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A British Collector Puts the Art in Department Store

Frank Cohen discusses his coming exhibit of John Bellany paintings at London's Fortnum & Mason and how he got his start in collecting



John Bellany's 'Bonjour Mr. Bowie (1240)' (1988) PHOTO: JOHN BELLANY/THE FRANK COHEN COLLECTION

For a new exhibit of works by an underappreciated Scottish painter, the British collector Frank Cohen is sending art lovers to a department store. On Sept. 18, Mr. Cohen will preside over a show of 50 works by John Bellany (1942-2013) at Fortnum & Mason, the venerable London emporium, founded in the early 18th century. Drawing on Mr. Cohen's own recently enhanced cache of Bellanys, as well as works on loan from the artist's estate, the show will spread paintings throughout the store, from street windows to areas near cash registers. It runs until October 28.

The works may prove a contrast to the atmosphere at Fortnum's, with its fancy food hall and posh picnic hampers. Known for his bold palette and fantastical figures, Bellany has "a grit to his art," says Simon Hucker, a London-based senior specialist in modern and postwar British art at Sotheby's.



Frank Cohen on Sept. 12, 2016. PHOTO: NICK HARVEY

Mr. Cohen made his fortune selling Britons everything from wallpaper to wrenches. A native of Manchester, Mr. Cohen, now 73, first got interested in art in the 1970s through the work of L.S. Lowry (1887-1976). The artist, a longtime resident of greater Manchester, is known for his stark depictions of everyday life in northern England's industrial cities and towns.

During his early years of collecting, Mr. Cohen bypassed the prohibitively expensive giants of 20th-century British art, Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud. Instead, he focused on what he calls "lesser-value artists" like David Bomberg (1890-1957), a Birmingham-born avant-garde painter who later created near-abstract portraits and landscapes, and Edward Burra (1905-76), an English painter and draftsman known for his lurid, mid-20th-century urban

scenes. Since then, works by Lowry, Bomberg and Burra have shot up in value.

By the 1990s, Mr. Cohen became “besotted,” he says, with the so-called Young British Artists, including Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin, and in 1997, he sold off the last of his businesses to devote himself full-time to collecting and displaying art. These days, he is buying works by American artists David Salle and David Hammons, as well as Germans Georg Baselitz and Thomas Schütte.

Mr. Cohen and Cherryl Cohen, his wife and co-collector, live in the Cheshire countryside, not far from Manchester, where they are able to display about 50 or 60 artworks from their collection, now numbering around 1,500. Mr. Cohen spoke about Bellamy, the business lesson a Victorian penny taught him and an earlier venture in department-store art shows. (Edited from an interview.)

—*J.S. Marcus*



Edward Burra's 'Sugar Beet East Anglia' (1973) PHOTO: EDWARD BURRA

I grew up in Cheetham Hill in north Manchester, an area that was very Jewish. My father worked in a raincoat factory, doing piecework from 7 in the morning until midnight. My mother was one of 14 children. They didn't know the first thing about art.

I have worked since I was a kid of 16. I used to buy closeout wallpaper for a dime a roll and sell it at markets—that's how I got started. At the time, I wasn't collecting anything, but then I went to a cinema in Manchester and they gave me a Victorian penny in change. Next door, there was a coin shop, and they gave me a half-crown for the penny—in other words, I got 30 times my money. I then built a very big collection of English coins, until I needed money and had to sell it all.

I like Georg Baselitz's latest work. He had a 10-year gap when his work wasn't that great—he did too many portraits. But the work he does now of his wife is interesting.

Last year, I did the first show at Fortnum & Mason—all British art. I had Bridget Riley, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, Howard Hodgkin, and Edward Burra—all the artists that I love. I couldn't do that with contemporary artists, because their art dealers would go mental—they wouldn't like their artists being displayed in a department store. But people really loved it. When it came down the customers were complaining, "Why has the artwork gone off the walls?"

John Bellany was a larger-than-life character—and a real alcoholic. They used to say, if you go out with John on Monday, you come home on Friday.

Bellany came from a Scottish fishing village, and everything he does has to do with the sea. He was very affected by death. He did a series after visiting Auschwitz, and he was very upset by the 2004 tsunami, when thousands of fishermen died.



John Bellany's 'Scottish Fish Gutter' (1965) PHOTO: JOHN BELLANY/THE FRANK COHEN COLLECTION

I've got a house full of art—I can't get anything else on the walls. I've got a Lowry. I've got a Burra, an Auerbach, two Damien Hirsts, a Tracey Emin. What I want to do is expand. I've got quite a lot of land, 12 acres, and I'm trying to get permission to build my own art space, like a museum. Not for the public though, just to hang a lot of the bigger pictures that I own, instead of keeping them in a warehouse.

I go and see the auction viewings, but I never sit in the room during the auction. I find it boring, to be honest with you. But I'm on the phone if I want to buy something.

I can't think of where I can show art after Fortnum & Mason—unless I go to Buckingham Palace.