

ARTnews

KENNETH LINSNER

Value Judgments

It's Kenneth Linsner's first appointment of the morning, and he's in the Park Avenue apartment of art adviser Daniel Barr. Linsner has put down his portable telephone and upended one of a pair of Empire-style chairs onto its neck. He laughs. Branded into the woodwork is the name "Cressent," the 19th-century master furniture maker. "Authentic Cressent might be worth \$15,000." A 19th-century chair, he says, would show more wear. "This pair is about 30 years old." He smiles. "They're worth about \$1,500 apiece."

Linsner, 43, a fine art appraiser who declares that "there are few people who produce a product equivalent to mine," keeps track of the value of everything from art to airplanes. He is one of a handful of experts whom Jacqueline Onassis, the Rockefellers, and the Vanderbilts allow into their homes to calculate the net worth of their possessions. For his time, Linsner receives about \$2,000 a day.

At one time a consultant to the Chinese government, Linsner is one of three American appraisers who counsel the IRS and the U.S. treasury. The IRS, in fact, pays Linsner a fee to use his extensive art library. With its 20,000 volumes, arranged by subjects (ancient, medieval, and Renaissance art, as well as materials, techniques, and conservation), it spreads across four large rooms in his home in Westchester County, New York. It is world class and, he says, his most valuable asset. But there is no librarian or even a card catalogue: it's all in his head. "I'm the catalogue," he says.

Linsner's knowledge is combined with an impresario's skill, and he rallied all his talents when, in 1986, he organized the sale of the Marcos collection for the Philippine government. "I was called in to evaluate the contents of the New York townhouse," he recalls. "Could I arrange to dispose of—through auction—all the items in the house?" The sale, which ranged from mem-

Linsner at the Chelsea Auction Rooms, evaluating a "100-year-old" painting—he says it's "five years old at most."



Kenneth Linsner with Wolfgang Somary and his Chinese scroll: "I come to appraise art—not to praise it," Linsner says.

orabilia to a few good pieces of furniture and paintings (though "not Imelda's shoes") brought some \$900,000. These days he is working with the Romanians (he has already taken a look at the Boeing 707 of their late dictator, valuing it at \$9 million.)

Shortly after Linsner arrives at Barr's

place, Wolfgang Somary, a Zurich banker who collects Oriental art and is one of Barr's clients, walks in with a 21-foot-long Chinese scroll painting. He bought it in 1973 in Taiwan for about \$6,000, and hopes it's 15th century. Somary unsheathes the parchment from a plastic pull-string book bag. Linsner unfurls it. "It's typical narrative scroll painting," he explains. "The emperor's summer vacation in the south of China—a hunt and picnic by the river. Probably from the K'ang Hsi period—a highly Mongolized work. Unfortunately, it's a court painting, less interesting than the scholarly and philosophical paintings."

"It's not Ku Ying?" Somary asks, a bit disappointed. "It looks so much like his style." Linsner checks identification seal marks on his clipboard. "I would estimate its creation mid-17th to the mid-18th century." He reminds his client—and his assistant, Anna Lee Spiro, who has accompanied him on his rounds—that the Mongols invaded China in 1644. "Yes," he says without apology, "it's that late." Linsner will research the piece further, but offers a rough retail estimate: \$25,000. Asked about the collector's dismay, Linsner responds, smiling: "I come to appraise art—not to praise it."

Linsner, with more than 25 years in the appraisal business, has seen everything from rigged auctions and surrogates to dealers colluding in rings. But his special ability comes with his knowledge not only of the market for vast numbers of objects but the actual chemistry of art—the makeup of fabrics and paints. "Most appraisers don't know how a painting is made," he says, adding a favorite quote by art historian Bernard Berenson, "You only see as much as you know."

After hopping into a cab to go down-



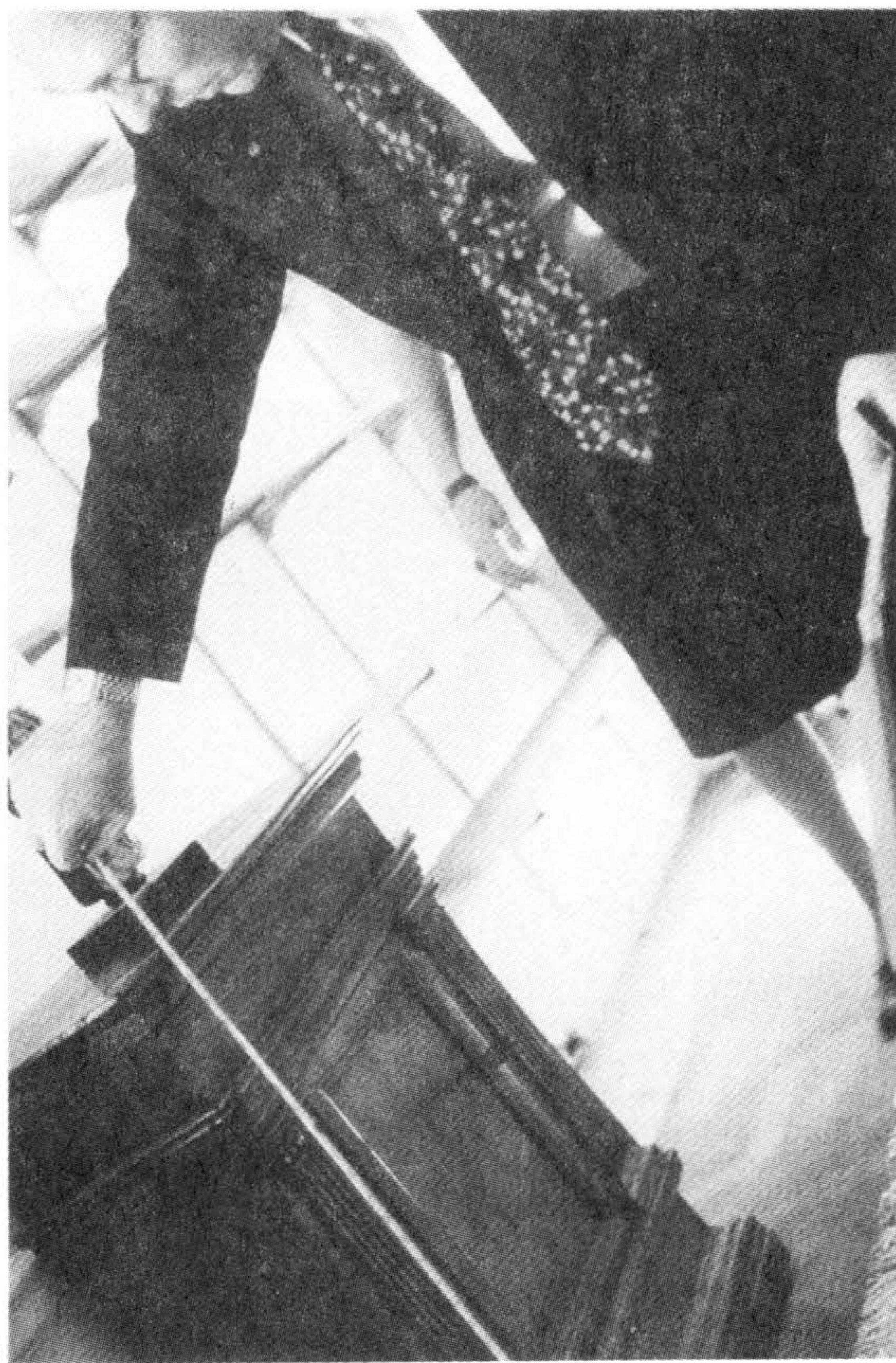
PHOTOGRAPHS BY HOWARD BARASH

town, we arrive around two o'clock at another of Linsner's clients, the Chelsea Auction Rooms on West 21st Street. It's a dusty storefront, brimming with dollhouse miniatures for an upcoming auction that owner Alan Erlichman and Linsner have put together. A dozen workers cheer, "Ken!" as he glides toward Erlichman, who shows the former NYU pre-med and art history major a maritime painting he's hoping (but doubts) is 100 years old.

Linsner snickers. "It's five years old at most. One-hundred-year-old canvas would be brittle," he explains, and then tells the story of the fellow creating these maritime masterpieces under various pseudonyms. The paintings would invariably come up at auctions, masquerading as authentic works from the 19th century and worth maybe \$3,000. "Not this one," he says, construing the value to be around \$200 to \$300.

The appraiser turns to a stack of Old Master prints Ehrlichman has recently purchased. The first is a Dürer engraving, purported to be genuine. "Hmmm," Linsner murmurs. He examines the edges of the paper, holding it up to the light. He quickly smiles. "Reichdruck," he says. "That's the watermark." Reichdruck, of course, was the Nazi publishing house. "It's worth about \$125; if authentic, between \$8,000 to \$10,000." Linsner's mind is a virtual storehouse of ephemera, the key—along with his library—to his business. "Appraisal is truly about information retrieval," he says.

As we walk out from a quick lunch at a nearby restaurant, Linsner's cellular phone



Linsner on location in a client's apartment: for his trouble, Linsner can earn up to \$2,000 a day.

rings in his hand. "Hello?" he answers. It's an East Hampton detective calling to report on a sting operation to lure the seller of a stolen Old Master painting to New York. "Thanks. Call me anytime," says Linsner, hanging up.

At three o'clock Linsner steps into Soho's M-13 gallery to inspect paintings by

Ford Crull and Robert Beauchamp. One of his clients wants to donate hers to the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and she needs to get Linsner's appraisal for tax purposes. Gallery owner Howard Scott hands him invoices and shows Linsner similar works, to help determine the value of the client's paintings.

Linsner's day is far from over. Leaving us, he steps out onto Greene Street to hail a cab—he has to go to the Bronx, where he's appraising the office art and antiques on the block for the Resolution Trust Company, a government oversight agency, set up to manage the fallout from the savings and loan debacle. In addition, the avalanche of bankruptcies has put a lot of work on Linsner's table. "It's one of the liveliest areas in appraisal," he says, "with assets being seized: anything from machinery to property to desks and chairs and fine art."

Linsner's latest clients are the Romanians. He has begun negotiations with the Romanian National Museum to help sell off its "surplus," a small number of art objects—"No, national treasures," he says—to raise money for the museum. On a recent trip there, though, he did some shopping, too, picking up a few real finds through newspaper classifieds. Linsner

bought an 18th-century Japanese Tsuba, or sword guard, worth about \$900, for \$20, and an Edo period, 19th-century lacquer box, for \$10, worth about \$300. "The Japanese didn't have pockets in their garments," he explains, "so they would put their personal effects in these beautiful boxes."

When he was in Romania, he also inspected Ceausescu's yacht, once thought to be worth about \$20 million. Its condition is now, according to Linsner, "significantly deteriorated."

While Linsner is still waiting for a go ahead from the Romanians—"It's difficult to get someone's attention to raise \$400,000 when the country needs to raise millions"—he did have a productive stay. He visited Primavera, the late dictator's villa on Lake Floreasca, and is planning another trip back to help put together a benefit for the country. The site? Snagov Palace, a 15th-century castle on Lake Snagov. "It was Ceausescu's summer home," says Linsner. "The castle, which sits on an island in the middle of the lake, is ringed by 50 villas, which would be perfect for housing all the guests. It was originally built by the most famous Romanian, Dracula, about whom the legend was based. Count Dracula, of course, was also known as 'Vlad the Impaler.'"

—Matthew Rose

Matthew Rose is a free-lance writer living in Port Washington, New York.



Linsner handles everything from art to airplanes. Here his assistant, Anna Lee Spiro, holds a Ford Crull painting he is evaluating for tax reasons.