

Don Albright collects art in all mediums and is not afraid of scale or color. Meeting one May, Monday morning, Albright shows me around his art collection. Albright spent thirty years in the Foreign Service as a Cultural Affairs Officer, serving, among other activities, as the director of American Cultural Centers in Tokyo and Mexico City. Along his journeys, he met artists, went to shows, and collected works of contemporary art from across the globe. As we walk around there is an energy and passion in his voice, and always a story behind each piece. We eventually gathered at the table to talk about his collection, public art, and more specifically, about an outdoor sculpture he collected by an internationally recognized artist, Michio Ihara. This particular work, originally installed on the Albright property in 2011, has been donated to the James Madison University's Madison Art Collection.

Meet the Collector



Albright moved to his new home in Harrisonburg, Virginia, just three years ago. In the process of moving from his farm west of Mount Jackson where he spent twenty years, he transferred around 350 pieces he had collected over the decades to his four children, and to various institutions. During our conversation at different points, we were joined by Earlyynn Miller, also a collector and lover of the arts.

MB: When did you begin collecting artwork?

DA: Probably around 1958 was when I bought my first piece. It was a painting of a ship, a small sailing ship in a bay, it just struck me as being very nice, and it was very normal, and I bought it. I don't like it now, but I liked it then. That was the first time that I thought about buying art.

Whoever heard of doing that? So, I did it. This was during my first assignment in Japan. My wife and I had just married and moved to Japan. I was working for the Embassy as a Cultural Affairs Officer, so I was involved with the arts, that was the nature of the work I was doing. Then I began going to shows and to art exhibits, and I started buying the woodblock prints by Japanese artists that were very popular with the foreign community. Not very imaginative, and I don't have any of those anymore (chuckles), but that got me going. Then we moved away from Tokyo to a rural area where we spent two years, and I met some artists there and got interested more in the nature of art, what wonderful things you can do with it, and what it can do for you. We came back to Tokyo and by that time I was really caught up in it. After Japan, we were in Chile, and then Mexico and Indonesia. I bought art in all of those countries and met artists in all of them, and really had a joyous time doing it.

MB: How has serving in the Foreign Service as a Cultural Affairs Officer and as the director of the American Cultural Centers in Tokyo and Mexico City influenced the artwork you collect?

DA: I don't know if that had a particular influence on me other than the fact that in Japan, I bought mostly Japanese works.

MB: Because you were there meeting the artists?

DA: "Yes, and going to their exhibits and whatnot, and seeing their works. And in Mexico, the same thing happened. In whatever country I was in I got to know the artists and that was the influence. The artists themselves were the influence. Then I would know them and see their work, and then see the shows of their friends and other people and I got to know them, too. It worked that way. So, I don't know that it differed from country to country only most everything I have is contemporary. Art that was contemporary fifty years ago or forty years ago depending on when I was there (laughs).

MB: When were you introduced to the work of Michio Ihara, and how?

DA: I had been in Japan on my second tour in Tokyo in '66, and the cultural center was in the process of being moved to another location. We moved it, and I decided for the opening at the new location I would have an art exhibit that would feature the work of Japanese artists who had been in the US as Fulbright grantees. There were four.

MB: Only four?

DA: Four, yes it was 1960's, early days. Two were printmakers, one a watercolor artist, and Michio. Michio Ihara didn't bring sculptures but brought photographs of his installations which were pretty dramatic themselves. So, it was a nice show, and I found Michio as a very compatible person, very nice. I met his wife, who is an American named Doreen. She and my wife got along very well, and so we saw quite a bit of the Ihara's. That has been quite a number of years ago. Michio is one month older than I am it so happens, and he is still working!

MB: What are your thoughts on the importance of public art?

DA: Frankly, we (DA and EM) are drawn to cities that have public art. In New Mexico, there is a law that declares that anyone who is planning a state building such as a post office or any kind of government building understands that one percent goes into public art. That's the law. Ihara has benefitted from that; he has a piece in New Mexico in the Court of Appeals in Albuquerque. Amazing, gorgeous piece. That is the only state that I know that has this approach to public art. It is just a requirement, and I think it's a wonderful requirement. Have you ever been to Columbus, Indiana?

MB: I have not been to Indiana at all.

DA: Columbus, Indiana is a knockout of a city. In the early 1940s, the congregation of the First Christian Church commissioned Eliel Saarinen to build a new church. It was completed in 1942 as an exceptional modern structure. It inspired J. Irwin Miller and his Cummins Engine Company to bring son Eero Saarinen into Columbus to design a series of buildings and his personal residence. The impact was intense and led to other businesses and city officials to bring in all the big names in architecture to create marvels. Currently, it ranks sixth in the nation in public art and architecture – with a population of 67,000 people. And the place is a dream! When you get there, you go to the tourist center, get a guide, and figure out where you will go to spend your day. You won't even have enough time in a day or two to see all of them. It is just great. That sense of public art is really wonderful. That's Columbus, Indiana.

DA: Another great experience we had was going to the Denver, Colorado area. The city, itself, has several huge outdoor sculpture parks – we visited three of them. Then we went to Loveland, about 50 miles north of Denver. It also has three sculpture parks, a small one with contemporary works, a larger one featuring works all made by artists from Zimbabwe, and a wonderful park featuring a mile-long trail with sculptures of

all sorts on every side.

EM: One of the things we like to do when we travel is to find a small city we've never heard of, go off the highway and explore it and see how it's fairing in the arts. We've done this for enough years that in some of them we've repeated, and we can really tell that the art movement has grown.

MB: Has there been a place that has been your favorite to revisit?

DA: Well there was this one town between Illinois and Indiana, it's called Danville, and we just drove into it. We noticed art outside on the sidewalks and on buildings, and thought, "Oh, that's interesting." We drove into town and found that there was art all over the place. It was a traveling art show that had been envisioned by the city. They would do this in various towns, and the town was required to do a certain amount of its own art. Original art, that's the price of it. And then the show would be placed around in public view all over the city. Well, what a great idea.

MB: What are your thoughts on the importance of collecting art to your life? Collecting art obviously enriches your life, do you find that it's been more than just a collection?

DA: Collecting has been an important part of my life to the point where we still go to exhibits and performances in this area. We go to shows in Staunton and this weekend we are scheduled to be going to Richmond and hit some down there. So, it still causes our life to reverberate all the time. When we travel within this country and get to a town, we check out the galleries and the artwork. You get some wonderful surprises that way. That is an impetus for travel, to take you to places that you never thought you'd go.

MB: Do you think Harrisonburg could potentially be a good place for public art, or do you think it's already getting more into public art?

DA: Yes, with the first Friday events it is obvious that many people are animated by the art. More so now than in the past. As you know on the first Fridays, we have all kinds of businesses that are involved in the arts. Thirty or so sites open up for that occasion, and they're obviously not afraid of art. Individuals are the same.

That is one of my favorite theories on people and their purchasing of art. Most people are afraid of it. Because if you buy something and put it on the wall, people may judge you, by what you bought, by what you have. So, they buy conventional, traditional work, so nobody can question them. I think a lot of people are victims of that. But I don't see that happening so much here, and the fact is that the artists that are working are experimental, they are abstract, they are original and traditional, all kinds and they all seem to attract a crowd, and that's good. Enthusiasm for the arts truly seems to be growing.

MB: Has there ever been an exhibit in Harrisonburg that just shocked you in a good way?

DA: I had a good experience at Eastern Mennonite University last year when they were celebrating their first centennial. What they had done is contact five artists that had graduated from their art program at EMU and commissioned them to each do an art piece. It was to be 10" x 10" x 100, and that's what they would do. So, we went to the exhibition the day after the opening, and we were floored by what we saw. We each have a piece from that show. The whole exhibit was really exciting and refreshing, and I thought, now there is something. [Albright is photographed with the work he collected]. This is 10" x 10" x 16, which is a portion from the 100. The artist, Melinda Steffy, allowed the work to be purchased in smaller pieces. She has spent many years focusing on the relationship between art and music. She is also a musician, and she sees a strong relationship between music and contemporary art, and in this particular piece this is the soprano role (pointing to the top row and going down), the alto, the tenor, and the bass. In her study, in her mind, as she sees it, this is called 606. 606 is a page in the hymnal from years ago that everyone knows. And they started singing the night of the opening.



It was not planned, but they all knew what 606 meant and started humming and then burst into song and did the whole piece. All of them, it just started happening with the whole audience, we didn't see that, but it sounds incredible. •

Don Albright has been a collector and lover of the arts for decades now. With his generosity, James Madison University is now home to a free-standing stainless-steel sculpture by Michio Ihara. When installed, the piece will be the first large-scale, abstract, public art sculpture on the university's campus.

I want to personally thank Don Albright for granting me a tour of his collection and being so kind to sit down with me for this interview. Also, a big thank you to Earlynn Miller who also graciously gave me her time and showed me around her collection. Thank you both.

Interviewed by Mallory Burrell