

# LOOK FORWARD TO THE FUTURE

## Mitzie Verne

### Art Collector & Curator



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*In the warm and softly lit gallery that bears her name — and surrounded by soothing, yet thought-provoking Japanese art — 91-year-old Mitzie Verne shared her thoughts on growing up in Cleveland in the 1930s and 1940s, how she and her husband “discovered” Japanese art — and how that discovery led to the launch of The Verne Collection — and her thoughts on what it takes to age not just well but successfully, too.*



### **When and where were you born and raised?**

I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1922 on June 16. I was raised in the inner city in the Glenville area on Drexel Avenue, near East 105th Street. And it was my father who convinced the first African-American family (the Phillips family) to move into the area where we lived and he was our next door neighbor. (Reverend) Phillips was the Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and I can truthfully say that I knew about “integration” long before the 1960s. Growing up I was very close to his daughter Nancy, who married Rembert Stokes, who became president of Wilberforce University (the

nation’s oldest private, historically black university). And on the other side of us was the Smiths, who were devout Catholics, and very active in their church.

Our rabbi was Barnett Brickner, but as a result of my neighbors, I learned how to decorate Christmas trees and all about Easter and Easter egg hunts.

### **Where are you in the sibling line-up?**

I’m the baby of the family. I have two brothers, Robert (Levine) who was 8 years older and Alfred who was the handsome middle child. You might remember Robert:

he (and wife Anne) owned and ran Publix Book Mart.

**Tell me about your parents. What did they do?**

My father (Manuel Levine) came from Russia in the 1890s. The director of Hiram House (George A. Bellamy) took him under his wing and saw to it that he attended the law school at Western Reserve University. My father never practiced in a law firm and was always for the little guy. He started out in the prosecutor's office and got rid of all the justices of the peace who were not very honest. Then he ran for an elected position in the municipal court system. Eventually he became the Chief Justice of the Court of Appeals. He instituted a lot of reforms and was rarely opposed in an election, but when he was, my mother always campaigned for him.

My mom was a Bialosky. She was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of The College for Women in 1908. Many of those in the Bialosky family went into some kind of civic or social work. My mother was active in the Council of Jewish Women and taught in after-school programs and her sister, Lottie, was the referee for the juvenile court.

**You came of age during the Depression and World War II. How do you think growing up in the shadow of the two most important events of the 20th century shaped the person you are today? Or did it?**

It wasn't those things so much, though I do remember that my father's salary during the Depression was paid in scrip. It was the death of my father that I think had the most impact. He died when I was 15 years old.

I'd been planning to go away to college — even at the age of 15 — but when he died

my mother could not afford to send me away to school, so I went to Mather College here.

**You graduated from Cleveland Heights High. What were you good at, and not so good at?**

In school, I was always very active and was on the boys' golf team. The only things I wasn't good at were cooking and sewing — the domestic sciences.

When I started there we were still living in Cleveland, so we paid tuition so I could go to Heights High School and I rode my bike. (Laughs) It was a real trip to go up the hill to the school every day, but eventually we did move to Cleveland Heights.

**When you graduated from Flora Stone Mather College in 1944 (Phi Beta Kappa, by the way), you had a degree in psychology. What were you going to do with a degree in psychology?**

I didn't have to think about that for too long. Immediately after I graduated, I was one of the 20 women admitted to a special program, the Harvard-Radcliffe Management Trainee Program. I went from 1944 to 1945 in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

It was an amazing program, essentially a Harvard MBA, for which we were awarded a certificate, not a degree. The professors would come to classes and practically roll their eyes, though, because we were "just" women and they thought that we'd "just" get married and have kids.

**Is that where you met your late husband, Dan?**

No, I met him when I was a senior in high school and he was a freshman attending Adelbert College. His mother was in a

sewing circle with my mother, and she told him to take me to the ZBT fraternity's Thanksgiving Dance. That was during an era when sons listened to their mother's advice.

Dan was attending Western Reserve's Dental School during World War II, while I attended Mather College. I think you could say that we went steady for almost seven years.

My mother said that when Dan graduated from dental school — and because of the war he was in an accelerated program and went only three years, as opposed to the usual four — that we could get married. He graduated on June 12, 1945 and we were married June 14.

### **How and why did you and your family end up in Japan in 1953?**

Dan was in the reserves while he was in dental school and immediately after we were married he was inducted into the U.S. Navy. He was a Lieutenant Junior Grade, and his orders said to report to San Francisco with the US Navy for about a year-and-a-half. What a dream place to be stationed.

He hadn't finished his training though, so when we returned to Cleveland he still needed to do an internship and residency in oral surgery. Just as he was done with that and had set up a practice, the Korean War started and he was recalled to the Navy. He received orders to report to the Naval Hospital in San Diego. We had been there about a year when he came home one night and said that he'd gotten orders to go to the naval hospital in Yokosuka.

I was so naive, I thought Yokosuka was somewhere off the coast of California. I was right. It was in Japan.

(Laughs) I'm a camp follower, so about 6

weeks after Dan got to Japan I arrived with our girls — Betsy was 5 and our daughter Heidi was 2 and Michael hadn't been born yet — and we moved to Kamakura, Japan. It had been the capitol of Japan in the 14th century and was about an hour train-ride from Tokyo.

### **Why and how did you become interested in Japanese art while you were in Japan?**

When my brother Bob heard that we were going to Japan, he told me to get in touch with Mrs. Saburo Kurusu (nee Alice Jay Little), so I wrote her and she wrote back in perfect English that she'd be happy to meet with Dan and to help us find housing and schooling for the girls.

Hers is an interesting story. Her husband was in the Japanese Foreign Service and he had met her in Chicago when he was there at the beginning of his career. When he was the Ambassador to Italy in 1940, he'd represented Japan in the signing of the Tri-Partite Pact with Italy and Germany, then he resigned his position in protest for having had to sign the pact. In the fall of 1941 he was called out of retirement by Emperor Hirohito and sent to Washington, D.C. and he was there when Pearl Harbor was bombed. He always claimed — and there's no reason to doubt him — that he did not know of the plans to bomb Pearl Harbor.

When Dan arrived in Japan he made arrangements to meet Mrs. Kurusu at the Imperial Hotel (designed by Frank Lloyd Wright) and expected to meet a kimono-clad Japanese woman. Instead a dignified American woman greeted him with: "I am the wife of the infamous Saburo Kurusu!"

Dan knew his history and realized who he was meeting.

We got to know the Kurusus very well, and they really took us under their wing, partly I think because Mrs. Kurusu was Theosophist, who believed in life after death, and always thought Dan was the reincarnation of her son who had been killed in a Kamikaze raid in 1945 because he looked very much like her son.

**You — and The Verne Collection — have been importing and promoting Japanese art for 60 years and have an important school of American artists who are living or were trained in Japan and have their work in museums all over the world. When and why and how did you get into the art import business?**

Originally, it was due to my brother. He told me to be on the look-out for wonderful books and prints. We sent him one shipment of things in 1953 and that's what got me started. He wanted more works, and I wanted to know more about the art and history of Japan.

I had no background in Asian art, but living in Kamakura, I was able to meet Itaru Tashiro, a noted art dealer who ran Kamakura Fine Arts — and who knew all the prominent families in Kamakura — and he took me under his wing. I spent a great deal of time with him, going to the second floor of his shop. Sitting on a zabuton and him sitting across from me on another, he'd unroll scrolls called kakemono — there's always an element of surprise as scrolls are being unrolled — and explain about the artists who made them, about the stories they told, about their history.

Then I took a course in brush and ink painting (sumi-e) from Fauré Harada (grandson of composer Gabriel Fauré).

Then Dan and I started collecting, but I never thought I'd be opening a gallery. And the very first scrolls that we bought — because

we liked them and wanted to live with them — went on loan to the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1956. The pieces that really interested Dan and me were cartoon-like prints (otsu-e) and stencil dyed works by Keisuke Serizawa, who was designated a National Art Treasure for his kataezome (hand stencil dyeing) and folk art (mingei) pieces.

When Dan and I got home in 1954, Tashiro wrote to me and asked me if I would be his representative in the United States. When I was in Japan I'd gotten to know him so well, so how could I not? And that was the beginning of the Mitzie Verne Collection.

When I would go back to Japan on visits — and I've been back 17 times — I started meeting with the artists that I was representing here, including Serizawa, who was the leader of the mingei movement. Bringing his works here, I was definitely a pioneer. (Laughs) I had to wait 60 years for it, but just recently the Japan Society of New York had a Serizawa show.

**You are in the Japanese art business, and “business” is the operative term here. So my question is: Where and when did you get your business experience?**

What I'd learned in the Harvard-Radcliffe program after I graduated from Mather certainly was a help, but I'd always been business-oriented and my business experience actually started in college where I'd been the business manager of the Polychronicon, the Mather yearbook. And because so many male students were drafted during World War II, I had the opportunity to be the first woman business manager of the Reserve Tribune, the campus newspaper, which was always in the hands of the ZBT fraternity. ZBT figured if they gave this position to me that I'd give it back to them when the

war was over. (Laughs) But I choose Mather colleagues for the Tribune when I moved on.

**When did you know you'd made it, that The Verne Collection was going to be a success?**

(Laughs) When I established the Mitzie Verne Collection of Japanese Art in 1954, I never doubted that it would be successful. Much of that success is due to the contacts that I'd made in Japan when I lived there and during the trips I made back to Japan, and now most of it is due to my son, Michael. He said, right after he'd graduated from Weatherhead School of Management in 1982 that he'd give it a couple of years. He's been my partner ever since. Now he's president of the Verne Collection.

When I started out, I'd bring in and show fine old woodblock prints and scrolls and other pieces, but those objects have become more difficult to find, so now we represent the elite of contemporary Japanese artists, too.

**Since you do and have done some much work with art and artists, were you ever interested in becoming an artist yourself?**

Not really. And when I took classes mostly when I was in Japan it wasn't to produce art but rather to understand how it was created, what it took to create it, not just the tools, and the discipline needed to create it.

**Running an art gallery is stressful and competitive. So, over the years, what have you been doing to balance your work-life and your life-life?**

(Laughs) It's hard to answer that question because they are so connected. For instance, my travels back to Japan were for both pleasure and for work. Or when Dan (an internationally recognized oral surgeon and educator) was invited to speak - and he was

invited to speak all over the world - I'd go, too, and be looking for the art of the country where he was speaking.

**At 91 do you have any plans to "retire," or at least slow down?**

I don't even think about it! And you wouldn't even ask me that question if you could see the piles of stuff on my desk that are going to take me a long time to work through. There was something published recently in Time Magazine about longevity and one of the things that it said contributed to a long life was having a reason to get up every day.

And I do!

**You just did a major show at the Cleveland Museum of Art and at 91 you look fit and active. What do you do to stay in shape?**

My house has stairs, and I walk up and down them as often as possible - except to the basement. There I don't like to go. And I think - despite the fact that I use a cane and am careful about my balance - that kind of constant movement and exercise has something to do with how active I am at 91. And I pace myself, too. I plan things for later in the day, not right after I get up in the morning.

And I know that I'm blessed with good health, and I'm grateful for it... I had cancer three times, but each time it was caught early.

**Yes, I noticed the cane. Where did you get it?**

Dan had volunteered on the hospital ship Hope and we'd sailed so close to Africa that we decided to go on a safari on our own. An elephant knocked a branch off a tree and I brought it home and I never thought about what it would be used for.

Just as a joke, a friend auctioned it off and I had to buy it back. (Pointing) That's why there's this little red dot - a sticker - on it.

**What about diet? Asian food is probably the healthiest there is, so do you tend to eat Asian food?**

Actually not that much, and my son, Michael, can't understand how I stay so healthy eating all the unhealthy foods that I eat.

**MythBusters is all about successful aging. In a nutshell, what's your advice — i.e. Mitzie Verne's tips and strategies - for successful aging?**

I'm going to go back to that Time Magazine article and say that you always have to be looking forward, planning things for the future. And, if you are fortunate enough to be in good health and you are doing something that you love to do, than you should keep on doing it. To me, that means doing things that are challenging and engaging, things that I enjoy, things that make me happy.

When we do shows, that means sharing what I've learned and what we know about the art and the artists we represent. And (tapping her iPad full of photos of artists in their workshops) it's always been that way.

**You personify the phrase "myth buster" — someone who is defying all the stereotypes about aging. Do you think of yourself as being a myth buster?**

(Laughs) Hardly. When I think "myth buster," I think of someone like Barbara Snyder, who is just transforming Case.

**What did I not ask that I should have?**

(Laughs) About what doing this interview has been like. It's really made me think and remember things. And it's reminded me, too, of the fond memories that I have. And just how fortunate I am to have them, too.