

## **Annapolis couple's collection reveals art of marriage**

Tom and Kitty Stoner combine their love of sculpture and drawing into fabulous display of 20th-century art and beyond



Collectors Kitty and Tom Stoner believe that they are just the trustees for art that belongs to the public and to the future. They are looking for ways to share their new digital/video art collection. (Algerina Perna, Baltimore Sun Photo / June 25, 2012)

By **Susan Reimer**, The Baltimore Sun

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Tom Stoner made his fortune owning AM radio stations, where the weekly Top 40 was eagerly anticipated by devoted listeners. Would their favorite artists move up this week? Would that new release make it?

"I remember how easy it was to decide who came on the list," recalls the **Annapolis** businessman and philanthropist, "but how hard it was to decide who went off the list. That was the part of the process that fascinated me."

At the Severn River home of Stoner and his wife, Kitty, "Top 40" takes on a new meaning.

Displayed in a light-filled and airy space renovated to resemble a Park Avenue apartment are the works of 40 sculptors the couple believe best represent the range of the 20th century. And the pieces are paired with the drawings the artists made first.

At its peak, the collection numbered more than 60. But the Stoners took up the challenge of winnowing it to 40, deciding, in the exercise that had fascinated Tom Stoner, what would come off the list.

"Rodin was the springboard," said Tom Stoner. "From there, we wanted to illustrate the evolution of 20th-century sculpture."

It now includes Jean Arp, **Alexander Calder**, Barbara Hepworth, Anish Kapoor, Sol LeWitt, Jean Dubuffet, Henry Moore and Pablo Picasso, to name but a few.

"We still tweak the collection a little here and there. I think most everyone would agree with 30 of the 40. Five or 10 would be in dispute," said Tom Stoner.

"But this is about as much fun as anyone is entitled to have."

What is so delightful about this art collection is what it says about the Stoners' marriage.

Kitty Stoner loves sculpture: its texture, its three dimensions and its relationship to the space it inhabits.

Tom Stoner, whose favorite childhood memories are of the art classes his father enrolled him in, loves drawings and paintings.

When they first relocated to Annapolis from Iowa, their home was large enough to accommodate only his passion. When they moved to this home in 1983, with its open floor plan, there was room for what Kitty loved, too.

But how to blend the two disciplines? How to create a collection, something that was cohesive and made a statement or covered an arc?

At a New York lunch with art expert Barbara Guggenheim in 1986, they presented their dilemma and asked for her help in resolving it.

Why not, she suggested, collect the drawing the sculptor made before taking up his tools and pair it with the piece that emerged from the stone, the wood, or the metal?

Kitty Stoner would be able to see — and touch — the work of the artists she loved and Tom Stoner would see that same work in a medium he enjoys.

"The drawings had to be good in their own right," said Tom Stoner. And because an artist might create several versions from a drawing and take much liberty in re-creating it, the drawing also had to be closely related to the final piece of sculpture.

That's the fun of this collection. You see the sculpture and, on the wall near it, you see the artist's first imaginings. It is almost like seeing a creative mind at work, a kind of time-lapse photography from inspiration to completion.

The Stoners sold American Radio Systems and its 106 stations to **CBS** in 1999. That's when the serious work of this collection began. It is one thing to put together the work of 40 sculptors you think best represent the past 100 years. It is quite another to find both the inspirational drawings and the completed sculptures. For the Stoners, it was a kind of scavenger hunt. With the help of Guggenheim and her partner, Abigail Asher, they chased their quarry from estate sales to galleries and back again.

Now that the collection has been essentially completed, they are taking what the couple calls "pilgrimages" to learn as much as they can about the artists in it, reading books, visiting birthplaces, exhibits, galleries, even graves.

Not long ago, for example, they took a helicopter ride so they could walk Robert Smithson's 1,500-foot spiral jetty in the Great Salt Lake in Utah, which had finally emerged from three decades of high water. (They have only the drawing of this piece, just as they own just the color pencil drawing Cristo made of his plan to drape orange fabric across Rifle Gap in Colorado, a mammoth installation called "Valley Curtain.")

With the end of the millennium, the Stoners looked forward. "OK," Tom said, "the 20th century is over. It's behind us. What about now?"

The answer, of course, is the same as it is for movies, books and music. Digital. Digital art.

Bill Viola began working in this discipline about 30 years ago. Also called video art, it is in its infancy, but it has captivated the

Stoners with its palpable vitality and, very often, its connection to nature.

One of the first pieces they purchased was Viola's "Becoming Light." Two lovers swim in moonlit waters and are gradually transformed into stars in the heavens over the course of this exquisite video.

In another, titled "Dervish" by Jennifer Steinkamp, another leading video artist, the leaves on a silhouetted tree, dancing like dervishes in a strong wind, gradually change with the seasons.

There is humor in this art form, too. The pixels in an image of the artist's face slide from one screen to the next, but they never completely form the image on either screen. It is titled "Both Here and Here," and the Stoners sought out the artist, Siebren Versteeg, in his Brooklyn studio to meet him and buy the piece.

"We really liked him very much," said Kitty Stoner. "I guess that's a good thing, since that's him in a shelf in my house."

When the Stoners sold their radio company, they created the TKF Foundation in Annapolis, and for 15 years they have been creating gardens in places that need them the most — including a Baltimore street corner where children who died in violence are remembered, and behind the concertina wire of a prison.

The foundation was born from their love of nature and their deep understanding of its healing powers, and this new branch of their art collecting grows from that.

Almost all of the video subjects have one foot in the natural world and the other in the life of the spirit. Sitting on the big wraparound sofa in their darkened screening room, you can feel your blood pressure drop and the furrow in your brow melt away as you watch them. It is a whole new way of experiencing the power of art.

"Art is what we do now," said Kitty Stoner. All their trips, business and pleasure, include visits to galleries and shows, and now to the studios of the video artists they seek out.

They have collected about 24 video pieces — some of which cost as little as a couple thousand dollars — and they are looking for a way to share them with people outside their darkened screening room, perhaps by screening them on the side of a building.

"All art just passes through the hands of people," said Tom Stoner. "We are just temporary owners, trustees in a way. It belongs in the public realm because art is what moves a society forward."

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He likes drawings and paintings. She likes sculpture. Here's how Tom and Kitty Stoner blended their love of art.  
Image 16 of 17



### **Zen garden**

( Algeria Perna, *Baltimore Sun Photo* / June 25, 2012 )

Art collectors Kitty and Tom Stoner have devoted their philanthropic life to the symbiotic relationship between spirit and nature. The garden outside their Severn River home, designed by Shin Abe of Boston's Zen Associates, reflects that.

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