Mogul Douglas Cramer collects hit TV shows and fine art

By Hunter Drohojowska

Mike Mullen/Herald photographer

Douglas Cramer started collecting as a child, "Then I collected pigeons, magic tricks, movie magazines, salt and pepper shakers, old books, even first editions when I was still a junior in high school." He now has an enviable collection of art by modern masters of the '60s and by younger artists whose reputations are still evolving.

When television producer Douglas S. Cramer talks about his primary passion — collecting fine art — his voice is bitter, somewhat bewildered. It seems that whenever he discusses his collection of contemporary art someone accuses him of trying to apologize, to compensate with his support of high culture for the popular TV shows he co-produces: "The Love Boat," "Matt Houston," "Dynasty," "Hotel" and "Finder of Lost Loves."

"In reality," says Cramer, trying to establish the weight of his commitment, "I've been collecting for 25 years!" That is to say, *before* he was one of the most powerful, wealthy figures in Hollywood, and *before* he had anything to apologize for.

As the gate to his Bel-Air home swings open, one gleans a sense of his catholic collection: A hefty steel cigarette butt sculpted by Claes Oldenburg and a minimalist gridded white cube by Sol Lewitt are perched on the grassy knoll in front of a 1920s Spanish mission-style home.

Cramer comes to the door with three King Charles spaniels scampering around his ankles: Victoria, Albert and Elizabeth. Immediately, the conversation detours from the big canvases by Frank Stella, Jim Dine, Roy Lichtenstein and Ellsworth Kelly on the living room walls to the dogs. "I had a mutt once that I loved, named Dorothy Buffum Chandler, and when she died, I thought I could never have another dog," says Cramer with a slightly embarrassed smile. "Then I started to see Lauren Bacall with hers and I fell in love with them."

Increasingly, industry moguls like Cramer are contributing their considerable resources toward collecting fine art, and inevitably, their commitments are regarded by the skeptical as less "pure" than those of bankers or yuppies. Cramer, for one, scoffs at the idea of art as balm to the guilty conscience. He believes that most entertainment personalities collect for the same intensely personal reasons he does: "There is no question that for me, in collecting, I finally have to satisfy *only* myself. No one in television has the liberty of making the show that you want just for yourself. The stakes are too high. You're making something for an audience, the stockholders, the distributors, whoever. If you want to be totally individual, you can build a collection that is just yours."

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> **Douglas Cramer, TV producer and art collector**

Cramer, a trustee of the Museum of Contemporary Art, collects art by modern masters of the 1960s and by younger artists whose reputations are evolving in the 1980s. A visitor notices that an early Andy Warhol "disaster" painting and a 1979 Jasper Johns share their glory with a large-scale painting by David Salle and Julian Schnabel's portrait of Cramer and his son, Douglas III. There are also works of African art that echo the angularity of a late Picasso and a Lichtenstein sculpture of two profiles. Paintings and drawings cover every wall of every room, while sculpture takes up the floor space. From Cramer's living room a breathtaking view of the L.A. basin is bisected by a massive pair of pastel planes he commissioned from his friend Ellsworth Kelly. That venerable abstract painter recalled, "Doug once told me that he spends a lot of time during the day watching film and that he wants something at home that is the opposite, something quiet and firm, rather than active. I like to think that my painting is about

Cramer/E-6, Col. 1

A life of mixed media

Cramer/Continued from E-1

permanence, clarity, something you contemplate, that gets better with time. He spends all day making decisions and it's a relief to see color and form in art that is very stable."

Yet art is not all that Cramer collects. In the den, over the bar, there are hundreds of pieces of mercury glass, which was produced in England at the end of the 19th century when silver became too costly for the middle class. "My mother gave them to me, and then I collected them and other people gave them to me."

Being a Leo, Cramer also collects lions. And an entire room is devoted to Staffordshire china figurines of — what else? — King Charles spaniels. (There are also dog portraits, by Malcolm Morley and Ellsworth Kelly.)

"I've always wanted to own things of beauty," confesses Cramer. "I've always collected, ever since I was a child. Then I collected pigeons, magic tricks, movie magazines, salt and pepper shakers, old books, even first editions when I was still a junior in high school. When I was in high school, I collected museum post cards and poster art."

Settling into a tan leather sofa, Cramer struggles to explain the dilemma and dichotomy of collecting. "It's about possession and ownership," he muses. "Yet we really are just a keeper for that certain time. I think it is important to look ahead and know where your collection will go. I want (my art) to go to the appropriate place for each artist. I have no ego need to have it stay together. The most important gift I've ever made was to MoCA. I gave something I thought I could never live without (an inverted red triangle painting by Kelly, still in his living room). It was the first painting I ever bought, and the most expensive at the time, over $50,000."

Art dealer Margo Leavin, who has known Cramer since the early 1960s, notes, "He always collected, but suddenly he's involved at a much deeper level. He spends more time looking and he's more aggressive about going after something specific that he wants. Since going on the board at MoCA, he has become a different kind of collector. Look at Gala! Gala! (a fund-raiser he organized on 'The Love Boat'). He has taken his role (as trustee) at MoCA very seriously. All you have to do is raise your hand at auction and you're known as a collector, but there are not many people who grow beyond that. He's taking a stand and he's giving it back, and there aren't many collectors who get to that point."

Cramer is a small, stocky man, casually dressed in a smart olive-and-rose plaid shirt and olive pants, with matching deck shoes, all looking as if they are brand new. His blue eyes are shrewd and he sports a small, natty mustache. He looks younger than his 54 years, but his hair has started to recede and his face has grown jowly. A native of Louisville, Ky., he has a Southerner's ability to spin a yarn, especially if it happens to be about his own eventful life.

It is ironic that the son of strict Southern Baptist parents, who forbade him to go the movies until he was 18, should wind up as one of the most successful producers in Hollywood, one who developed the notorious "Peyton Place" — the first American nighttime TV soap opera — and more recently, the racy "Hollywood Wives." On the other hand, he has known small-town values and scandals first hand, whether in the Midwest or in Hollywood.

"We were very old-fashioned Baptists until we moved to Cincinnati, when we became Presbyterians," confides Cramer. "My father was the classic traveling salesman, a Willy Loman of the South; he was never very successful. My mother was an interior decorator and a writer."

Cramer was initiated into the world of drama as a child, when he worked as a theater usher, but his parents wouldn't let him go into show business without a college education. First, he went to Northwestern University, then to the Sorbonne in Paris, finally to the University of Cincinnati, from which he graduated in 1953. He received a graduate degree from Columbia University in 1954. With the intention of becoming a writer, he took different jobs along the way. He taught theater and English at Carnegie Institute of Technology, ran the Cincinnati Playhouse and wrote plays that were produced off-

Broadway. In 1956, after renting a house in Majorca, he was embarking on the Great American Novel when his father died. "I came back and went through a period of analysis and realized I was not going to be Hemingway or Faulkner, and if anything I had a good commercial sense," recalls Cramer sagely. "At that time, Broadway was showing its first signs of death, Hollywood was being absorbed by television and television was where it was all happening. I made a decision: I wanted to be as successful a producer as I could be, and I studied the best way to get there."

That way was a brother-in-law at Procter & Gamble in Cincinnati who got him a job as television supervisor of such daytime serials as "The Edge of Night," "Search for Tomorrow" and "As the World Turns." With a wry smile, he says, "That's when I felt the serial form had great vitality and could transfer to nighttime; but it took a while to convince people of that."

Cramer went on to the advertising agency of Ogilvy and Mather because it was in New York City and that much closer to the world of television. Three years later, in 1962, he was hired as vice president of program development at ABC by Daniel Melnick. "For the next four years, I was spending about half my time on the West Coast," he says, adding that it was an "extraordinary time in television." Others who pushed ABC to No. 1 during those years were such prominent figures as Barry Diller, Leonard Goldberg, Brandon Stoddard and Michael Eisner. With William Self, Cramer developed "Peyton Place" and "Batman," and he also met another "bright young producer" named Aaron Spelling.

It was in New York, as well, that Cramer started going to galleries with Melnick during their lunch hour. "In terms of the accessibility of collecting, which grows to desire and then to craving for it, *that* began with Danny," he says. "The young Doug Cramer was very much like the contemporary Doug Cramer," recalls Melnick. "He'd always had an enormously interested personality. He was interested in everything he was doing in life. He also had a very good eye, a curious eye with no frame of reference. He's the kind of person who, once interested in something, fairly obsessively has to know everything there is to know about it. Numbers of people had an effect on his taste, but he never stopped at that level. He internalized and put it through his own intellectual and emotional filter system."

Cramer began to devote his Saturdays to buying lithographs by such artists as Matisse, Henry Moore, Giacometti and Braque. "The hand-colored Braque was $350 and I paid $50 a month for it. The last one of those particular works sold at auction for $22,000. I always tell this to beginning collectors," he says.

In 1966, Self asked Cramer to move to L.A. and work with him at 20th Century Fox, which then had the most hours on the air. After one month here, he went on a blind date with a columnist poised to start at the L.A. Times; Joyce Haber. "I couldn't bear her, which probably says something about trusting your first instincts," laughs Cramer about his ex-wife. A few weeks later, however, he needed a date and called her. "I had a wonderful time. It was months before I realized she had dyed her hair from brunette to blond in between, and I've always had a thing about blondes." They were married in a matter of months; Douglas III and Courtney were born soon after.

Cramer and Haber both took an interest in the art of California, and they frequented the Monday night art walks along La Cienega Boulevard. "I got to know the dealer Felix Landau very well and, unfortunately, did not get to know Irving Blum, who was on the other side of the street." (Blum ran the legendary Ferus Gallery and is now co-owner of the tony Blum/Helman Gallery in New York.) "I sold all my graphics and lithos and bought a lot of the artists that Felix thought would be masters of the late 20th century: James Gill, Jan Stussy, Jack Zajak," says Cramer, rolling his eyes. "Meanwhile, I would go across the street to Ferus Gallery and look at works by Warhol and Lichtenstein."

Cramer's career continued to soar. He went to the flagging Paramount TV in 1968 as executive vice president in charge of production and turned it around financially. There, he developed such series as "Love American Style," "The Odd Couple" and "The Brady Bunch." Haber took Hedda Hopper's position at the Times, and according to Cramer, "That was the beginning of the end of a lot of things." But for a few years, "I guess you could say we were a 'bright young couple' around town," explains Cramer, his fingers digging quotation marks around the phrase. "I was running what had become the most successful studio and she was the hot columnist. She had two movie magazines and she was always on television."

"The only collections I hate to see are collections about style or about money . . . they are like bad films and very bad television, in which there is nothing unique or individual about them."

The pressures of family and public life brought on the couple's separation in 1971. "At the time we got divorced, it became a situation about revenge," he confides. "She put herself in the hands of an attorney interested primarily in his financial gain and her emotional satisfaction. She got the house and the attorneys got everything else."

He is still bitter about the early '70s, when he essentially had to start over. "Joyce was a very powerful person in this town, and we were received everywhere," he says. "After the divorce, she was treated like royalty, and most people who sided with her never even spoke to me. It was very hard to take, and I spent a lot of time thinking about going back to New York. But I dug my heels in. There were certain people who were very supportive, like friends at ABC and Aaron (Spelling)."

Cramer had gone on to work as an independent producer of such series as "Bridget Loves Bernie" and the first miniseries, "QB VII," as well as of a number of movies for television — one being "The Love Boat" in 1973.

In 1976, Spelling approached Cramer about joining him as co-executive producer. "It was a tortured time," he admits. "To make that decision meant giving up my own identity. But I finally realized he had a lot of strengths that I didn't have in terms of selling, persevering, negotiation and long-term experience. He saved my life by giving me balance and focus in my career. And a total acceptance. I hadn't had before. He taught me a lot about myself."

After almost 10 years together, this "odd couple" has six shows on the air and "The Love Boat" just filmed its 200th episode, making it one of the longest-running series on television. Needless to say, he recouped the losses incurred by his divorce.

"It was two years before I could think about collecting again, but I spent that time profitably, going to galleries and reading the magazines. I was influenced as much as anything by (collectors) Barry Lowen and Fred and Marcia Weisman."

As if on cue, a young man pokes his head in the door and announces that dealer Larry Gagosian is on the phone from his limo in New York. A picture wanted badly by Cramer is available: A 1967 Lichtenstein from his art deco period. The negotiations are serious. Cramer closes the deal for "close to" $500,000. By developing a network of dealers and other collectors, he has been able to buy such earlier, rarer works by the modern masters.

Since 1975, Cramer has compiled 400 works of art, which are scattered among his beach house at Trancas, his ranch in the Santa Ynez Valley and his Bel-Air home. But his art is also in storage rooms and that galls him. He plans to demolish his existing home to build another with more wall space on the same site. He cautions that his business manager keeps him on a budget: "Otherwise, I'd spend everything." He cites the black Stellas from the '60s that are now worth up to $2 million.

These days, collecting has become so competitive that there are parallels in it to the deal-making, politics and negotiations of being a television producer.

"There are enormous similarities," agrees Cramer. "There are other producers and studios just as in the art world there are other collectors sniffing the bushes and looking for great, new talents and the best works by established talents. You don't just walk into a gallery and say, 'Give me a great Jasper Johns or a fabulous Frank Stella.' Particularly with new work, because most shows today are sold out before they even open," he continues. "Ellsworth's (Kelly's) new show just opened in New York, and at $100,000 a painting, it was sold out before the work was hung. It's a matter of having a relationship with the artist and the dealer and letting them know you have a quality collection, making available to you the work. It's the same thing in the television business to attract the writers, directors and stars who realize you know what you're about and who will want to come work with you. You put together a first-class television production the same way you put together a first-class art collection — you're out there on the line in terms of taste and perception in the same way."

Cramer confesses that, had he not been a producer, he would have become an art dealer. "I'd rather go to someone's home and see their collection than almost anything, even if it is only 12 lithographs, or eight paintings by total unknowns. It says something about the person. The only collections I hate to see are collections about style or about money, which reflect someone's vision of the marketplace. To me, they are like bad films and very bad television, in which there is nothing unique or individual about them."

Another assistant interrupts, politely reminding Cramer that he has a very full schedule today. The limo is waiting. Cramer shifts back into his role of television executive. He has bills to pay.

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.