

Conversations in art

# Embodying the art spirit: Mark Waskow as collector

by B. Amore Arts Correspondent, published in *The Times Argus/Rutland Herald*, March 20, 2021



Mark Waskow poses with a fraction of The Collection in Burlington recently. *Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo*

*“It has been my desire to have the process of collecting art live up to its potential as a creative act.”*  
—Mark S. Waskow

I first met Mark Waskow in the early '90s through an exhibit at the T.W. Wood Art Gallery in Montpelier, when I was told that a “collector” had purchased a piece of my work. Little did I know my art was entering a collection Waskow was gathering to fulfill his dream of making under-known artists more visible. In the early days, Waskow’s collection was in several Burlington venues and subsequently Barre as well.

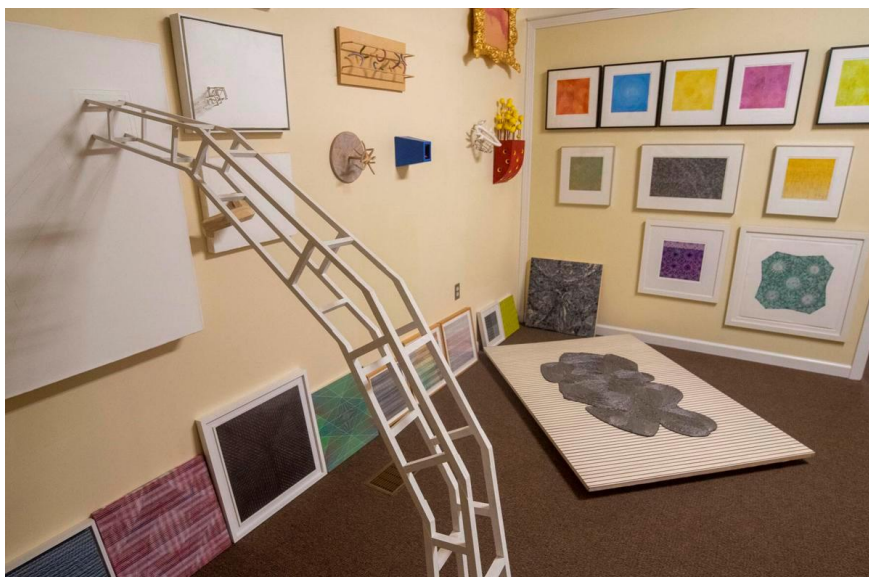
At one point, it was called The Waskowmium, an early working title. Waskow has since refined and redefined the project, and that name has been changed to the Northern New England Museum of Contemporary Art (NNEMoCA), now a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. (The NNEMoCA is not currently open to the public except by invitation.)



Jack Moulthrop: "6Q2", *Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo*

Waskow has been involved with museums and the arts since childhood. He has served on the boards of the Main Street Museum in White River Junction, the T.W. Wood Art Gallery in Montpelier, and the South End Arts and Business Association (SEABA), the presenting organization behind the South End Art Hop, the largest visual arts event in Vermont, of which he served as chairman early on.

Mark Waskow is the driving force behind the NNEMoCA, and he is involved in every aspect of this collection, from purchase to cataloguing, display and outreach. He completely embodies Robert Henri's "Art Spirit," as defined in his well-known book by the same name. Henri wrote, "When the artist is alive in any person, whatever his kind of work may be, he becomes an inventive, searching, daring, self-expressive creature." Waskow sees collecting as a deeply creative act reflecting the culture from which it springs. He is the collector-artist, and The Collection is his creation.



Op art displayed in one of Mark Waskow's galleries in Burlington, *Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo*

Waskow considers the current state of the institution, NNEMoCA as a study collection, archive and library. It is his hope that NNEMoCA will acquire a suitable building and land for the museum's campus at some point in the future. When visiting The Collection in its present abode, the originality of Waskow's vision is apparent. The experience is the complete opposite of a usual gallery or museum experience where the objects are sanitized and hung in white spaces.

In Waskow's Collection, these works are carefully curated, and placed thematically in a series of nine large spaces comprising approximately 16,000 square feet. The art runs the range from collage/assemblage, painting, sculpture, ceramic, to unique combinations of elements that have to be seen to be appreciated. The sense of the maker's hand and the collector's eye is omnipresent. Waskow's choices of art, combined with consummate curating, and meticulous installation continues to impress throughout.

Being in the spaces, one feels a sense of intimacy. Many works of art are placed on exquisitely crafted furniture, others hung on the wall in salon-style fashion. There is a resonance and conversation between the pieces. It is impossible not to be filled with wonder at the marvels of creative expression. It is an uplifting experience, a journey filled with the possible, never knowing what unique treasure might be revealed next.



Howard Jones: "Crosscut Saw Handled Brush", *Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo*

The NNEMoCA Collection is one of a kind, as is its founder and chief benefactor. It is living proof of how important an inspired individual can be as an enriching force for positive action. Waskow's choices of artists who see in a distinctive way is profound. The works offer a glimpse into all aspects of human nature, often expressed with a humorous twist. The fact that Waskow can remember the provenance and particularities of each piece is astonishing. He reminds me of a modern Medici prince with his deeply personal interest in each artist and his dedication to supporting art and community while creating a memorable legacy.



Mark Waskow has spent a lifetime honing the skills that brought him to conceive of the Northern New England Museum of Contemporary Art. I'd like to ask him a few questions about how he came to be such an original and dedicated collector:

*B.A.: I'm always curious about early childhood experiences and their effect on our later choices. Can you share a bit about the role of art and collecting in your family?*

M.W.: As a young adult, my mother was employed as a commercial artist in the fashion industry in New York City. She always had a genuine enthusiasm and passion for the arts. As a youngster, I remember that she created murals on our apartment walls that were really spectacular. We also spent much time going to art galleries and museums. Back then, growing up with virtually no money, these were culturally enriching, yet free activities.

My father was a collector of many things. Usually, things with little or no intrinsic or extrinsic value. We had no money, and yet the collecting and organizing impulse was strong within him. He collected thread, paper samples, bags of various sorts, old tools (many not working), metal pipe and so on. Later, he was able to start some small-scale stamp and coin collections. We spent some father-son time together going to stamp and coin shows mainly viewing things which we couldn't possibly acquire, but it was, apparently, very developmentally important for me.

The art that I was exposed to at a young age, mainly through my Mom's influence and interests, was a "cultural inoculation" that worked. Years later, it has been one of the great points of focus in my life. My father passed away the summer after my 16th birthday. If I were to make a psychological projection, I would suspect that collecting has been a way to both honor my Dad, as well as to accomplish some things that I think he would have been excited to see materialize. What has happened would have been impossible for my parents to imagine.



Ceramics by Romulus Craft, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

*B.A.: Can you talk about working at the Museum of Natural History as a child and how that came about?*

M.W.: I was very interested in invertebrate zoology, primarily external morphology, as a child, and collected specimens voraciously. I was part of a group called the Junior Entomologist Society at the American Museum of Natural History, where my family had a membership. On a field trip, I caught an unusual mole crab (a brackish water crustacean) in Pelham Bay State Park when I was 5. I didn't know what it was and could not identify it, so I went to the museum to see if someone could help me understand what I had "discovered."

Of course, being a young child, I was initially sent to the lowest rung of "experts." I could see right through that and realized that the first person did not know any more than I did about this issue. I requested to be sent "up the food chain." After three or four more iterations of essentially the same nonsense, I finally was ushered into the office of John C. Pallister, who was then 84 years old. He was a full curator in the Entomology Department and an expert, it turned out, in a few groups of beetles.

He was very familiar with the specimen that I showed him, and more importantly, I could see that he knew of what he was speaking! We ended up having quite a conversation, and he asked me if I could pin insect specimens properly. I said, "Of course." He requested a demonstration, which I provided with a specimen he gave to me for that purpose. He was really excited. He asked me how old I was. I replied that, "I am just as old as you were at my age." He said that he could use someone like me. At which point I proceeded to explain that I was 5 years of age and what exactly did he have in mind?

So I became a volunteer at the museum, initially under his tutelage, for 3½ years. I also acted as a teaching assistant for some courses offered by the Education Department, and eventually became a full instructor there, as well as an assistant curator in the Department of Living Invertebrates during my last period of time at the museum before heading off to college.

*B.A.: How did you begin collecting? What were your original collections comprised of?*

M.W.: The very first collection was rocks and minerals. This was followed by seashells, which led directly to invertebrate specimens. I started collecting at age 3 and have yet to "shake it." The thing about my collecting is that the newer collection(s) do not replace the previous one(s). Rather it is an additive process. I generally continue to collect the previous material as well as the newer one.

*B.A.: There is an incredible variety of types of work in the NNEMoCA collection. What guides your choices?*

M.W.: Initially, as I started to become exposed to the amazing array of contemporary visual art, everything was new and brilliant and terribly interesting. Of course, over time and after seeing literally hundreds of thousands of art objects, that is not the case anymore.

Originally, I purchased things that appealed to me visually, things that I liked. Of course that is still true, but now there is an additional overlay, and I ask myself how this new piece that I am considering will continue the discussion that the other works, which already comprise The Collection, are having, and will it advance/enhance the focus of our institution's mission?

*B.A.: How many works are there in the collection at the moment? What is the geographical area that they are drawn from?*

M.W.: There are approximately 28,000 art objects and 15,000 reference books, periodicals, catalogues, etc. There are approximately 50,000 pieces of art-related and historical ephemera as well. The collection is geographically diverse with a concentration on Northern New England, and Vermont in particular.



Works by Rutland artist Bill Ramage, *Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo*

*B.A.: What is the Northern New England Artist Legacy Project?*

M.W.: The Northern New England Artist Legacy Project is a subsidiary of NNEMoCA, and essentially a programming arm of the institution. The purpose of NNEALP is to continue the “conversation” that the artwork has had after the creator becomes diminished or passes away.

There are many ways that visual art can achieve significance: culturally, aesthetically, technically, socially, historically, etc. Unfortunately however, there is only one measure of success that can ensure the longevity of deserving work beyond the lifespan of its creator, and that is financial i.e. enough resources to preserve it. Most artists for a variety of reasons never reach economic “escape velocity.” Therefore their work, no matter how accomplished and successful in other ways, becomes part of the great dumpster of history shortly after their creators die (if not before).

The mission of NNEALP is to protect bodies of work that it deems significant, promote continuing activity between these works and the greater art world, create exhibitions or incorporate this work into significant shows, create interest in these bodies of work amongst independent curators, museums, universities, art critics, and other persons of significance involved in this area.



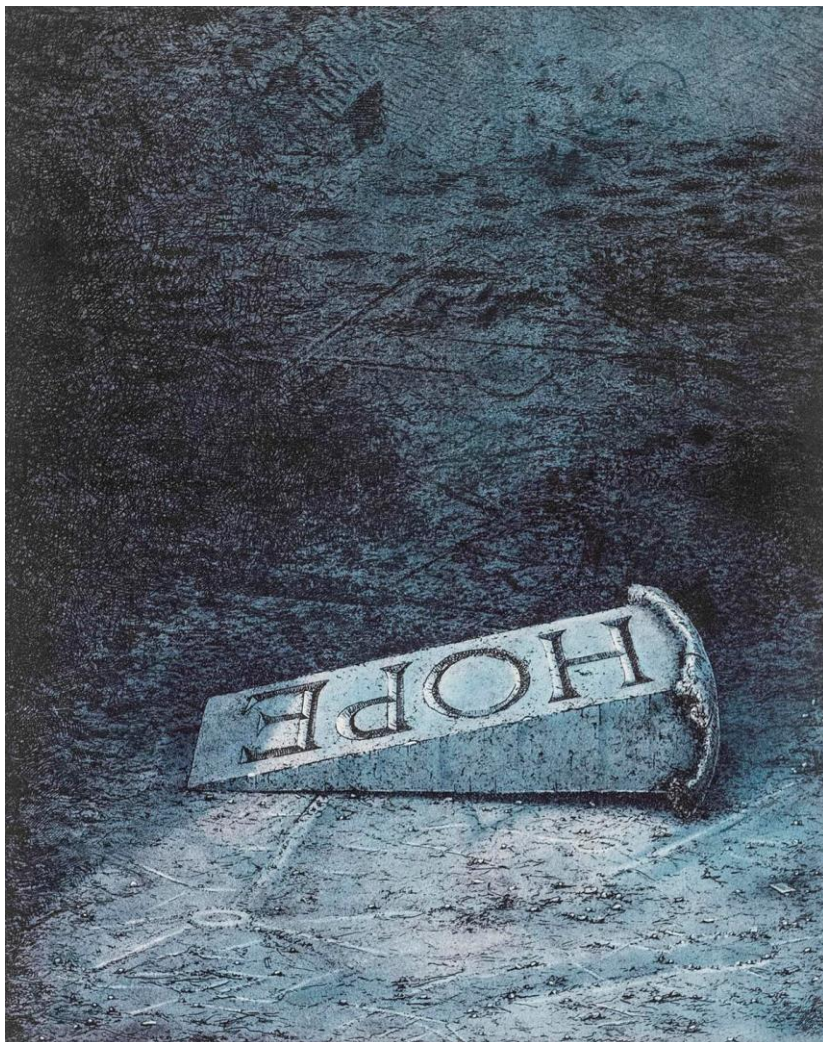
It is also important to write about the art, publish monographs and histories about these works as well as their creators, and/or cause works to be incorporated into articles, catalogues, and other organs disseminating such information, as well as occasionally placing some specific works into institutional collections.

*B.A.: What does it feel like to have created the Collection at NNEMoCA to date, and what is your vision for the future?*

M.W.: It is very exciting to contribute in some small way to the development and recognition of deserving visual artists. It has long been my desire to have the process of collecting art live up to its potential as a creative act. I believe that visual art is a part of a healthy emotional, conceptual, and cognitive “diet” designed to foster mental sensitivity and cultural awareness.

My goal for NNEMoCA is for it to be yet another good reason for people to come to Vermont and an opportunity for Northern New England visual artists to show their work in a museum setting. There are of course many ways to approach, interpret and present, contemporary visual art. NNEMoCA’s perspective is rather unique and as such, creates substantial value as a cultural institution.

amoreb@earthlink.net



Edward Henderson: "Untitled (Hope)", *Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo*