



The breakfast room of Karen Johnson Keland's home in Racine, Wisconsin. On the table are salt-glazed covered casseroles and serving bowls by Don Reitz, glass salad plates and tumblers by Paul Koller and a centerpiece—bark canoe—made by local Winnebago Indians about 50 years ago. The table and chairs were made by local craftsmen at the turn of the century, and the maple cabinet by an immigrant Norwegian carpenter before 1900. On the wall is *Noblesse Oblige*, 1979, acrylic on canvas, by Louis de Niverville.

# COLLECTOR: Karen Johnson Keland

TEXT BY JAMES AUER PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEE NORDNESS

Whenever Karen Johnson Keland is served a plateful of sliced tomatoes, she sprinkles a few grains of sugar on them, as Frank Lloyd Wright taught her to do many years ago. "This is fruit," she remembers the celebrated architect telling her over lunch at his home, Taliesin, in Spring Green, Wisconsin. "You must have sugar on it, not salt. It brings out more of the real tomato flavor."

The spirit of "Mr. Wright"—as she formally refers to him—still hovers over Karen Johnson Keland's private world. She lives in a house designed by Wright on a tree-lined residential street in Racine, Wisconsin. And she grew up in another just north of Racine, the fabled Wingspread—built by her father, Herbert F. Johnson, in the 1930's—now home of the Johnson Foundation.

Since her early association with Wright, Keland's interests have expanded beyond the art and architecture of the past to encompass many areas—personal and corporate collecting, publishing of art books and prints and, perhaps most important of all, direct personal encouragement of regionally and nationally known artists.

She has spent many hours selecting artworks for the corporate collection of her family's company, S.C. Johnson & Son, whose internationally famous office building, erected between 1937 and 1939, is one of the principal ornaments of Wright's late maturity.

But it is her own personal art collection—a richly textured amalgam of works in a wide variety of two- and three-dimensional media—that testifies most eloquently to Keland's intense interest in and dedication to those diverse means of expression commonly lumped under the heading of crafts. Her collection could only have been

built by an enthusiast who had long been in intimate communion with spaces created by an architect who was essentially a sculptor—an artist and theoretician whose tools were volumes and colors, surfaces and textures, aspects of light and nature-based ornamentation.

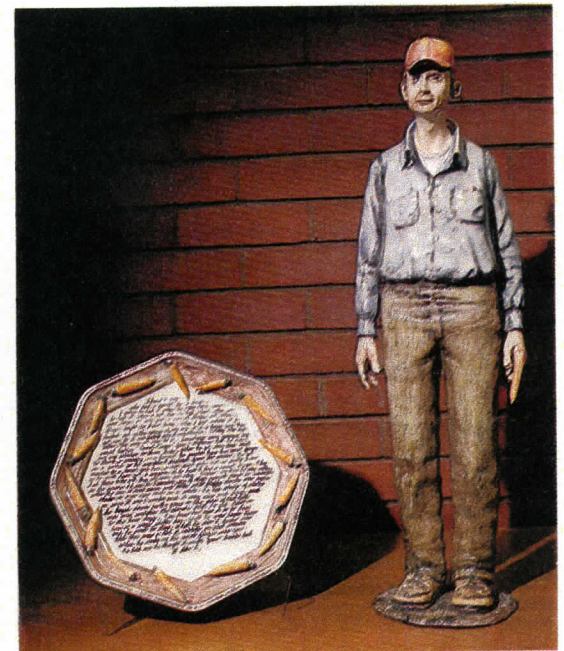
The collection is, furthermore, a constantly changing body of work that easily incorporates abstract pottery, blown-glass bowls, whimsical porcelains and fiber hangings into an environment that also includes paintings by Hans Hofmann and Jim Nutt, photographs by Ansel Adams and Irving Penn, and drawings by Leonard Baskin and John Colt.

A stroll through the main and upper floors of Keland's home suggests that this slender woman, reserved and soft-spoken but quick to smile, likes nothing better than to discover a talented newcomer before the museums and art press do, and to introduce that person's work into her immediate surroundings. Allied to this highly personal pleasure is her obvious joy in communicating her enthusiasm for rising young talents to others by donating works to fund-raising auctions and institutions. "I like the idea of recycling art," she says, "keeping it for a while and, if interest is shown, passing it on."

An exhibition of selections from the Karen Johnson Keland collection was held during the autumn of 1981 at the Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, a community-owned facility in Racine. Bruce Pepich, the director of the museum, believes that Keland's example is of immense importance in the elevation of crafts to their rightful place in the contemporary art scene.

"There never appears to have been a question in Karen Johnson Keland's mind as to whether or not crafts are of equal importance to painting and sculpture," he said. "She integrates contemporary functional and sculp-

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Two Girls with Two Deer*, stoneware vessel, 30¾" high, by Rudy Autio, as well as Autio's colored ink drawing #11, both 1981, and a stoneware plate, 1973, 16" diameter, by Peter Voulkos; *Sea Forms*, 1981, blown glass with fuming, 5 pieces with largest 18½" diameter, by Dale Chihuly and Rocky Mountain Landscape, 1948, oil on canvas, by Milton Avery; *The Story of Carrot Finger*, porcelain plaque, 12⅝" diameter, and *Carrot Finger*, porcelain with china paints, 26¾" high, by Jack Earl, both 1978; raku-fired ceramic vessel from series "Homage to Veruschka," 1978, by Paul Soldner.

tural crafts into her home in such a way that the question of their legitimacy as art never arises." One finds clay pieces by Richard DeVore and Jack Earl next to photographs by Penn, prints by Jack Beal and Robert Raschenberg, and paintings by Milton Avery.

"Her acquisition of drawings by Rudy Autio, DeVore and Earl along with particular ceramics by these artists is of immense interest," Pepich continued. "By doing this, she is both supporting the artist and documenting the total process of his work. The display of these drawings with the three-dimensional pieces at the Wustum was thought-provoking."

Items recently purchased by Keland include a DeVore pot, an Earl porcelain and a set of Dale Chihuly glass baskets, all of which fit perfectly into her broad-windowed, greenery-filled sitting room. Other crafts in her collection include glazed porcelains by Ruth Duckworth, ceramics by Dick Evans, burnished clay vessels by Robert Forman, porcelains by Karen Massaro, Phillip Maberry and Verne Funk, salt-glazed ceramics by Don Reitz and blown glass by Marvin Lipofsky.

Indeed, a visit to her home suggests that, though she is fond of paintings like those of the German artist Dieter Krieg and Midwesterners William Peckenpaugh and Gladys Nillson, all of whom have their places on her walls, her heart is with the burgeoning crafts.

She was one of the first major Wisconsin collectors to plunge into ceramics, glass and metal in a big way, and she is still partial to the color and tactile richness of clay. Her interest in this medium was first stimulated by ceramics courses at Bennington College in Vermont, from which she graduated in 1946. But she also relishes the inventiveness of glass artists. Friendships with Harvey Littleton, father of the American studio glass movement, and with Chihuly have added to her knowledge of glass. And, in recent years, she has begun to delve seriously into photography, both as a buyer and as a maker of pictures. (She has audited courses in camera handling and darkroom technique at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, but hesitates to exhibit her prints, which she describes as "rather straightforward landscape work.")

Keland's discovery of crafts parallels that of many of the more imaginative and affluent members of her generation, but she had the additional inspiration, not only of Frank Lloyd Wright but of her father, who, with his wife, Keland's stepmother, sparked the creation of two traveling exhibitions, "Art: USA: Now," 1962, and "Objects: USA," 1969.

"'Objects: USA' was a turning point for the crafts," Keland mused. "Many artists, curators and collectors would say that it had great impact. And the response to the exhibition worldwide was much more exciting than that which greeted 'Art: USA: Now' a few years before. It was the crafts that created a lot of excitement and interest in Europe. The attendance for the crafts was far greater than it had been for the paintings."

Keland's own collecting activities—as apart from those sponsored by the Johnson firm—date back to her late teens. "I've collected since college," she recounts. "At first I bought whatever was near—some drawings and things by instructors. But I don't have much left that I started with. I gave them to college study collections. I favored prints for a long time. Then, in the early 60's the crafts got going, especially in Wisconsin, and I started buying them. Now I'm buying photographs—Harry Cal-

lahan, Les Krims and Adams. I bought Adams six years ago when prices were more advantageous. And I'm trying to put together an important ceramics collection."

How does Keland add to her holdings of craft objects? "I read a lot," she explains. "I subscribe to many publications. Then I make my plans based on gallery listings and announcements. Of course, a lot depends on the quality of work I know that certain galleries present. After a while, you put your trust in the gallery if you haven't heard of the artist."

One of the encouraging things she has noted on the current craft scene is a switch in emphasis from the purely utilitarian to the aesthetic, particularly in ceramics. "For a while," she recalls, "many of the craft galleries would show bread-and-butter pottery and ceramic sculpture, with the fine arts pieces lumped in with the functional. They weren't set up to show off the top talent very well. Often space was limited. Now, that has changed. Gallery owners are affording ceramic artists larger spaces."

Like many dedicated art collectors, Keland started out on a part-time basis but is now getting into the field in a more systematic way. Her firm, Perimeter Press, which she describes as "hanging around the outskirts of the publishing business," has already commissioned limited-edition portfolios of prints from Midwestern printmakers such as Fran Myers and Keiko Hara.

Currently, Perimeter is thinking about bringing out a number of monographs on living American artists. In the works is a six-part series profiling major craftsmen. The first volume, a study by Lee Nordness of Jack Earl—a Keland favorite whose porcelains, dating from 1965 to the present, enliven her home—should be available for distribution in 1983. Earl's work "strikes a chord" with Keland because "he is interested in people's psyches. Everyone recognizes these people and what he's trying to say about them. Earl is less a social commentator and more a humorist." She responds to a "naive kind of wit" in his work, as well as to a certain melancholy that is there. "There's always a sense of isolation about his subjects—a reference to a kind of loneliness."

Perimeter is also planning small volumes of drawings by Paul Caster of Milwaukee and of color photographs by Frank Pollock of Racine. The publishing venture was necessary, its organizer says, because "most of the books in the field have been technical, or how-to, written by artists themselves, or else they've been general, about the crafts as a whole. There have been very few on individual craftsmen."

As a woman whose life revolves around artists and their work, Keland has some terse but useful advice for would-be collectors. "Examine your motives," she says. "Are you looking for a good investment or for something to please the eye in your home? These are the two directions that can be taken. If you want to invest, much homework is necessary. It's easier doing it the second way." By her own account, she allows intuition to guide her when she wants to add to her collection. "I just let myself respond. And the next day I go back and try to figure out why I liked something. If you're going to buy an artwork and live with it, you should certainly buy what you like.

"Look at things," Karen Johnson Keland urges. "Talk to artists and try to get involved with what they are doing. I'm saddened by people who avoid art as something to be leery of. There's an artist for every person." □