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*Young at Art*

## New Groups Ease the Way For Aspiring Collectors

By ANNELENA LOBB

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Leyla Marrouk, a 29-year-old attorney at the New York office of the firm Clifford Chance, says she always has enjoyed visiting museums and galleries, but her hectic work schedule rarely leaves her with enough energy to just drop by. Last fall, Ms. Marrouk began looking for a way to deepen her connection to the arts. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Apollo Circle, for patrons age 21 to 39, appealed to her, but she was daunted by its \$1,000 fee.


"As much art as there is in New York, there aren't many ways to get involved in an unintimidating manner," she says.

Through a college alumni connection, she heard about an organization called the Contemporaries, which brings together young professionals with an interest in contemporary art for educational and social events. Ms. Marrouk has been a member for about a year. She says she might join the Apollo Circle one day, but that the Contemporaries has provided her with an engaging alternative.

Young-collectors' groups like the Contemporaries that target newcomers to the fine-art world are multiplying, fueled by growing wealth among under-40 professionals who are interested in buying art, but who might be put off by its perceived elitism. The new groups, often created by young professionals themselves, position themselves as demystifiers, offering novices how-to lectures about collecting and opportunities to socialize. They say their aim is to serve as starter organizations to grow the ranks of arts enthusiasts and feed museums' patronage efforts. Some groups target individuals in law, finance and business, giving young professionals a chance to rub elbows and get hooked on art as their salaries climb.

For museums, which depend heavily on philanthropy and for decades have cultivated emerging donors and collectors through their in-house patrons' circles, the growth of independent groups poses a challenge. On the one hand, increased interest in the arts ultimately could enhance museums' ability to attract new patrons. On the other hand, young arts aficionados might never develop the institutional ties that lead individuals to become significant contributors as their wealth grows. What's more, the newer organizations have come on the scene as arts institutions compete with public health, education and other causes for donations.

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Museums for years have run their own arts-patronage groups to court under-40 members. Besides art itself, the organizations often emphasize fundraising and acquisitions, with the belief that some of today's young art enthusiasts will be tomorrow's significant donors. At New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Junior Associates run campaigns to raise capital for the museum. The group raised around \$1 million for the expansion of MoMA's building facilities in 2004. Some members of the Guggenheim Museum's Young Collectors' Council sit on its acquisitions committee and help select new pieces for the museum, says Abby Lawler, who organizes events for the group.

In contrast, the independent organizations tend to concentrate solely on education and collecting, and don't have a fundraising component. They spend time with pieces new collectors can purchase, rather than works that fit a major museum's budget. "I saw a need for a group that focused on collecting, rather than looking at pieces a 30-year-old could never buy," says Rodney Reid, who co-founded the three-year-old Contemporaries while at Harvard Business School. The New Collectors' Circle, which launches this fall and is affiliated with Ramsay Fairs, a company that runs several contemporary-art fairs, combines events like Pulse, a contemporary-art fair held in New York and Miami, with gallery tours, lectures, and curatorial walk-throughs.

In general, museum development officials say their in-house groups are better places for young arts enthusiasts to get started. "Art fairs are a great place to go and look at collecting, but it's a commercial perspective," says Bettina Korek, who chairs the prints and drawings council at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and who helped launch Avant Garde, its patronage group for people under 40, three years ago. The Guggenheim's group offers new collectors an opportunity to cement strong relationships with curators, says the Guggenheim's Ms. Lawler, who help develop every event.

But museum officials also see the potential for outside groups to act as feeders for their own organizations. Both the Guggenheim and New York's MoMA arranged recent events for Summer Art Circle, another new group, whose members are summer law-firm associates. Kianga Ellis, the group's founder, says she aims to create a pipeline for museum arts-patronage groups like the Junior Associates or the Whitney Contemporaries. She plans to launch another group, the Young Patrons' Collective, in October, for professionals under 40.

Young-collectors' groups are emerging as the art market has soared: Last year, fine-art auctions brought in \$4.2 billion world-wide, an increase of 15% over the year before, according to Artprice, an auctions tracking firm. The Contemporaries' Mr. Reid, a 28-year-old investment banker at UBS Warburg, says that some members have begun to collect more seriously since joining.

"They don't collect purely as investors, but you notice the potential," Mr. Reid says of the group's members. He now owns about 60 works of art, 10 to 15 of which he bought over the past two years.

At a July gallery talk for Summer Art Circle, founder Ms. Ellis started a debate among the lawyers in attendance about the risks in buying pieces by very young artists, who might gain early fame only to see the value of their work sputter by age 30. She encourages participants to start collecting. "Once you make that financial investment, it makes you serious," she says.



The Contemporaries

The Contemporaries at a gallery reception in July.

Phil Selden, a summer associate at law firm Willkie, Farr and Gallagher in New York, went to several Summer Art Circle events this year. Before taking part in the group, he hadn't had much experience with the visual arts beyond museum visits and a high-school studio-art class. He says the group gave him the know-how to find galleries in New York with art he likes. "I'm much more comfortable with art now," Mr. Selden says. "So much of this was about access."

Summer Art Circle's Ms. Ellis and the Contemporaries' Mr. Reid both expect that at least a few of their fledgling collectors eventually will become prominent arts patrons. Mr. Reid says he is confident that some of the members of the Contemporaries will land on museum boards in the next 10 to 15 years, in part because so many of them have the kinds of lucrative career paths that would make such largesse possible.

"Some of us will be there," Mr. Reid says. "I aspire to that role myself."

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