelier from Texel, that meant dunes and sea, which is why he bought the painting [Beach XV](#). A couple from Paris was magnetically attracted by a view of the [South of France](#) with its tall, dark cypresses, while a Californian woman contrasted the violent surf of the Pacific Ocean in [Beach 43](#). The American consul general in Amsterdam chose the painting of the tall poplars along the [Amstel](#), not for the art history associations (Mondriaan, Rembrandt), but because she used to do her long-distance running along this river.

The paintings of Lieuwe Kingma evoke very strong sensory stimulations in their owners. 'The painting pulls you in' writes one. 'It carries you

along,' says another, 'you can feel the sunshine.' Not only the landscapes have that, the still lifes do, too – they are '*Stimmungsbilder*'.

A female collector writes about her [flower still](#) life: 'My painting dances along to the mood changes of our Parisian climate,' and goes on to describe the color changes and mood shifts that Lieuwe's canvas brings her to experience. A psychologist bought a painting portraying the sea just before a storm for a client: 'You not only see, you also feel what it's like to be in that landscape, you feel the wind coming up, the foreboding storm, and the air pressure'.

That power of his work to 'transport' one is mentioned and praised by people with very diverse professional backgrounds. Among Lieuwe's admirers represented here are teachers, a physician, a journalist, a diplomat, bankers, an hotelier, an electrical engineer, an executive coach, and an entrepreneur. As a bank manager succinctly describes it: 'Art is emotion.' He bought a painting of a blossoming fruit tree after a visit to Julie and Lieuwe's home. Being 'carried along' by a work of art means that it's not just a tabula rasa onto which you can project your emotions, but a work that seems to have an autonomous power of its own to lift you up and bring you into a different state of mind.

Gradually, a bond is forged between the piece of art and its owner that grows stronger over time. Some collectors even talk to their art acquisitions, like a pet you caress or address in passing. Then the paintings or sculptures have really become housemates. Collectors also mention the enormous value of having art so close at hand. You enjoy the fantastic privilege of seeing the work in very different guises: in the gray light of morning, midday's warm yellow light, or in the glowing light of evening. It is as with the different character traits of someone you love: You keep seeing other, unexpected sides of that person. In that sense, a work of art you live with becomes ever more layered.

Being allowed to touch art is another luxury you only enjoy at home – certainly not at a museum or a gallery. Furtively caressing a sculpture as you walk past it, letting your hand explore the dabs of paint on an oil painting; it all contributes to the bond the owner has with his objects – making them much more than mere objects. Collectors describe their experience of art strikingly often in physical terms: the art around them feels 'like a warm bath', 'like a comfortable sweater', 'like a second skin'.<sup>iii</sup>

Acquisitions mark important moments in your life: A piece of art bought with your first salary, or during your honeymoon; a creation you spent your entire holiday savings on, a painting that brought you in touch with its maker or seller, and with whom you've now been friends for decades. A collector cannot talk about his collection without bringing up his own life story. Pieces of art remind their owners of special events and emotions, inextricably bound up with the art that surrounds them. A collection is the biography of the collector.

That is also partly the reason why the impact art has on its owners is so immense. Collectors cannot imagine a life without their treasured art. When asked to do so, many collectors found it a shocking thought, as I discovered during my research. 'It would be like having to live without my wife', 'It would be an amputation, like losing an arm or a leg', were a few of the stark comparisons that were made.<sup>iv</sup>

Yet these feelings are less extreme than they seem when you realize that works of art are much more than mere things. They have become a part of the life of their owners, a part of him- or herself. 'Lieuwe's paintings have been witnesses of our whole life,' writes one collecting couple. He is a physicist and she is an investigative journalist. 'They have seen us happy, and sometimes sad.' The paintings have accompanied all the stages of the owners' life: patient, loyal, consoling. That is the strength these art lovers and collectors derive from Lieuwe Kingma's landscapes, still lifes and portraits.

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<sup>i</sup> Renée Steenbergen, *Iets wat zo veel kost, is alles waard. Verzamelaars van moderne kunst in Nederland (Anything Costing That Much Is Priceless. Collectors of Modern Art in the Netherlands)*. Vassallucci, 2002.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

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Steenbergen has her own company, Bureau Renée Steenbergen, and acts as advisor and curator in the field of collection forming and patronage.

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