

The Art of Connoisseurship

Della Monica Guides Private Collectors

Text by JOSEPH MONTEBELLO Photos by WALTER KIDD

ON A QUINTESSENTIAL SUMMER DAY in Litchfield, Conn., the ideal place to be having lunch is on Lauren Della Monica's porch. The table is set with blue and white cloth and napkins, white plates piled with a seasonal salad; the hostess is also dressed in crisp blue and white, her only accessory: her amazing red hair.

Besides having a delicious lunch, I am ready to find out something about Ms. Della Monica that I don't already know. (Full disclosure: She and I have been friends since the day I laid eyes on her.)

The Della Monicas moved to Litchfield four years ago and bought one of the centuries-old houses that line the main streets of town.

"I grew up on the Cape and like most young people couldn't wait to get away and so I moved to the noisiest city I could find—New York—to begin my career," said Ms. Della Monica. "I think when my husband and I realized that we could never leave the city because of our professional lives, we decided we needed a place to relax and cool down. I had never been to Litchfield

County, but I had a vision of a perfect New England town and Litchfield filled that for me. People are welcoming and friendly and they care about where they live. It's the perfect antidote to being in New York."

Ms. Della Monica attended Vanderbilt University, got her degree in fine arts and went on to Christie's and earned a master's degree of connoisseurship. The challenge then was to turn her knowledge into a viable business.

"I was still too young and didn't have the finan-

Lauren Della Monica in front of her Litchfield, Conn., home. Above center, the cover of her book, "Painted Landscapes, Contemporary Views," flanked by images from the book; opposite page, another kind of landscape.



cial capabilities to strike out on my own. I met several women who were attorneys at auction houses and museums; the idea of combining art and law appealed to me, so I decided the next step had to be law school."

So Ms. Della Monica went off to Brooklyn Law School, where she took an art law seminar. There she met a professor and a partner in a law firm practicing art law who offered her a job. She got her one-in-a-million chance to practice law representing artists and museums.

"Our art law division was within a litigation department," Ms. Della Monica explained. "If there was a discrepancy as to the authenticity of a painting there would be a lawsuit between the seller and the purchaser. The auction house, which was usually in the middle of the dispute, would be our client. It was a big change for me, going from a degree in art history to being a lawyer. I did it for two years and realized I needed to really get back into the art world itself."

After her last job with Citibank Art Advisory Service, advising private banking clients on art acquisitions, she began to plan her way to her own business.

"I put out feelers letting everyone know I was back in the art business in an advisory capacity. I built a website explaining my background and what I could offer. It was terrifying to start a new venture but I'm glad I did."

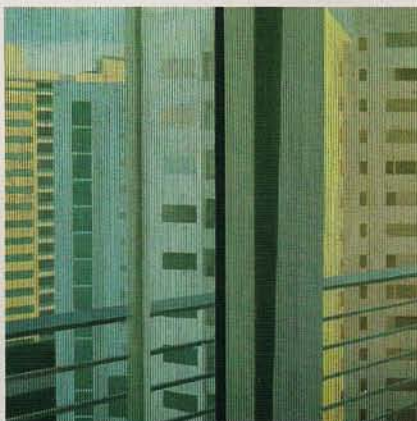
Much of Ms. Della Monica's business comes from referrals and from Internet searches that bring up articles she has written. Still, there are people who wonder exactly what an art consultant does and why they need one.

"I'm not a decorator," she explained. "I don't come in and match a piece of art to a throw pillow. My clients tend to fall in several categories. There are those who understand the concept of collection building. They may already have started one and want to best know what to add that will enhance what they already own. They want to understand the art they are going to live with.

"Others are in it purely for the investment, and while they know what they like, it is likely that they will not hold onto the pieces forever. In those cases, I try to find art or an artist that is undervalued but will mature in value over time. And, yes, then there are those who really just want a fabulous piece to fill that space on the living room wall. Obviously I prefer those who want to build an ongoing collection, to teach them about art and develop their passion."

The first meeting is crucial for that is when client and consultant set the rules and goals for the project.

"I like to meet in a neutral place, such as a museum where we can leisurely walk around and I can see what they like and what they know about art. I then visit their personal space



to see how the paintings will relate to what they may already have. A project typically involves a couple, so it's helpful for me to meet both of them. How involved do they want to be in the process? Do they want to visit galleries or have me do a preliminary walkthrough and set up some options for them? How interested are they in learning about the artist? We need to establish a budget. If there are constraints I need to know about them up front."

The business is nine years old and growing all the time, thanks to the explosion in the art market. "I liken my job, in a sense, to that of a personal shopper. I do all the research after discussing the client's needs and interests.

And then I present those items that I think will fill their requirements."

She needs to be aware of any new developments in the market. With contemporary art, which is what people are most interested in, Ms. Della Monica has to know what the next new thing is going to be. "I'm always on the lookout for new talent. It's tricky, because the buyer will want to know if the investment is worth it. If someone is 25 and a comer, how can one know about the rest of his career?"

To help evaluate that, there are certain indicators she looks for: Is the person represented by a good gallery? Has his or her work been looked at by museum curators, been included in group shows, won any prizes? Have the prices for the work increased?

"Even with all of that, people have to trust my instincts and their own."

To aid her in developing her business, Ms. Della Monica has recently compiled a book, "Painted Landscapes: Contemporary Views."

"I've worked on so many collections, including my own, and, across the board, most people are comfortable with landscapes, images of pretty places they know and understand. But the definition of a landscape is quite broad and the 60 artists in this book cover the range. Landscapes are really about places, and ideas about places, but not everything is pristine and pastoral. I took a concept everyone is familiar with and turned it on its head. There are traditional scenes, of course, but there are also grittier aspects of landscapes, dealing with place, environment and situation."

The book is a tool for Ms. Della Monica. "I can give one to a client and say, 'Go through it and tell me what you like, what you would choose to live with,' and I can work with them to achieve that end," she explained.

Next up for Ms. Della Monica? "Maybe another book, but not for a while. Right now I'm planning a special trip for my upcoming special birthday."