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SANDY BESSER'S
**Extraordinary
Art Collection**

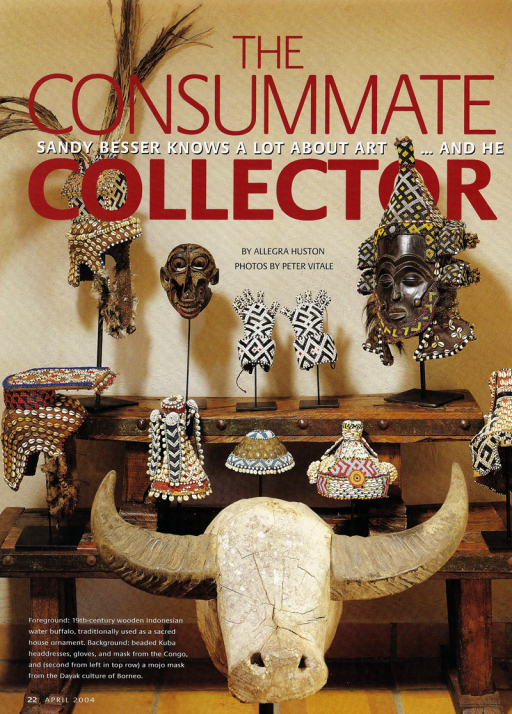
HOW TO ATTRACT
WILD BIRDS
TO YOUR GARDEN

THE ENVIRONMENTALIST
AND THE ROLLS ROYCE: **A Love Story**

THE CONSUMMATE COLLECTOR

SANDY BESSER KNOWS A LOT ABOUT ART ... AND HE

BY ALLEGRA HUSTON
PHOTOS BY PETER VITALE



Foreground: 19th-century wooden Indonesian water buffalo, traditionally used as a sacred house ornament. Background: beaded Kuba headaddresses, gloves, and mask from the Congo, and (second from left in top row) a mojo mask from the Dayak culture of Borneo.

Sandy Besser with two teapots from his extensive collection (in background, on shelves): left foreground, Picasso, and right, van Gogh, both by Russian-émigré artist Noi Volkov.

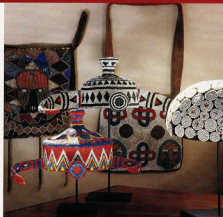
KNOWS WHAT HE LIKES, TOO







Above: The living room, with Ruby (left) and Stella perched picturesquely on a chair. On the walls, drawings and textiles; on table in background, Yoruba beaded crowns. Above right: Beaded objects from Africa, including a Yoruba diviner's bag.



St. Louis, the early 1940s: Two boys, one 11 years old, the other only four, race up the steps of the museum in Forest Park. At the top of the steps is a nursery in an open case. The boys press its muse, then go to look at paintings. The older boy is Harold Bradley, who will become a well-known writer. The younger boy is his cousin Sandy Besser, whom Harold brings to the museum three or four times a week, instilling in him a lifelong passion for art.

SANDY BESSER STILL TAKES A CHILD'S DELIGHT

IN ART, as if each thing his eyes alight on is new and wondrous. Nearly 4,000 pieces of art are displayed in his house: drawings, sculpture, contemporary ceramic teapots (as well as some made of things as diverse as cactus and quilted fabric), antique slingshots, beaded crowns, Hindu icons, intricate embroideries, masks ... Whenever he talks about an object, his voice drops to an awed whisper tinged with both the pride and the amazement of ownership.

The collection, though vast and wide-ranging, with 14 subcollections, has a unity imposed by Besser's own personality: an aesthetic impulse toward the figure and the vessel, and an insistence that everything he buys must be of museum quality. Besser edits his collection constantly and loves playing curator, finding amusing or suggestive juxtapositions of seemingly disparate objects. His office contains, among many other things, a gloriously fragile Chinese robe, sculpted phalluses from four different countries in Southeast Asia, and an 11th-century Burmese slingshot. Yet the collection is not, he insists, eclectic. To him the word "eclectic" suggests lack of focus, low standards, a slipshod mind.

Besser sets rules for his collection, and adheres to them. For each new piece he acquires, he donates three to museums. Anything he acquires must be better than anything else of its kind that he already owns. When I





ask him if he would buy a piece of art that does not fit into one of his current collections, Besser responds, "You mean, would I start a new collection?" If he falls in love with something new, he says, he doesn't want just one. He collects in depth, with a romantic's desire to know every facet of his beloved.

Besser admires expertise, intellectual rigor, decisiveness, and fine craftsmanship—in other words, he admires people who know what they're doing and are good at it. He himself is one of those people. *Art & Antiques* magazine named him one of the top 100 collectors in America; his art library is enormous, and he devotes long hours to research. He has little patience with dilettantism, sloppiness, or mediocrity. When he finds them, especially in the art world, he does not hesitate to confront them head on.

Besser has become notorious in Santa Fe for his outspoken opinions on the State of New Mexico museum system. He served for two years as chairman of the board of the Museum of New Mexico Foundation, presiding over three major accomplishments: more than enough money was raised to build Milner Plaza; the *Apache Dancer* sculpture became a permanent fixture there; and millions of dollars' worth of Native American art were transferred, after decades of infighting, from the School of American Research to the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture. Besser resigned from the board in August 2002, not because of the failings he saw in the system, but because he was asked, in strong and threatening terms, to keep his opinions private. That he refused to do. He sometimes likes to irritate, because, he says, "irritation can lead to action." He is the person who is willing to stand up and say what other people merely think.

If Besser can't work for change from inside the system, he will call foul from the bleachers. He regards the new complex of museum offices on Museum Hill as bureaucratic egocentrism, a

Continued on page 60



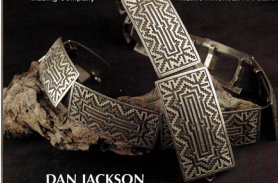
Above: A cluster of objects that appeal to Besser on a spiritual level, including a cast-iron bowl by Santa Fe's Tom Joyce (center). Above left: Part of the collection of kris handles from Indonesia.

Opposite page: The entry-hall gallery features a sampling from many of Besser's subcollections: drawings, ceramic figurative sculpture, contemporary Hispanic art, baskets, turned-wood bowls, Southeast Asian textiles, tribal masks, and Indonesian beadwork.

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Consummate Collector

Continued from page 27



In background: A room filled with Latin American art; foreground, ceramic-and-burlap sculpture by an Argentine artist.

diversion of funds that would be better used for expansion projects at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture and the Museum of International Folk Art, which he rates "our crown jewel in this state, the best of its kind in the world." It irks him that the Palace of the Governors is perennially (and, in his opinion, undeservedly) the Cultural Affairs Department's favorite child, and he feels that the \$47 million complex smacks of grandiosity. As for the fourth state museum in Santa Fe, the Museum of Fine Arts, Besser considers its administrative and curatorial leadership weak; he greatly prefers the fine-art museums in Albuquerque, Taos, and Roswell. He thinks the multi-million-dollar endowment drive now being proposed by the Foundation is doomed to failure. He would prefer to see each museum hold its own drive, and succeed or fail on its own merits.

Besser would also like to see the Foundation disburse its \$12 million endowment to the four museums and concentrate its efforts on attracting new members and improving the museum gift shops.

The one New Mexico museum board Besser serves on currently is that of Rancho de las Golondrinas, a Spanish colonial village 15 minutes' drive from Santa Fe that is also an active farming operation. He describes it as "the most fun board I've ever been on," as well as the most efficient and well-run. He is one of only a few Anglos on the board. The Hispanic culture of Northern New Mexico is, he says, "my favorite culture," and one of the main reasons he moved to Santa Fe.

Although Besser loves the Museum of International Folk Art, he dislikes the term "folk art." He also dislikes the word "craft." He finds the semantics of art treacherous, implying a hierarchy that he does not accept. "Good art is finely crafted. Finely crafted pieces are good art." He is pleased that his collection of contemporary teapots (as well as the vast majority of his drawings) will eventually go to the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, where they may well be displayed in the same room as 17th-century Italian paintings. "Museums are changing," he says, "and I like to think I'm part of a large number of people helping museums change." He often lends works from his collections to museums in Santa Fe and elsewhere. (See sidebar, page 62.)

BESSER IS NOT PRECIOUS ABOUT HIS ART. He does not stash things away in cabinets or special rooms. Every surface—vertical and horizontal—of every room in his house holds art. He and his late wife, Diane, raised children and grandchildren with free run of the house, and he claims they never broke a thing. Nor have his two shih tzus, Ruby and Stella (named after barmaids he has known). His kitchen looks like a display area—he's putting together a collection of contemporary functional ceramic objects for the COPIA museum in Napa, California—but everything is in regular use.



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Consummate Collector

Art, for Besser, is an integral part—and an essential pleasure—of daily life.

This is reflected by his interest in tribal art, which he defines, with carefully chosen words, as "objects made by a culture for use by that culture, that have been used by that culture."

The similarities between objects made by cultures from opposite sides of the world are striking. A remarkably beautiful Tibetan chest painted with skeletons could be mistaken for Mexican. Animal motifs on beaded dance panels from the Indonesian island of Sumba recall Guatemalan textiles (of which Besser also has a small but lovely collection, draped over chairs and beds). The coffee table and nearby shelves hold an intriguing array of mounted Indonesian kris (dagger) handles. Each handle is a masterpiece of miniature sculpture in wood, bone, ivory, or metal. Some have the terrifying scowls of Polynesian idols, others the rounded abstraction of a sculpture by Brancusi or Henry Moore.

Besser explains the incredibly varied nature of his collection with an anecdote about a turn-of-the-century baseball player named Wee Willie Keeler.

"What makes you such a great hitter?" Wee Willie was asked. His answer:



In the guest bedroom: Mexican dance masks on wall; rare Brazilian historical-narrative bedspread, circa 1960.

"Because I hit 'em where they ain't." Besser read that story when he was about ten years old, and it never left him. "I didn't know to call it wisdom at that time," he says, "but it made sense." He applied it to his business career, with great success. It is the cornerstone of his collecting philosophy.

"When you go to buy 'em where they ain't, several things happen," he says. Because the field isn't crowded, prices are affordable, and you—the new collector—have the opportunity to buy the best. This is his primary piece of advice for

UPCOMING SHOWS FROM THE BESSER COLLECTION

Arte y Amistad: Selections from the Diane and Sandy Besser Collection of Contemporary Hispanic Art, Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, opened March 2004

Historic Navajo and Zuni Silver Boxes from the Besser Collection, Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, opening July 2004

Tribal Art from the Besser Collection, Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, opening late 2005

Contemporary Teapots from the Besser Collection, DeYoung Museum, San Francisco, opening late 2006

Contemporary Figurative Ceramic Sculpture from the Besser Collection, Arizona State University Ceramic Research Center, Tempe, opening 2007

what he calls "the serious, obsessive, sick collector": never buy a lesser piece, and if you can't afford the best in a particular field, move on. In a crowded field such as Native American beadwork, pre-Columbian sculpture, or African wooden sculpture, only the top collectors get first crack at the best things, and because prices have been driven up, the market is compromised by fakes. Besser does not collect in these areas.

Things that were made for the tourist trade don't normally interest Besser. The exception is his collection of Navajo and Zuni silver boxes, the most extensive in existence, which will go on exhibition at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in July 2004. As he points out, almost all Native American art made after the railroad came through was trade goods. His collection contains compacts, lipstick holders, cigarette lighters, pillboxes, and cigarette boxes. Like most of his tribal collections, it is pretty much closed, as he thinks he has exhausted the supply of the finest pieces. He did, however, find one box last year that was better than anything else he had. His eyes light up as he describes it: "It's a big squished frog. A Zuni fetish in a silver box, absolutely incredible. It was one of the ugliest boxes ever. It crossed over. It looked like roadkill."

Besser's main interest now is in collecting living artists who are, in his estimation, under-recognized. "When I find a significant new talent, which I do fairly frequently, I work with them—if they want to work with me." That means collecting their art, getting other collectors interested, and placing their work in museums and private galleries. Occasionally he'll go to a graduate student's show and buy everything in it. When a new piece arrives, he places it next to the very best he owns. If it doesn't stand up, it was a mistake. He figures that 20 percent of what he's bought over the past few decades were mistakes. His eye, he hopes, is still improving.

The collections that Besser describes as currently active are drawings, contemporary figurative ceramics (which will go to the Ceramic Research Center

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Consummate Collector

at Arizona State University, in Tempe), and contemporary Hispanic art. He likes ceramics and drawings because of their intimacy, the sense of the artist's hand at work. A painting can be painted over, rethought, refined. In a drawing, Besser says, "you get the raw artist. And you also get the idea."

"I enjoy humor in art," he says. "I like hard psychological edges. I like art that makes you think." Many of his pieces contain strong political or social satire; some are weird, shocking, even upsetting.

One entire wall is dedicated to the Catholic Church. Besser was chairman of the Museum of New Mexico Foundation during the controversy over the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe wearing a bikini, and received several threatening letters. He's still annoyed that a valid debate between museumology and Catholic doctrine was emotively recast as a clash between the Anglo and Hispanic cultures. Besser recently commissioned a *santero*—a good friend, whom he warned of possible repercussions—to make a "hard-hitting

religious piece." It will deal with what Besser calls "the Pope's fallacies."

"I have a number of artists who'll call me and say, 'Sandy, I've done a piece and nobody but you would hang it in their house.' And," says Besser, "I usually buy

the piece they're offering. There's no art in this house that bothers me." **SB**

Allegra Huston is a daughter of the late film director John Huston, himself an avid (if eclectic) collector whose passion was pre-Columbian art.

SANDY BESSER'S FAVORITE GALLERIES

"It is said that there are between 200 and 300 galleries in the Santa Fe area. Fewer than 25 meet my personal collecting tastes. These galleries are fair, cordial, and entertaining, and they know the definition of quality." (Artists' names or gallery descriptions in parentheses.)

Turner Carroll (Bergt, Linn, Smith, Shadler)
EVO (Bennett, Joyce, Hallawell)
Zaplin-Lampert (Campos, Doffoff)
Thirteen Moons (Brock, Khan, Sutton, all ceramic artists)
Klaudia Marr (Gay, Ruiz, Ding)
Cline (Herrera)
Taylor Dale Tribal Arts
Robert Nichols Gallery
Tadu (cutting edge)

Santa Fe Clay (Scala, Bobrowski, Fowler, Voelker)
Rainbow Man (a bit of everything)
Addison/Parks (Carlson, Tinker, Zink, Hosmer, Khan, Lopez)
Owings Dewey (L. Tapia, S. Tapia)
Nuart (Briggs)
Munson (Dominguez)
Morning Star (Native American)
Davis Mather (Folk)

Kania-Ferrin (Native American)
Chiaroscuro (Kaneko, Shrewsbury)
Andrea Fisher (Native American pottery)
Nedra Matteucci
Economos (tribal arts)

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Architects, Contractors, Interior Designers

Arizona Tile	8
Clemens & Associates	56
Kitchens by Jeanné	59

Art Galleries, Museums & Studios

Alexandra Stevens	43
Deloney Newkirk Fine Art	41, 50
LewAllen Contemporary	13
Lone Eagle Studio	68
Martha Pettigrew	21
Meyer Gallery	52
Monkey Tree Gallery	61
Navajo Gallery	16
Nedra Matteucci Galleries	Inside Front Cover
Peyton Wright	5
Shush Yaz	60
Studio 1592	62
Wheelwright Museum	69

Entertainment & Events

Santa Fe Opera	Inside Back Cover
----------------	-------------------

Santa Fe Stages	66
SWAIA	20
Fashion, Footwear & Accessories	
Lincoln Place	4
Tianello	Back Cover

Home Furnishings & Antiques

Cose Belle	63
El Rancho de Nambé	18
Furniture Design of Taos	57
Nambé	1
Santa Fe Market	42
Southwest Spanish Craftsmen	2

Hotels & Accommodations

Bishop's Lodge Resort & Spa	53
Inn on the Alameda	67
La Posada de Santa Fe	57
Rancho de San Juan	67

Jewelry

Danny's Jewelry	54
Howard Goldsmiths	62

Lone Eagle Design	68
Nancy Brown Custom Jeweler	59
Robert Hurt Master Goldsmith	67
The Golden Eye	66

Real Estate

Coldwell Banker	55
Dougherty Real Estate	61
Quail Run	63
Zocalo	7

Restaurants

Chilacas	68
Joe's Diner	69
Julian's Restaurant	60

Services

Haight & Lopour, DDS	51
Mist Skin Care	67
Qwest Dex	56
U.S. Dept. of the Interior,	
Indian Arts and Crafts Board	58