

PERSONA: ROGER HOUSTON OGDEN

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When confronted with a blank wall in our homes, some leave it that way, while others find a piece of art or two to hang. For commercial real-estate developer Roger Houston Ogden [yes, he's a descendent of that Sam Houston], a blank wall once gave him the opportunity to call good friend and noted artist, the late Ida Kohlmayer, to commission a piece of art. It still hangs there today, in his house that's full of art, much of it hung "salon style."



As an art collector, Ogden is one of the leading forces in collecting southern art – and along the way he raised the profile of many artists, including Kohlmayer. The culmination of his collecting, one could say, was the opening in 2003 of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in

New Orleans, which showcases his collection – with pieces ranging from the 18th to the 21st centuries – as well as works the museum has bought.

As a developer, Ogden established suburban shopping malls throughout Louisiana and the central South, then moved on to developing within New Orleans' Central Business District (the Loews Hotel, for example), which he and his business partner, Darryl Berger, continue today.

Even though being a serious art collector and a commercial real-estate developer may seem to be disparate pursuits, they both require assets that Ogden has: he does his research and he has good instincts, as well as a gambler's sixth sense of when to fold and re-strategize. When Ogden sets his mind on something, he has pinpoint focus on the objective, a doggedness of sorts.

Once he started collecting art – his first piece was an Alexander Drysdale he bought while he was in college as a joint gift with his dad for his mother – there was no turning back, even if he didn't have a formal education in art history or much money at the beginning.

Ogden was – is – a visionary who saw the potential in Southern art way before anyone else did and today, sees great potential in this city. It should be interesting to see what his next step will be.

Resides: Uptown **Education:** Bachelor of Science, Louisiana State University (LSU); Juris Doctorate, Tulane University School of Law. **Family:** Partner Kenneth Barnes, with whom I've been with for 33 years; Son, Dr. Field Ogden. **Favorite book:** Right now, I'm reading His Excellency, George Washington, by Joseph J. Ellis. I love biographies. I love reading about people's lives, their challenges and how they overcome the difficult times. I always learn something from every biography I read. **Favorite restaurant:** Otto's Barbecue in Houston. I first went there in 1972. I always have an order of barbecue ribs and a chopped pork with barbecue sauce sandwich, with cole slaw and pickles. **Favorite food:** Thinly sliced, fried onions. **Favorite movie:** If I have to pick one great American film, it would be Gone with the Wind. It still moves people today as when it was first released. **Favorite TV show:** Any and all sports, especially college football. I have season tickets to LSU football games. **Hobby:** All sports, but in particular fly-fishing and snow skiing.

Tell me how you're donating your collection; I see that you still have many pieces in your house. I've given the Ogden the first phase of my donation, which I completed in 2003, prior to opening the museum. That was about 600 works. Upon completion of the [Patrick F. Taylor] library, I will pledge the remainder of the total, 500 to 600 works, which are mostly

historical works.

When did you think southern art came into its own? While there were many chapters leading up to it, without a doubt the opening of the Ogden in 2003 was the seminal event that brought attention and focus on Southern visual arts.

Any artists in New Orleans – or the present-day art scene in the South – that you're looking at now? Among the younger, new generation in New Orleans, certainly two that come to mind are Nicole Charbonnet and Sidonie Villere. I've been watching their work and own examples from each. There is an artist from South Carolina, Brian Ruttenberg, who works in heavy applications of paint in an abstract manner depicting realistic scenes.

What challenges does the city face now? We're two years past the devastation and we have to be realistic about what can be achieved – and within that framework of discussion there are still across-the-board challenges. There are challenges with public education, crime, rebuilding, economic development, medical care/health-care delivery. Pick one and there's a challenge.

Bottom line: I believe this is going to be a much better, much stronger city five years from now than it was the day before Katrina and the resulting levee failures occurred. I say that because there never would have been the political will to do what's being done with public education in the city. We're only in the second year of this huge experiment that I predict in a number years – and I don't know whether it's going to be in two, three, four or five years – it will be the model for redeveloping inner-city public school systems in this country.

What about crime? This is the one area that it is unclear when the resolution will come.

Do you think it will take something like the Louisiana Pizza Kitchen murders, which happened in 1996, to improve law enforcement, like it did after that incident? It doesn't have to come to that point.

We're not there yet but the wheels are in motion to deal with the crime problem in a significant way. Leaders such as John Casbon, the founder of the New Orleans Police Foundation, Police Superintendent Warren Riley, U.S. Attorney Jim Letten and the FBI's James Bernazzani – the team approach that is just now taking foothold is going to make it a miserable place for criminals to do business – but it's going to take time.

The weakest link right now is the judicial system – we haven't had crime labs, witnesses or a witness protection program. But, I expect in the next 24 months the shift will turn [for the better] and then another couple years to perfect it.

What do you think New Orleans has to do to attract new businesses here, as the city only has one Fortune 500 business [Entergy] here? We need to build a foundation, a platform to recruit major business activity to New Orleans.

I don't see New Orleans in the next 10 years as being a major site for relocation of Fortune 500 companies, but I do believe that will grow our business from within and I think we have several areas to focus on.

One is the port and everything that emanates from that. Two is biomedical. I believe there are very few U.S. cities that have two major medical centers such as LSU and Tulane. Plus the city is about ready to get two \$1 billion hospitals built downtown: LSU teaching hospital – it's not the replacement for Charity, it's a new teaching hospital that will serve the entire community, both indigent and paying patients. And with the VA hospital adjacent to it we're going to have one of the greatest biomedical complexes anywhere in the country from which to build our research in biomedical and pharmaceuticals, and the potential of businesses that spin off those – it will be phenomenal.

Next, we've got the film industry, there's a new initiative of the performing arts and theater district, oil-field services and then one of the things I'm most excited about, is the "Silicon Bayou" initiative. Through Tulane, UNO and LSU, we have a significant IT presence in this country.

There will be some surprises. We all need not to forget about tourism. New Orleans has always been a magnet for visitors because it has a special culture like no other in the U.S. and very few like it in the world. If we have enough sense to continue to invest in the infrastructure that is the greatest current asset we have – which is our culture, arts and tourism – then we should not ever overlook the contributions that they will bring to the city in the near term and long term.

What I hope happens is that as we get a better foundation of public education, law enforcement and infrastructure, such as streets, drainage and hurricane protection that everyone has faith in – as those things materialize over the next five to 10 years, then that's the platform from which we can bring people in here who come for meetings and conferences, the CEOs and the CFOs who will wonder "Why aren't we in New Orleans?" – that's how it's going to happen.