

Steven Vincent

A SPURIOUS MASTER-piece, a dictator's yacht, the poetry of a slain president—some of the world's most intriguing objects pass before the judicious eye of Kenneth Jay Linsner. An appraiser of fine art and personal property for 22 years, Linsner has handled the possessions of industrialists, artists, movie stars and racketeers. Armed with well-thumbed reference materials and a connoisseur's insight, he has also helped close art-based tax loopholes, insure traveling art exhibitions and repair shattered Third World economies. "I'm adventurous," Linsner says. "Other appraisers say I'm only an appraiser, but I always see the big picture." And today the big picture includes Eastern Europe, where the soft-spoken, unassuming appraiser is presently applying his skills toward the reconstruction of post-Ceausescu Romania.

Born in New York in 1948, Linsner exhibited the makings of a natural connoisseur early on. "I was a young bibliomaniac," he remembers. "While other kids traded bubble-gum cards, I traded books. By age 12, I was dealing rare books." Books—and bubble gum—helped launch his career in 1967 when, as a volunteer at the Brooklyn Museum, he restored a torso of the Egyptian king Akhenaton. "Kids had stuck bubble gum on the torso's nipples," he explains. "The curator asked if I could remove the stains, and I said yes, even though up until then I had never cleaned anything other than dishes." Linsner rushed to the museum's library to research the subject and successfully cleaned the torso the following day. "After that, they hired me to work with small objects," he says. "I constructed the museum's first object restoration laboratory and spent the next five years learning about the material, condition and structure of countless pieces." By age 22, he had become the museum's conservator of objects.

In 1970, Linsner went to Turkey to oversee the excavation of a theater at New York University's archaeological site at Aphrodisias. Two years later, while continuing his work at the museum and pursuing graduate studies at NYU's Institute of Fine Arts, he helped Boston's Museum of Fine Arts reexamine the tomb of the 5th-Dynasty priest Shepseskaf-ankh in Egypt. Back in the U.S., Linsner became increasingly distressed with the chemical hazards of his museum work, and in 1975 decided to

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ART & AUCTION

MORE THAN AN APPRAISER

join Appraisal Affiliates, one of the country's largest appraisal firms. After a few years' apprenticeship, his innate skill, restoration experience and zeal for research propelled him to the top of the field. Today, he is an independent appraiser and part owner of Appraisal Affiliates. "Appraisal is a

vocation," he says, "and those who combine academic perception with a comprehension of materials and condition have an advantage."

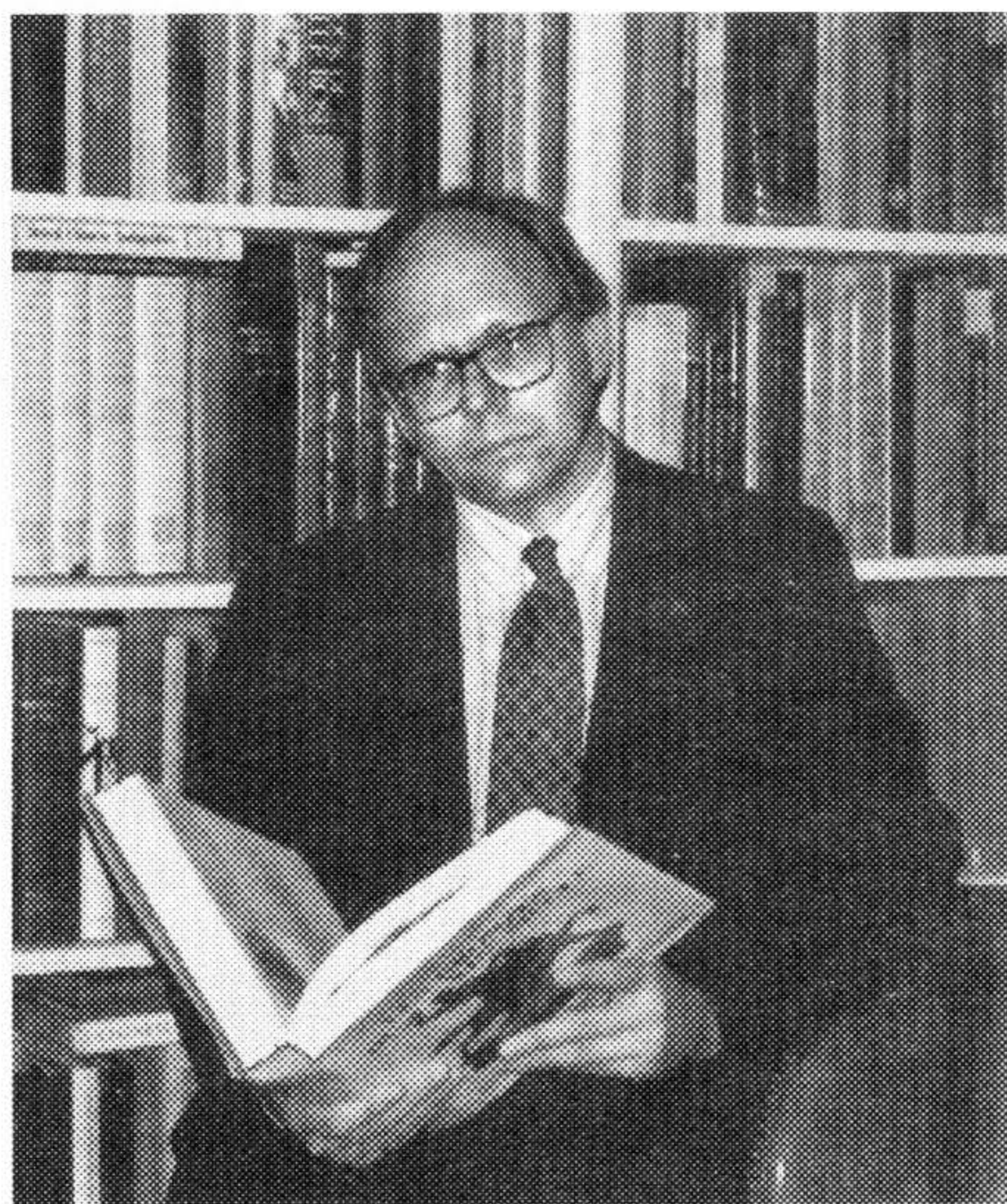
"There are two ways of looking at art—in vitro or in vivo," says Linsner. "I prefer the latter, to pick up and handle objects." Linsner relies as much on examination as on thorough research. "Authentication and appraisal are like detective work," he adds. "You have to gather facts, follow clues and canvass opinions." He continually pores over price guides, auction records and catalogues. "Researching and resourcing are the basis for

everything I do," he explains, pointing to stacks of reference books lining the walls of the upstate New York home he shares with his wife and two daughters.

Since the mid-'70s, Linsner has handled possessions belonging to the Rockefeller, Vanderbilt and Mars families, as well as the personal estates of Malcolm Forbes and Dorothy Schiff. Other clients include Dustin Hoffman and Jacqueline Onassis. "Mrs. Onassis asked me to appraise a collection of John F. Kennedy's writings, drawings and poems," he discloses. "I told her the best way to determine their worth would be to put one up for auction."

Whether for civil litigation, insurance matters, divorce actions or inheritance purposes, Linsner is constantly in demand. A lecturer in appraisal studies at NYU, he often appears in court as an expert witness and is frequently asked to authenticate questionable artworks—such as a "Titian" donated to an order of Catholic priests that he judged to be a forgery. Since 1983, he has appraised personal estates for the Internal Revenue Service and reviewed fine art tax shelters called "high-lows" (buy low, donate high). Assisting the New York State attorney general, he helped topple a pyramid scam that promised investors a 38 percent annual increase on the purchase of third-rate art.

And for the Criminal Investigation Division of the Department of the Treasury, he has appraised posses-



Kenneth Linsner's appraising has led him to bigger projects in post-Ceausescu Romania.

sions seized under the tough federal racketeering statute RICO—a job that has led to some surprising discoveries. Called in to appraise the antique gun collection of a convicted racketeer, Linsner discovered, to his horror, among ancient flintlocks and arquebuses, a Luger with silencer, a Thompson submachine gun, two Claymore mines and a canister of nerve gas. And though his findings are not always this exciting, given the tax dodges, bunco schemes and forgeries, his work for government agencies is disturbingly plentiful. “In the dollar amount of criminal activity, number one is drugs, number two is counterfeiting, number three is fine art,” Linsner reveals. “Only 6 percent of the criminals involved are ever caught, only half of those are prosecuted, and only half of those ever do time.”

Linsner’s international activities began in 1979, when a consortium of businessmen asked for his assistance in mounting a museum show based on artifacts discovered in an imperial Ming tomb. The deal collapsed, but not before Linsner had the chance to make important connections in Beijing. At that time, Chinese officials were looking at traveling museum exhibitions as a way of reaching out to the West, and Linsner was asked to advise them on how to insure these exhibitions in U.S. dollars. He also became involved in various other projects. His relations with Beijing remain cordial: “I still receive ministerial treatment from the Chinese whenever I visit them,” he says.

In 1986, on the strength of his work in China, Linsner was approached by representatives of the Aquino government, then trying to rebuild the Philippines after the downfall of longtime dictator Ferdinand Marcos. “The Marcoses had amassed a large collection of paintings and fine art in various homes throughout the world,” Linsner explains, “including such works as Veronese’s *City of Venice Adoring the Christ Child* and Zurbarán’s *Holy Family*. The Philippine government, however, asserted that the works had been purchased with money misappropriated from the country’s treasury.” Working in New York with the cooperation of the FBI and the Philippine Presidential Commission On Good Government, Linsner tracked down the whereabouts of these holdings, interdicted their sales and returned them to their rightful

(portraits)

owners. Whenever possible, he arranged to have artwork sold, with proceeds accruing to the Philippine people.

“To finance this operation,” Linsner continues, “we organized an auction of the objects inside the Marcoses’ Manhattan town house.” They included a coverlet once owned by Nicholas II and Alexandra of Russia, furniture from the collection of Les Samuels, Paul Storr wine coolers, rare books, monogrammed sheets, even a box of plastic smoke detectors. Says Linsner, “We decided not to break anything up, but to sell the entire estate. And with each item, we offered a certificate attesting to its previous ownership by the Marcoses.” For security reasons, the auction was held at New York’s Kennedy Airport, while Linsner himself was protected by Filipino bodyguards. “We orchestrated a huge event for propaganda purposes,” he recalls. “Because Corazon Aquino

was due to visit the U.S. in September 1986, we held the auction in August. For two months, the papers were full of stories about her new government—an invaluable amount of publicity.” The auction itself raised \$900,000, including \$300 paid for the box of smoke detectors. “The goods of the infamous are always worth more than those of the famous,” says Linsner.

In 1989, another of the world’s tyrants fell, and once again Kenneth Linsner was called in to help pick up the pieces. “A network of

Romanians had been awaiting Nicolae Ceausescu’s demise for some time,” says the appraiser. “After the revolution, they seized his possessions and asked me about arranging a sale to benefit the Romanian economy.” (Because of the crisis in the Persian Gulf, the auction is on indefinite hold.) Unlike the Marcoses, Ceausescu did not accumulate fine art, but preferred big-ticket items packed with technological hardware. His personal Boeing 707, for example, is an exact copy of the U.S. president’s *Air Force One*, with gold-plated fixtures and 26 American-built electronic systems, each requiring U.S. congressional approval before installation. The jet also comes with a telecommunications van for ground-to-air transmissions. “It took me three days to appraise the damn thing,” Linsner admits. Ceausescu’s yacht, *Mircea the Great*, is 315 feet long, sleeps 120 passengers and 50 bodyguards and can make 24 knots on smooth seas. Capable of storing

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over three and a half tons of food and nearly 40 tons of fresh water, it too bristles with up-to-date telecommunications gear. Other items once owned by Ceausescu include an extensive collection of sporting equipment, seven homes—in addition to an enormous, unfinished palace—and, says Linsner, “the 15 best sable coats in the world.” Now in the midst of evaluating these objects, Linsner refuses to quote their values, only hinting that “most of them are worth several millions of dollars.”

But liquidating the pelf of a former dictator is not the extent of Linsner's plans in Romania. To encourage investments in the region, the appraiser cofounded a company called the Lorient Group and became involved in a \$750 million project to rebuild Tarom, the Romanian national airline. These projects, too, hit a snag last summer with Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. “A quarter of the Romanian economy depends on refining Iraqi oil,” explains Linsner. Keeping his eye on the “big picture,” Linsner does see some opportunities for Romania in the present international gloom. “The Kuwaiti situation has underscored the vulnerability of Mideast banking centers,” he claims. “We'd like to see Romania become the new financial center of the region, a new Hong Kong. For the real end game here is to prevent a power vacuum in Eastern Europe.”

Although his Romanian projects are temporarily on hold these days, Linsner continues to find no shortage of business opportunities closer to home. He is currently preparing to venture into yet another new field—the silver screen. “I'm representing the sale of a private archive of movies,” the appraiser reveals. “The archive contains over 700 titles and 200 short subjects, some of which have never been screened.” The collection contains one of only 20 Technicolor prints of *The Sound of Music* and an uncut print of *Gone with the Wind*. “I'm looking forward to screening that,” says Linsner. “I hear it's a totally different movie. For one thing, it's six hours long.” Now that's seeing the big picture. (A&A)

Steven Vincent is a New York-based writer.