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From Miró Constellations to 50,000 Pounds of Kiefer: Martin Z. Margulies on 45 Years of Collecting

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Martin Z. Margulies.

ALEXPHTO.COM – EWM/THE MARGULIES COLLECTION AT THE WAREHOUSE, MIAMI

The sale of works collected by Robert C. Scull at Sotheby’s in 1973 represents a historic moment—the first time contemporary art came to the auction block in a grand fashion. But it turns out it was significant in another way: it was a starting point of sorts for mega-collector Martin Z. Margulies.

“I was starting a real-estate business and I bought a couple of modern prints by Chagall and Picasso and one thing led to another,” Margulies said in a recent interview. “I went to an auction in New York”—the Scull sale that was the talk of the town—“and I said to myself, ‘These people buying are smart people. They’re business people and putting their money into something.’ So I started going around to dealers.”

The 81-year-old globe-trotting art collector and dedicated philanthropist (who has spent years on the **ARTnews “Top 200 Collectors”** (<https://www.artnews.com/toc/2018-artnews-top-200-collectors/>) list) has become known for his eponymous museum-scaled art warehouse in Miami’s Wynwood Arts District, which plays home to part of his mostly contemporary collection. In September, D.A.P. published the **nearly 300-page first volume** (<http://www.artbook.com/9788862086202.html>) of his complete holdings, and in the fall Margulies touched down in New York for a conversation about the humble origins of his now-storied collection.

The 50-work Sotheby's sale by taxi-fleet owner Scull is widely considered the first major single-owner contemporary art auction held with jaw-dropping and record prices, including Willem de Kooning's Abstract Expressionist masterpiece *Police Gazette* from 1955 that fetched a then-record (yes!) \$180,000. After the auction, Margulies was approached by a vivacious and super connected dealer from Fort Worth, Texas, named Shaindy Fenton, who had seen him at the sale and who was building a collection for Ray and Patsy Nasher now enshrined as a world-class sculpture trove at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. Fenton, who had been the close-up subject of three Andy Warhol portraits between 1978 and 1983 (a sure-fire sign of her art-world standing), offered her help.

Soon, Margulies was introduced to the top dealers of postwar and contemporary art in New York, including Bill Acquavella, Xavier Fourcade, Larry Rubin, Arne Glimcher, and Leo Castelli—the power brokers of their time. “They were all willing to share their experiences,” Margulies said. “It was a fascinating field and I got very enthused about it. I started reading, learning, coming up to New York, going to galleries, and I realized it was a different life, a new life for me, not about building, not about business. If you made enough money you could embark on this new life, and it really turned out great.”

“Buy and Hold”



Joan Miró, *Femme dans la Nuit*, 1940, gouache and oil wash on paper.

THE MARGULIES COLLECTION AT THE WAREHOUSE, MIAMI

By 1980, Margulies had acquired a major and rare painting from Joan Miró's famed “Constellation” series, “*Femme dans la nuit*” (*Woman of the Night*), 1940, which had been in the collection of Alexina “Teeny” Duchamp, Marcel Duchamp's widow. Margulies paid around \$300,000 for it. In 1993, he loaned the piece to the Museum of Modern Art's Miró retrospective; more recently, in 2017, it was on loan to Acquavella Galleries, where 23 of the 24 Constellations were meticulously assembled.

One of the works from that series of the same size and date, *Femme et Oiseaux*, sold at Sotheby's London in June 2017 for £24.5 million (about \$31.1 million).

“I became well-known because of that work,” Margulies said, with more than a bit of pride.

As a strategy, Margulies has followed the mantra of investor Warren Buffet: “buy and hold.” “I was approached by a guy who offered me a million dollars more for the Miró than what anybody else will pay, and I said, ‘Well, you can give me \$20 million over it, but it’s not for sale.’ ”

In 1983, Larry Rubin, who ran Knoedler Gallery during its heyday, sold Margulies one of the three luminous Mark Rothko abstract paintings the collector now owns, *Untitled (Silver, Orange, Plum)*, 1962. For the painting, which, had been in the collection of the Baltimore collecting couple Robert and Jane Meyerhoff, Margulies paid less than \$400,000.

Rothko paintings from that period and of similar scale have sold for as much as \$86.8 million in recent auction seasons. But *Untitled (Silver, Orange, Plum)* has not gone on the block. “It’s in my living room,” Margulies said. “At night when you turn the light off—I have dimmers—and it dims, those rectangular shapes appear to almost move around.”

Margulies spoke highly of Rubin, who died this past August at age 85, crediting him with another great get: a large-scale Abstract Expressionist work by Franz Kline. “He sold me a lot of nice work.”

Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Silver, Orange, Plum)*, 1962, oil on canvas.

THE MARGULIES COLLECTION AT THE WAREHOUSE, MIAMI

Downright Daring

Of the 4,000 or so works of art that Margulies has acquired since the late 1970s, another of his favorites is by the Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi. *Square Ring*, from 1971, is a gracefully brawny abstraction executed in carved marble.

Another favorite is George Segal’s extraordinary sculpture/installation *Subway* (1968), which includes part of an authentic New York City subway car with vintage rattan seats and a full-length, cast-plaster figure seated contemplatively. Margulies bought the oversized work at Christie’s New York in November 1995 for \$310,500. It carried a blue-chip provenance, formerly in the collection of Chicagoan Robert B. Mayer, a founding member of the city’s Museum of Contemporary Art.

The Margulies Warehouse, where works in his collection live, is a standout even in Miami, where contemporary collections and museums abound—including the Institute of Contemporary Art, founded by Irma and Norma Braman; Mera and Don Rubell’s Rubell Family Collection; and the de la Cruz Collection of Carlos and Rosa de la Cruz. Margulies’s taste is broad and quirkily sophisticated as well as downright daring, encompassing everything from abstraction to realistic figurative work, paintings and sculpture to room-sized installations—plus a decidedly in-depth collection of photography and video.

Anselm Kiefer (<https://www.artnews.com/t/anselm-kiefer/>), *Geheimnis der Farne* (Secret of the Ferns), 2007, 48 paintings (clay, argile, ferns, and emulsion) and three concrete sculptures.

THE MARGULIES COLLECTION AT THE WAREHOUSE, MIAMI

The daring part can be encapsulated with the collector’s obsession with the prolific and challenging German artist Anselm Kiefer. Kiefer’s sprawling and darkly overwhelming installation *Geheimnis der Farne* (*Secret of the Ferns*)—a work from 2007 consisting of 48 paintings executed in clay, ferns, and emulsion along with a trio of 50,000-pound concrete sculptures that resemble Holocaust gas chambers—stands as a capstone to the collector’s vision.

Margulies acquired the work from London’s White Cube Gallery in 2015 and built a bespoke addition to his building to house it. Asked what so enralls him about Kiefer, Margulies said, in his plain-spoken way, “I find the work very full of drama. It’s strong, textural. It meets my sensibility, and that’s what it’s all about.”

Margulies also has philanthropic allegiances. Apart from seven-figure gifts to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum, and the Studio Museum in Harlem, his giving is best measured by his \$40 million commitment to Miami’s Lotus House, a state-of-the-art live-in facility dedicated to improving the lives of over 500 homeless women and children. “That’s a great legacy for me,” Margulies said—“helping humanity.”

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