



No One Paints Ralph DeLuca Into a Corner

The tough-talking, Jersey-born art adviser tells his celebrated clientele which artists to buy, which ones to unload and how to avoid getting conned. His Ten Commandments for buyers will help you get through Art Basel this month By Mark Ellwood

Ralph DeLuca has carved out a rare niche for himself as the go-to art adviser of Hollywood's A-list. The no-nonsense New Jersey native is on first-name terms with most major gallerists and counts blue-chip celebrity collectors like **Sylvester Stallone** and **Leonardo DiCaprio** as clients as well as friends. Other top-tier advisees include **Martin Scorsese**, **Quentin Tarantino** and **Steven Spielberg** and **Kate Capshaw**. If you're heading to the Dec. 6-8 Art Basel, keep an eye out for him: He's the bushy eyebrowed, shaven-headed force of nature squiring boldfaced names to the best booths in the fair.

DeLuca, 47, started out on Wall Street before pivoting to collectibles more than 20 years ago. It was legendary dealer **Tony Shafrazi** who suggested he upgrade to art. DeLuca proved a natural: curious, unflappable and direct. "I don't have a formal education. I come from nothing. But I have my reputation," he says. "At the end of the day, we're collecting stuff, not curing cancer. Art is very important, but we're not changing the world."

Now based in Las Vegas, he's one of the key supporters of LACMA's looming satellite there. But he retains his close connections to Hollywood, earning his clients' trust by advising them not only on what to buy, but also on how not to get hoodwinked. "With a celebrity art collector," he says, "they can get totally exploited by an art adviser or dealer — I've seen that happen a lot." Here are his Ten Commandments for any Hollywoodite keen to follow the DeLuca playbook.

1. Rules Are Rules

"Just because you're rich and famous doesn't mean the rules of the art world don't apply to you," DeLuca says. Many Hollywood A-listers, he says, "don't understand why, if they can call and get a private jet to Bora Bora from the chairman of the airline in a

minute, they can't buy work from a 24-year-old artist who's two years out of school and painting with his feet." Even household names need to earn the respect of a gallerist or dealer and put in face time at their booths or shopfronts. If you expect to simply snap up whatever you want, when you want it, expect to become familiar with the phrase "We're taking indications of interest."

"You have to manage a client's expectations and help them understand that a lot of people are asking for the same works, and galleries don't place them right away. The more involved you are, the better access you get," he says. "I'm only as good as my worst-behaving client. For me to make the phone call, I'd have to vet that client and school them in the rules for a while."

A strong gallery relationship, of course, unlocks better access to emerging work fresh from the artist's studio, at which stage pricing will likely be much more favorable. "I am very selective when buying emerging work, which I buy for myself and my clients only in the primary market," he says, referring to artworks that are being sold for the first time. "It's important for collectors to care about and support young artists and galleries but with the proviso that they do their research — or hire someone."

2. Use Your Fame Wisely

Patronage today involves deploying your own renown to help burnish the reputation of whoever

Art adviser Ralph DeLuca's starry clientele includes, from left: Sylvester Stallone, Leonardo DiCaprio, Kate Capshaw and Steven Spielberg.



you collect. The more you're willing to say you own a work, or post a picture of it on social media, the better access you'll get. "Sylvester Stallone is the perfect example of this," says DeLuca. "He loves to get the artist on the phone, and he's Instagrammed studio visits and things he's bought and loved. He has a huge social media following, and it trickles down. It's good for the ecosystem." Galleries and artists cozy up to celebrities and tech barons for much the same reason. "They have these amazing parties, their homes get photographed — everyone from the **Dalai Lama** down has been to Leo DiCaprio's house. It's better that a painting is on their wall as opposed to a museum in Miami or Wisconsin."

3. Buy on Instinct, Not on an Interior Designer's Say-So

Don't fret over where a piece might be installed or if it matches the decor: "A real collector never worries about wall space. You can move stuff out when your tastes change."

4. Stay Loyal

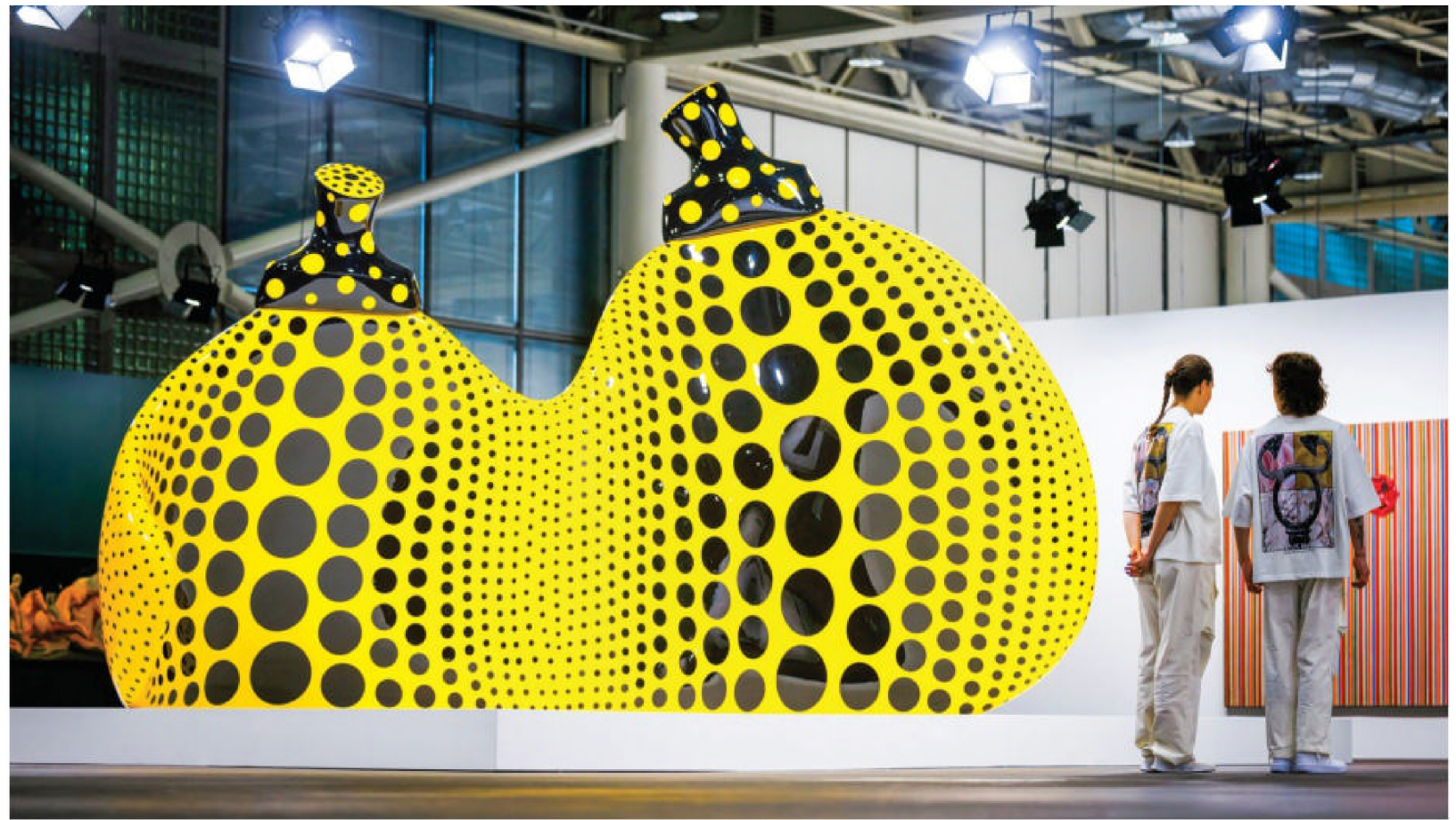
Sure, assess a few advisers up front and see whose style and taste best fit your own, but once you choose one, don't diversify. "Do not ask 40 people to chase after the same thing for you," warns DeLuca. "It creates fake demand and makes you look like a trophy hunter and a flipper."

5. See Art for Yourself ...

"Go and see as much art in person as you can," says DeLuca. "We've gotten complacent, and lazy, because we can buy on our phone or by FaceTiming the dealer. That's a mistake, and it backfires. You need to understand the texture, the tonality, the tactileness of a work in person."

6. ... but Approach Art Fairs With Caution

"Celebrities get accosted at art fairs. People come up and ask for autographs, and you might just be standing there looking at something, a Warhol or whatever,



Aspiring to Pumpkin's Love, the Love in My Heart (2023), by Yayoi Kusama, was displayed at the 2024 Art Basel fair in Basel, Switzerland.

and it gets out that you bought the painting," he says, citing unauthorized shots from Art Basel Miami Beach that showed DeLuca with client DiCaprio last year. "You're surrounded by 50,000 douchebags who want to go look at art and take selfies in front of a Twombly." The rare exception: Art Basel's OG fair in Switzerland. "It's different and much more about the art. But celebrities have crazy schedules and don't all have the time to go to Europe for a fair like that."

approach a client and work with the gallery."

8. Resist the FOMO

An adviser's job is often to tell clients what *not* to buy. DeLuca recalls walking around an art fair with a well-known, wealthy collector and discouraging him from buying almost everything he considered. "He had FOMO running around the art fair, so excited, like a kid in a candy store, because everyone was talking about needing to own this or that.

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Ralph DeLuca

7. Beware the BOGO

The new gimmick whereby a gallerist will offer to sell a certain artwork as long as the buyer snaps up another one on behalf of a museum or institution is an unwelcome development, says DeLuca. Such practices, he notes, amount to creative blackmail by "force-feeding a museum to take a donation so the gallerist can tell the artist they got them into one. It's not creating stewardship or patronage." The exception: if a blue-chip institution asks for help acquiring a specific artwork. "Say **Michael Govan** at LACMA calls me up and says, 'We want XYZ painting and we're X dollars short.' I would be happy to

In six months' time, he would have said, 'Why did I buy this?' Keep your ears open, but don't buy with them. Buy with your eyes and the opinion of your adviser." It's much harder to offload an artwork than a more fungible investment. "Going back to the gallery is a difficult conversation, because art is hard to buy and hard to sell. It's not liquid like stocks." Case in point: DeLuca has been working with a new client for more than six months — and has not yet transacted a single piece. The fact that so many folks were listening rather than looking is one major reason for the current slump in the secondary market for emerging art, he adds:

"A lot of collectors were focusing too much on the social aspects of art collecting."

9. Collecting Is Personal

Ask an adviser about their own collection — but not to check their taste. "This is one business where you *should* get high on your own supply," says DeLuca. "It's easy to spend other people's money, but it's important that the art adviser collects themselves." It's a lesson DeLuca learned from his mentor, storied adviser **Todd Levin**. Advisers may not have pockets as deep as those of A-list celebrities, of course, but they should be participating in the art economy, and at a similar percentage as they'd expect their clients to take.

10. Art's a Business, Too

"If you suggest money doesn't play into this at all, you're really blowing smoke up your own ass," he scoffs. "[Art] is an asset class, and when it appreciates, you're happy." One sector DeLuca is watching closely on this front: Indigenous and Native American artists, where he's seeing a surge in interest and support. But it's important not to lose sight of art's intrinsic worth. DeLuca often tells clients to ask themselves a difficult question: "Do I love this enough to want to live with it in perpetuity even if it does not increase — or even decreases — in dollar value over time?" **THR**