

OUT OF RUSSIA

In a retreat-like setting on the James River, Lazare Gallery owners John and Kathy Wurdeman have amassed an outstanding collection of art by Soviet-era masters and contemporary painters

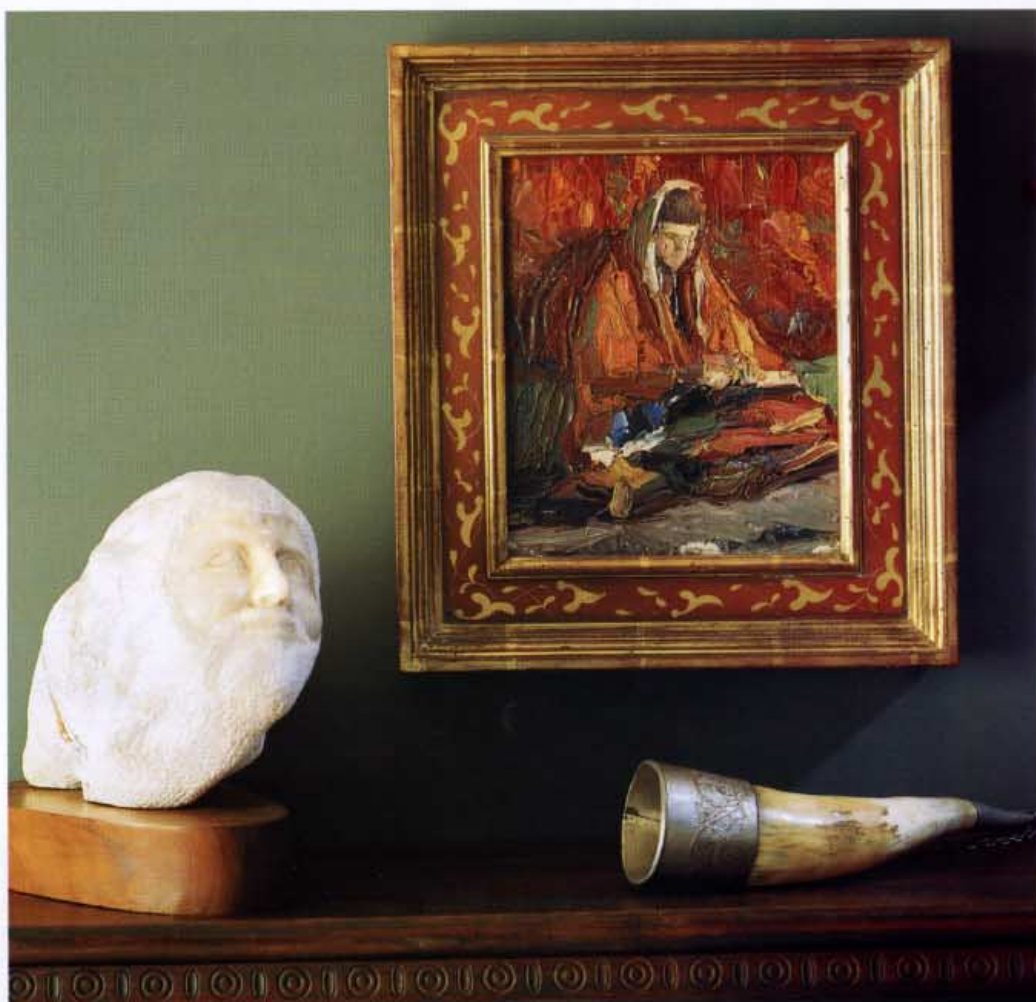
By Judith Bell

Photography by Tyler Darden





The Wurdemans make their home in a Williamsburg-style colonial and carriage house with panoramic river views. The gallery, housed in a separate building to the right, was designed by Richmond architect Henry Teisler. It encompasses guest quarters for visiting artists and collectors.



The Wurdemans' favorite paintings hang on the gray-green walls of the entrance hall (opposite) and include masterworks by the late Vyacheslav Nikolaevich Zabelin (their son's Surikov Institute studio master), Nikolai Kozlov and two of Jonathan Wurdeman's most admired works. In an alcove beside the stairs, a sculpture by the elder John Wurdeman, an old Georgian drinking horn and a painting of a harem girl by Chistakov are on display (above).

From their new compound on the banks of the James River in Virginia's historic Charles City County, where the Union Army amassed before its march on Richmond, art dealers John and Kathy Wurdeman are quietly making some history of their own.

For years the couple owned Richmond-based Old World Prints, a large decorative arts publishing concern. But in 1992, their son Jonathan made a decision about his education that changed not only the course of his life, but also that of his parents. As a student at the Maryland Institute College of Art, Jonathan became dissatisfied with the school's

emphasis on experimentation and the lack of traditional art training. He opted for study at Moscow's Surikov Institute of Art, where the tenets established in French Impressionism had continued to flourish for some 130 years.

Jonathan graduated six years later, the only American to do so in the history of the Surikov. "When your child graduates from the Institute," explains the elder Wurdeman, "it's traditional for parents to do something nice for the teachers if they are able. We introduced the work of three teachers and three students at the New York Art Expo, a show where gallery owners buy art to re-market. To our great surprise, in the first hour we sold \$150,000 worth of art."





In the living room (right), the Wurdemans emulated the style of hanging art seen in Russian artists' homes. A grid of paintings hangs above the carved mantel and the late 1800s mahogany bookcase filled with the family's antique book collection (above).

The Wurdemans began selling these artists' work to other art dealers as a side venture. Jonathan's decision to settle in the Republic of Georgia, where he married renowned folksinger Ketevan Mindorashvili, strengthened their ties to the region. Through annual buying trips, Wurdeman, accompanied by Surikov teachers and his son—who served as interpreter, critic and diplomat—began amassing an outstanding inventory of works by Soviet-era masters and contemporary Surikov painters.

But the passion for the most prolific and perhaps the most significant art school of the 20th century overtook their lives, demanding their full attention and soon, a new home. In 2003 they sold their thriving print business and began to hunt for a location that would support their vision.

"We wanted our business to fit into a wonderful lifestyle, to create a unique gallery situation, not a retail location," explains John Wurdeman, "one where we could develop a one-on-one relationship with dealers and collectors and they could select art in a retreat-like atmosphere that embraced our love of history and the outdoors."

They found the ideal setting in a 1980 Williamsburg-style colonial and carriage house built on former Berkeley Plantation property. A long drive winds through forest before opening onto the tranquil property and its panoramic river views. The original owner had served as his own construction project manager, determining many of the house's unique details, from the antique heart of pine floors and beams in the kitchen and dining areas, to the heart of pine cabinets









A convivial atmosphere prevails in the Wurdeman home, whether they are entertaining clients or catching up with daughter Maris Brook Wurdeman around the antique English pine kitchen table (opposite top, left and right). An 1850s rug found in the Republic of Georgia's Caucus Mountains complements the warmth of the nearby fireplace; a Zabelin hangs over the mantel (opposite, bottom). The heart of pine cabinets in the open kitchen were custom-built on site by the home's previous owner (above).

WHEN THE WURDEMAN'S MOVED INTO THE HOUSE, THE FULL COLLECTION CAME OUT OF STORAGE FOR THE FIRST TIME, GIVING CLIENTS THE OPPORTUNITY TO SEE ART IN A LIVING SPACE.

in the kitchen and master bath that were custom-built on site. The massive mahogany front door, which previously stood in President John Tyler's Richmond home, was a gift from Tyler's descendants.

To design the guest cottage and three-story museum-quality gallery, the Wurdemans turned to Richmond architect Henry Tensler. Tensler had worked with them on the renovation of the historic Fan District building that housed their former business. "There was openness here inside and out that we wanted to preserve and express, and we wanted unity on the

property, to tie everything to the house," says Wurdeman. Tensler echoed the house's façade in that of the gallery, including a reproduction of the original Tyler door. A lofty screened breezeway between house and gallery provides sheltered passage and brings a vignette of the all-important river view into focus.

In the 4,200-square-foot gallery, tall walls and controlled lighting were paramount needs. "We wanted clients to be able to stand back from the art and really see it," says Wurdeman, "to see it from different

"WE WANTED TO CREATE A UNIQUE GALLERY SITUATION...A RETREAT-LIKE ATMOSPHERE THAT EMBRACED OUR LOVE OF HISTORY AND THE OUTDOORS," EXPLAINS JOHN WURDEMAN.



perspectives and to fully imagine how one lives with this art." Natural light flows into the gallery from the bank of windows on the second floor and spills down the wide staircase, creating a dramatic light shaft. When artists visit from Russia, the Wurdemans wanted them to be able to paint in the gallery. "For them," explains Wurdeman, "light coming from a single source is of paramount importance. You can't create proper shadows with multiple light sources." The gallery's track lighting emulates sunlight, the perfect light for showing these plein-air paintings created in nature. Bamboo floors and sage green walls—a favorite in Russia for showing art—further enhance the connection with nature.





In the master bedroom, an entire wall of massive windows overlooks the James River (opposite). Peach walls add a glow to the large female nude by Nikolai Dubavik (opposite, inset). A bedroom in the gallery (above) accommodates visiting artists and clients.

To furnish the gallery, the Wurdemans looked for pieces that would reinforce the quality of the art. Jacobean cabinets to the right and left of the gallery entrance provide storage for wine and printed materials. A signed inlaid Louis XVI reproduction made by the late Richmond master craftsman Barbarit Jackson anchors the main wall on the second floor. Five sturdy expansive tables constructed from antique wood from an old California warehouse can be moved about the gallery or lined up together on the first floor to seat 30 for patrons' dinners given for visiting artists.

The first floor of the Wurdeman home is an extension of the gallery, showcasing the finest examples of Russian art and giving clients the opportunity to see

art in a living space. When the Wurdemans moved into the house, the full collection came out of storage for the first time. A color expert, Kathy Wurdeman chose a palette of French cream, neutral green and soft peach to enhance the space around the art. "White walls add too much reflection. The color families that accentuate art all feature a tinge of yellow," she says. She also uses their collection of antique rugs to anchor the simply appointed rooms. "They add instant warmth, making any room livable and inviting. I don't want a pristine, pulled-together look. I'm interested in the character inherent in a worn antique rug. You don't have to have fine furniture if you have something that is itself a statement."





In the three-story, 4,200-square-foot gallery, tall walls and controlled lighting were paramount needs. Clockwise from opposite, top left: Track lighting in the studio emulates sunlight; materials await visiting artists; sage green walls offset the art; and natural light from a bank of windows on the second floor spills down the wide staircase. A painting by Stanislav Brusilov hangs above an inlaid Louis XVI reproduction and anchors the main wall on the second floor (above).

The Wurdemans' favorite paintings hang on the gray-green walls of the entrance hall, and include masterworks by the late Vyacheslav Nikolaevich Zabelin (Jonathan's Surikov studio master), Nikolai Kozlov and two of Jonathan's own most admired works. The Wurdemans collected antiquarian prints before Russian art. John Gould's *Birds of Paradise* (1849-1861) are also displayed here, along with a Revolutionary War-era mahogany grandfather clock.

In the living room, the Wurdemans emulated the style of hanging art seen in Russian artists' homes.

"Painters often give each other gifts, small works, and these are hung tightly." A grid of paintings hangs above the carved mantel and the late 1800s mahogany bookcase filled with the Wurdemans' antique book collection.

The open kitchen, dining area and sunroom overlooking the river are the heart and center of the Wurdeman home. "For me," says Kathy Wurdeman, "working in a home environment is about creating something that speaks of our personality but that is

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comfortable for guests, whether they are clients or our children." The antique English pine table and its contemporary elm chairs easily accommodate frequent large dinner parties. An 1850s rug found in the Republic of Georgia's Caucus Mountains complements the warmth the nearby fireplace adds to gatherings in winter months. A Zabelin hangs over the fireplace; a set of six Diderot prints from 1770 of animals recorded by African explorers is displayed on the high wall between the dining and sitting areas. The pair of 25-year old Henredon sofas are slipcovered in cream; the reproduction armchairs were discovered in a boutique in Mississippi. The circa 1930 Afghani rug is in tones of blue and red. "The color is in the rugs, the art," says Kathy Wurdeman. "With these incredible water views, I don't want one's eye focusing on the furnishings."

Upstairs in the master bedroom, where an entire wall of massive windows overlooks the James, the river is everything. Peach walls add a glow to the large female nude by Nikolai Dubavik and the Zabelin landscape over the fireplace. The sofa and the adjacent meditation room reinforce the serenity the Wurdemans discover living not only with nature but with art.

"We get great pleasure from our collection," says John Wurdeman. "We're constantly studying the paintings, discovering new things about a work, the artist. A good indicator of a great piece of art is [that] your appreciation for it grows with time. I look at Zabelin's favorite painting and ask myself, 'Why, why this one, out of all of his pieces we have, out of the hundreds in museums?' There's something bigger than life in the privilege of pondering that question." ❖

Judith Bell is a Richmond-based writer. Tyler Darden is a Richmond-based photographer and art director.

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