

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Galleries: 'Four Decades' traces evolution of an art aficionado's taste

By Edith Newhall For The Inquirer

One of the first pieces that greets you as you enter Fleisher/Ollman Gallery's eclectic yet surprisingly copacetic exhibition "Four Decades" is framed and dated 1970, but it is not a work of art - at least not in the usual sense. It's a polite, confident, handwritten letter from John Ollman in response to an ad in *The Inquirer* for an assistant gallery director.

The rest is the stuff of Philadelphia gallery lore. Janet Fleisher, who placed the ad, hired Ollman; they worked together compatibly at her Janet Fleisher Gallery until she retired; Ollman bought the gallery from Fleisher in 1996 and tweaked its name. (Fleisher died in August at 93.)

The show, proposed to Ollman by his gallery director, Amy Adams, could have been simply a "greatest hits" exhibition, with works culled from every show organized by Ollman and Fleisher and by Ollman on his own, tracing the trajectory of his career. Instead, it's a fascinating visual history of the development of Ollman's taste, eye, and knowledge over his 40 years with the gallery. It is also no small tribute to Fleisher, who had wide-ranging taste and encouraged Ollman's eclecticism.

Some of the best reflections of Ollman's interests and expertise are in the dialogues between works here, rather than in individual pieces. His humor and fondness for connections, for example, can be seen in the very first grouping of works. A 1937 Horace Pippin painting, *Major General Smedley D. Butler, USMC, Retired* (1882 – 1940), portrays Butler in profile against a blue sky with billowing clouds; apparently completed three years before his death, it suggests he already is en route to heaven. Next to it is a carved limestone sculpture of two somber doves by William Edmondson, a sculpture that, like many of Edmondson's works, was likely intended as a headstone embellishment. Not coincidentally, works by Pippin, Edmondson, and Bill Traylor (also in this show), all self-taught African American artists, were in the exhibition "Paintings, Drawings, and Monuments,"

organized by Ollman for Janet Fleisher Gallery in 1991.

The connections continue. A Martin Ramirez drawing of stags from about 1950 was reproduced for a postcard announcing Janet Fleisher Gallery's first Ramirez show in 1983. William Hawkins' painting *Trail Riders* (1982) was based on Thomas Hart Benton's painting of the same name; it was also in the gallery's first Hawkins show in 1983.

The sculptors Bill Walton and Charles Fahlen, who exhibited in group shows at Fleisher/Ollman in recent years and whose sculptures are mounted here in close proximity, both taught at Moore College of Art & Design and were longtime friends and admirers of each other's work. Morris Hirschfield, who is represented by the painting *Girl With Plumed Hat* (1945), was in the gallery's "Masterpieces of American Folk Art" in 1996, a show that led to Ollman's first encounter with the late New York gallery owner Sidney Janis; years earlier, Janis had helped introduce self-taught art to a mainstream audience with his book *They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters of the 20th Century*, in which Hirschfield was included.

The diversity of "Four Decades" is most striking, as seen through Ollman's gatherings of pre-Columbian Peruvian ceramics (from a collection he persuaded Fleisher to buy, he says); drawings and paintings by the Chicago Imagists Christina Ramberg and Ray Yoshida, *Hairy Who* artist Jim Nutt, and the self-taught artists James Castle, Forrest Bess, and others; anonymous African and Oceanic carvings; works by contemporary artists currently represented by the gallery; and examples of American frackturs, Tramp Art furniture, and Native American kachina figures.

Seeing this exhibition reminded me of visiting a great, eccentric collection in someone's house. You may need Ollman as your guide.



An oil-on-canvas work by Morris Hirschfield, part of the "Four Decades" exhibition at Fleisher/Ollman Gallery.

Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, 1616 Walnut St., 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, 12 to 5 p.m. Saturdays. 215-545-7562 or www.fleisher-ollmangallery.com. Through Nov. 27.