

## Meet Advisor Ralph DeLuca, the Self-Made Celebrity Whisperer Who's Won Over the Art World

He doesn't have a college degree or an auction house pedigree, but the New Jersey native has risen through the art market's most insular and illustrious ranks—earning the ear of celebrities like Leonardo DiCaprio and Sylvester Stallone along the way.



Ralph DeLuca. Image courtesy of Levin Art Group.

Frieze New York is well underway, and the art world's power brokers have assembled in Manhattan to prowl the fair and its various satellites. Milling among the booths and openings, you might find one of the scene's best-loved characters, and perhaps the one having the most fun: Ralph DeLuca.

The art advisor—with his thick New Jersey accent, high-school diploma, and penchant for straight talk—may represent a departure from his profession’s typical profile. But in the more than two decades since he began his career, DeLuca has climbed the art market’s ranks, befriend and collecting high-wattage artists like [George Condo](#) and [Jonas Wood](#), and assembling a covetable roster of deep-pocketed clients including [Leonardo DiCaprio](#), Sylvester Stallone, and the Park MGM Grand in Las Vegas.

So how does a regular Joe from East Hanover work his way into the inner circle? DeLuca's lack of a college pedigree or a formal art history background may make him a curiosity, but for the dealer, the recipe is simple: “I can sit down with a collector of anything and connect on passion.” DeLuca, a fervent autodidact to learned all he knows on the job, is not simply a deal-maker: he's a connector of people, leaving a trail of charmed gallerists, artists, and collectors in his wake, prepared to sing his praises.



“He’s one of my dearest friends in the world,” says Robert Goff, senior director of [David Zwirner Gallery](#). “What’s not to love?” adds New York dealer Marianne Boesky, who has known DeLuca for a decade and placed works by artists like Ghada Amer and [Sanford Biggers](#) with the MGM Grand through him. “[Ralph is] a quick learner and knows so much about pop culture and cultural history. When he came to me, he was ready to take on contemporary art.”

DeLuca’s path to celebrity art whisperer was a winding one—no graduate programs, no climbing the gallery or auction house ladder before hanging a shingle of his own. Instead, the 47-year-old is doggedly self-taught and -made. “I come from a very blue-collar Italian family that didn’t collect anything,” he says of his upbringing with a stay-at-home mother and a father who worked in demolition. “But I started collecting toys at 10. I would buy two of the same action figures and save one in the package.”

An encounter with a set of Salvador Dalí tarot cards that DeLuca encountered at 13 set him on the path to collecting in earnest. He used his birthday money to buy a lithograph from the Surrealist’s “Divine Comedy” series. “I showed my father, and he said, ‘What the fuck is wrong with you?’” DeLuca recalls with a laugh, adding: “To this day, I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with me.”

After finishing high school, he worked on Wall Street and in insurance before quitting in 2000 to focus on dealing collectibles—baseball cards, vinyl records, comic books, and movie posters from Hollywood’s golden age—while amassing his own horde of increasingly rarefied material such as Russian Constructivist art and works 20th-century photographers like Diane Arbus and Weegee.

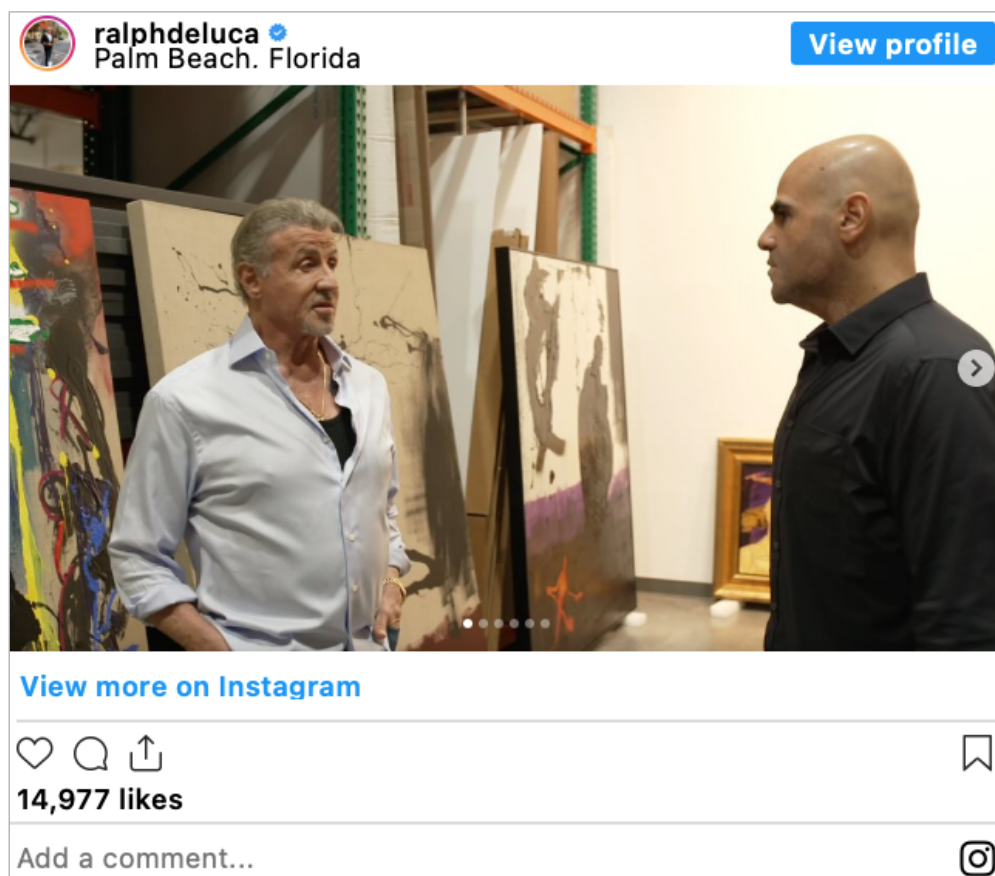


Photography by Chloe Wise. Image courtesy of DeLuca.

DeLuca was making a living, but art advising is a notoriously insular world—it didn't take him long to realize he had reached his own glass ceiling. "Everything you collect is dead. You should buy the best of today," he recalls being told by dealer [Tony Shafrazi](#), who suggested that DeLuca's proclivities might be limiting his access. Hungry to build momentum, DeLuca sought the services of heavyweight advisor [Todd Levin](#). "I was probably his poorest client," says DeLuca, who attributes much of his art world initiation to watching Levin guide him in building up his own collection.

"He is extraordinarily intelligent," Levin tells me, acknowledging that some sectors of the art world can be a "sniffy" place for those from outside a particular social stratum. "Ralph has overcome that through his rigorous self-education. When he gets interested in something, he digs in like a pit bull. And he's different from me in that he has tremendous charisma."

That charisma—and his firsthand experience as a serial collector—have earned him the trust and affection of many an art world figure, not to mention the celebrity set. Today, DeLuca has the ear of some of Hollywood's most influential figures—creators of culture themselves who are eager to build collections that convey their taste beyond the screen. His no-nonsense demeanor and expertise in Hollywood ephemera drew the attention of DiCaprio and Stallone, highly insulated A-listers often wary of un-vetted characters. DeLuca gained their trust by offering advice on their respective collections gratis, and then by embracing a policy of full transparency in his financial dealings (he told me he helped Stallone save millions on a Picasso). He's also got a reputation for fierce loyalty. DeLuca has seen just how deep the art world's prejudice can run—even Stallone, a household name, was passed over for more blue-blooded collectors. "Sly is totally self-made," DeLuca says. "He has a great eye as a collector ... but people just see Rocky or Rambo and hear his accent and don't realize it. If there's no trust fund, no endowment, then people can be a little judgy. [But] I love the unexpected surprises in the art world. Zwirner loves dealing with Sly."



The advisor has even managed to win over some art world figures who were initially wary, like New York collector-advisor-artist Kenny Schachter. “His scrappy outsidersness accounts for a lot of his charm,” Schachter says. “Many people in the art world don’t have a character. He wears his upbringing on his sleeve, and he seems a lot more content than a lot of people in the [industry].”

Indeed, DeLuca's meetings with high-profile clients and artists are more likely to take place in red-sauce Italian joints in lower Manhattan than at the iconic five-star hotel Trois Rois bar in Basel, where art dealers sip overpriced drinks after a day of selling at the fair. “I don’t know if I’m supposed to tell this story,” Goff says, “but Ralph is the guy who will throw together a lunch in the back room at [Emilio’s Ballato](#) with R. Crumb, [Leo] DiCaprio, Leo’s dad, and me. It was the most fun. I don’t know any other art advisor who could do that in that place.”