

# House paint to oil paintings

Booker Prize-winning novelist **Howard Jacobson** first met Frank Cohen when the future collector was just a young man about town hoping to set up a home-decoration store. So how did Cohen make the move into the world of fine art?

**"N**o, Cheryl, no!" Frank Cohen shouts, hurling himself across the room and

interposing himself between his wife and the elegant bottle of mineral water she is about to take from the sideboard. Though we are eating barbecued Middle Eastern food in the kitchen of the Cohens' Wilmslow home – the door open to their garden, in the distance, beyond the sculptured pieces, a dreamy view of Alderley Edge, home to wood warblers, brown long-eared bats and footballers' wives – it as though we have suddenly been transported into a Jacobean tragedy. We let out a collective gasp, assuming that had Frank not acted in time, Cheryl would have drunk from a poisoned chalice. "No, Cheryl," Frank says again, "that's a limited edition!"

Unperturbed, Cheryl reaches for a different bottle.

It tells you something about how closely the Cohens live with the precious objects they own that they might at any moment be in danger of ingesting a work of art. It also tells you something about the nature of their relationship that it should be Frank who does the worrying and, so to speak, the mental archiving. Cheryl's connection to what they own is more relaxed and equable. "Careful," Frank says, seeing Cheryl approaching one of his favourite sculptures. "Don't be silly," she tells him. "I'm the one who dusts it."

Cheryl doesn't look like a duster. But then dusting is just a way of speaking. The word encompasses the passion the Cohens share and Cheryl's particular part in it. It's she, if you like, who curates the house, not simply in the sense of hanging the work – though it's thanks to her unobtrusive skills that you aren't overawed as you walk past a Bomberg on the way to the bathroom – but in the very way they buy. They have chosen and bought together from the start.

"though it's Frank who has the knowledge," Cheryl says. "We have the same eye, but Frank has knowledge." They smile at each other over that.

Frank's wanting to know goes back to his earliest years,



Frank Cohen: 'I have a thing about death and funerals'

It is an accompaniment to his collecting mania – "I always had it: cigarette cards, coins, toy soldiers, jukeboxes" – and now Modern British Art: Edward Burra, Lowry, Kenneth Armitage, William Roberts. "It's like a disease, collecting," he says, the disease consisting not simply of needing to own, but to master. "If I find an artist I like, I buy every piece I can find."

**A**s with all serious collectors, the story of how he came by a work matters almost as much as the work itself. But Harry Epworth Allen's *Funeral in Cornwall* has a particular appeal. "I like funerals," he admits. "I like crucifixions. I have a thing about death."

What collector doesn't? But maybe Frank's "thing about death" exceeds the normal fears against which we amass what stores we can, and is the consequence, in part, of growing up poor and vulnerable on the borders of Jewish Manchester and Jewish Salford, and having to make his own way in the world, financially and culturally. I knew him in those days. He was a Manchester character, a young man about town. He worked for my father for a while, selling fancy goods on markets in Liverpool and north Wales – "He was good at working the edge," my father used to say of him, meaning he was good at pulling in a crowd and entertaining it – and later started his own retail

wallpaper, paint and home-improvements business.

Frank had moved into a shop – The Home Improvement Company – in Manchester when Cheryl entered his life. She was 16 and found a summer job working in the shop. It was meant to be for just six weeks. Her own background had more art in it than his did. Her mother taught art, her father, Jack, who represented Treichliff, was "Master of the Fine Art Guild". He manufactured mirrors and installed spinning mirrorflex globes and glass dance floors in ballrooms throughout the North. Frank, as I remember him as a boy, was a great talker: what we called a spiceler in the part of Manchester we grew up in. And Cheryl had the sparkle of ballrooms in her eyes. So they dazzled each other.

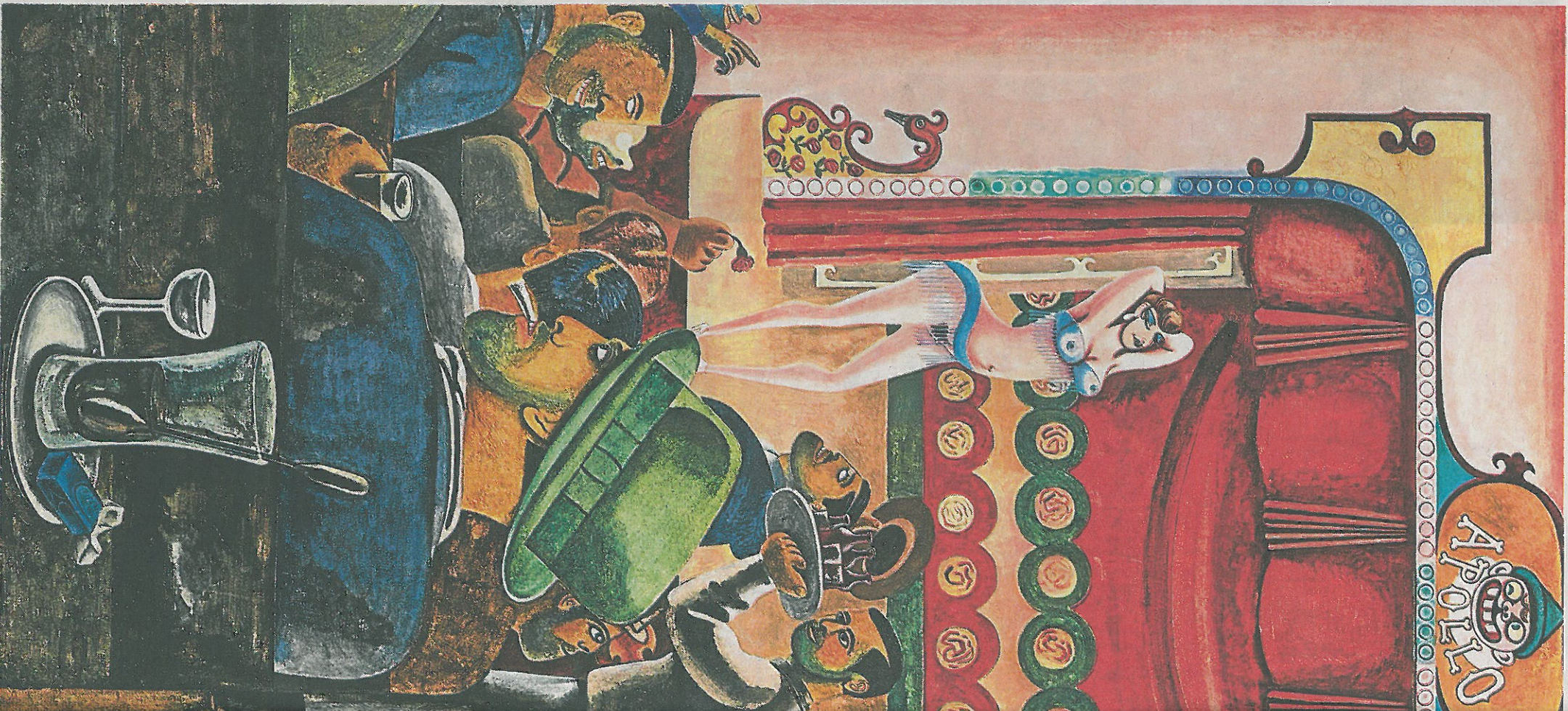
The part of the story that fascinates me is how Frank Cohen the gaff-worker with no training in the fine arts became Frank Cohen the distinguished art collector – such a long and arduous and yes, unexpected, road for him to have taken. How, to begin with, did Cheryl's widely travelled, art-guild father cope with her going out with this wide boy from the wrong side of the tracks?

"By getting me to buy a signed Lowry print every time I drove round to pick her up," Cheryl fills out the details. "He thought he was a wheeler-dealer, too old and not suitable for me!"

Someone more raw about his background might have bridled at that. But Frank laughs, agreeing with the judgment.

It was those Lowry prints that Cheryl's father got him to buy that hooked him. Enter the collector. Unsatisfied with mere prints, he now wanted an original. "Wendy Bridgeman, who knew Lowry and published a number of limited editions of his work, sold me a real Lowry the size of a postcard, called *Our Family*, for £1,100." He is animated, remembering that purchase. "I wanted something of value," he says, but feels he can improve on that word. "Important," he says at last. "I wanted

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something important." "What he really wanted," Cheryl says, "was to search out the best. My father took us as children three times a year from the age of eight to Florence, and therefore I was brought up appreciating art. Frank got a taste. He got addicted. He wanted to get to the source."

She isn't saying she taught him all he knows, but she does speak sometimes as his intellectual midwife. "I led

him," she says. But clearly he was eager to follow. Florence, Paris, Rome – the cities she was familiar with and he wasn't. "Until me all he knew was Torrenolinos." But she accepts they had much to learn from each other. "He taught me street life," she says.

In 1972 they married. They didn't honeymoon in Torrenolinos. "On a visit to London," Frank recalls, "we walked into

the Waddington Gallery on Cork Street and saw a Jim Waddington said, 'You want to buy this?' I asked how much and offered to give him a little Elisabeth Frink – almost all the art I owned then – as part payment. We shook on it then I confessed I had no money. 'Pay me when you can,' Leslie said. That was the beginning of a friendship."

And the beginning of the serious collecting. He laughs