

arts

# A £5 million player signs for art's premier league

**TIM TEEMAN** meets Randy Lerner, the football tycoon behind the largest ever donation to the National Portrait Gallery

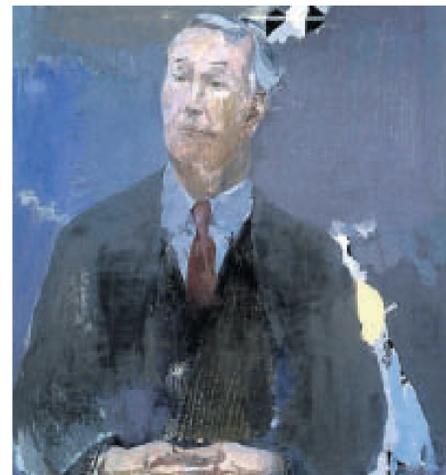
Randy Lerner knows the requests will soon start landing, the begging letters and invitations to lunch. To be touted as a major arts philanthropist just as the Arts Council prepares to swing the axe will mark him out. "I'm not sure how I'll respond," he says. "I think I'll run like hell."

For Lerner, his gift of \$10 million (£5 million) to the National Portrait Gallery is not about a love of art so much as a result of years of friendship between him and the NPG's director, Sandy Nairne, and a group of their arty acquaintances. "This is a one-off," says the American owner of Aston Villa very firmly. But I'm not so sure: given the secret, aesthetic leanings that he reveals this may well be just an opening salvo.

He is not the first arts supporter to come from football. Fabio Capello, the new England boss, was unmasked as a collector in the most recent edition of *The Art Newspaper*, owning works by (among others) De Chirico, Chagall and Cy Twombly. His collection is estimated at £7.4 million. John Madejski, OBE, chairman of Reading, who has many treasures (including a Degas bronze) and who mounted a Ferrari Testarossa as a work of art in his home, gave £3 million to the Royal Academy in 2004 and has a suite of rooms named after him there.

At the National Portrait Gallery, the ground floor galleries will be renamed the Lerner galleries, which Lerner professes to be hugely embarrassed about. So he didn't stipulate it as part of giving the NPG its largest ever gift? "No," he says, mortified, emphasising, slightly semantically, that the money comes from this family's trust, not him.

He's a tricky one: blunt but friendly, handsome and fit (he runs in Hyde Park) with mournful grey eyes. And he hates talking about himself: "I think that what goes on, goes on out and around you. The 'you' part is dangerously distorted and overrated." I joke about how odd it was for Tom Hanks to parade around with an Aston Villa scarf at the recent London premiere of *Charlie Wilson's War*. "I honestly didn't think anything of it," he says crisply. "So it's not part of a Hollywood commitment drive?" "No, no," he says tersely. His default setting is an



**The art lover: Randy Lerner, right, says he learnt about pictures from browsing in galleries. His favourite artists include Theodore Géricault, whose *Mounted Jockey* is pictured, top; and Humphrey Ocean, whose portrait of Tony Benn, left, is in the National Portrait Gallery**

abrupt, slightly robotic monotone.

Lerner, 45, met Nairne through the Canadian curator and writer Bruce Ferguson and has since met many artists, art students and curators. He says this so passionately I remark that £5 million is an awful lot of money to pay even in respect of a strong friendship. "I probably am a fan of portraiture, but not by any means knowledgeable, more reasonably familiar," Lerner says. "I like to look at paintings, to read. When somebody says, 'Did you study art?' they mean schooling. I probably wandered in and out of art classes, but I would say my education has come much more through my appetite to read, going to galleries, shows, knowing artists, museum directors." He says he knows "what's going on the museum world", particularly with the transfers of large collections.

But this still doesn't explain the huge sum. "I don't think the amount was a great sticking point. Museums need what they need. They propose gifts to their supporters and in this

particular case we thought we'd like to be helpful on that level."

The money, Nairne says, will go towards the long-term development of the NPG's Portrait Fund (for commissioning and acquiring works) while also bolstering "programme development" — in research, digital activity and "outreach work" into schools and hospitals. What excites Lerner most is that the money is being used "within the current appetite for thinking very hard about contemporary portraiture, asking very difficult questions about portraiture and performance and the wider way portraiture is being interpreted by young painters and art-makers."

Begging letters in mind, he says again that "it is not part of a larger campaign" and adds sharply that he has "no opinion" about government funding. Nor does he think sport and art are linked by filthy lucre, despite the mutual cachet one bestows on the other: "But many football players will become buyers of art, that's a reasonably predictable progression." He points to celeb-

## Art's biggest private donors

**1985** J. Paul Getty Jr donates £50 million to the National Gallery, aiding the acquisition of several Old Master paintings, including Caravaggio's *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, *The Balbi Children* by van Dyck, and *A Lady with a Squirrel and a Starling* by Holbein.

**1991** The Sainsbury brothers fund the £35 million extension to the National Gallery.

**1998** The philanthropist Vivien Duffield donates £7 million to establish education facilities at the British Museum, Tate Modern (£2.5 million each), the Natural History Museum (£1 million) and regional museums and galleries.

**2003** An anonymous donor, widely thought to have been Getty, commits £12.5 million to the Tate to prevent Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Portrait of Omai* from being sold overseas.

**2004** The entrepreneur Tom Hunter pledges £5 million to the Kelvingrove in Glasgow.

**2000** The Canadian financier Christopher Ondaatje gives nearly £2.75 million to the National Portrait Gallery.

**2005** After his RA donation, see article, John Madejski gives £2 million to the V&A to create the John Madejski Garden.

**2007** John Studzinski, the head of a US private equity group, gives Tate Modern £5 million, its largest single donation.



DAVID CORIO

I loved being on a bicycle, not in a car. Cambridge was beautiful. I met great friends and it was a great place to concentrate, a real sense of academic immersion."

Is he at heart an academic? "Accidentally, yeah," he confesses with a heart-lurching expression that screams road-less-travelled. But he went back to the US and law school, though never practised as a lawyer, and entered the world of finance, working as a financial analyst. He married and had four children. His father "wanted things handled properly" after he passed away, which, disentangled, means he wanted Lerner to become head of his business empire. His fortune is estimated at \$1.6 billion.

It seems there is a tension between academic manqué and businessman, I say. "I've been feeling that for a very long time," Lerner admits ruefully enough to make me want to spirit him off immediately for an afternoon mooning around the V&A. So did he want to be an academic? "Yeah, I did yeah," he says forcefully. So what stopped him? "I probably felt the influences suggesting more of a professional life seemed to be more persuasive than

**I very much love to look at paintings. I think they make the world better'**

the influences suggesting an academic life, which begs the question, 'Why can't I make a decision for myself?' and the answer is 'Personal weakness'. Absolutely. The influences saying 'You should have a proper job' I couldn't resist." Your parents? He laughs. "I can't answer that question because my parents will come right out of that little machine (he points at my digital recorder), saying, 'You made up your own mind'."

At that moment, this wistful turn in our conversation is accentuated when a gentleman walks past the café wearing a Clare College scarf — his Cambridge college.

Lerner bought Aston Villa last year for nearly £63 million and relishes the business challenges of running two football teams. The big difference between here and the States is that here you can get promoted and relegated (this makes his stomach "churn"); over there, you pay to be in a league that never changes. He talks the talk of branding and strategy, and, at Aston Villa, of "maintaining the player population"; he has reportedly spent £40 million on transfers. He won't confirm if he has actually bought Jermain Defoe as has been rumoured, but "Who wouldn't want Jermain Defoe?" He fiercely prizes his team's manager, Martin O'Neill,

recently rumoured to be in the running for the England manager's job, pre-Capello's appointment. Of the prospect of the same thing happening in the future, Lerner says: "I would be significantly more than sad. I would probably be holding on to his [O'Neill's] ankle as he dragged me down the street. He cannot go. *He must not go.*" Lerner seems genuinely respectful of Villa's heritage.

He has homes on Long Island and in Kensington, and as for being a high-living billionaire, he confesses: "I like to think I'm not immune to a certain appetite for niceness, but I haven't become addicted to the narcotic." He fell in love with art in his twenties in London, with lost afternoons at the National Gallery and Tate and, later on, the Serpentine. Géricault, Mondrian and Brice Marden bewitched him.

No, he isn't a collector, he says, "I just own some pictures" — including works by Humphrey Ocean ("his reactions to life are magically transferred to the canvas"), Stephen Chambers and David Austin; all bought "between impulse and recklessness", he says. "In this day and age you look, react and there you go. There are no strict rules for how to look at things. For me it's about movement, motion, the amazing convergence over decades between easel painting in the traditional sense, and photography and film."

And again, the passion button is suddenly on. "I very much love to look at paintings. I think they make the world better. They help you get outside your personal concerns and issues. They're an amazing filter of how the world looks at a moment in time. They address an amazing part of our imagination that observes colour, space, light, people and shape."

There is at the very least a frustrated academic inside you, I say. "That's what you say," Lerner mugs, looking like a schoolkid who's been busted. "I may have a very thin and hopefully not too poorly written book inside me." What about? "I have no idea." Cat and mouse again. Would it be history? "I don't know." Has he written anything before, started a novel? "Yeah. No, no, no. Yeah, I've got a wastepaper basket filled with things, just scraps and scribbles." Would he write a novel ("no"), poems ("NO!"), autobiography ("GOD NO!") You would have control, I say. "There's nothing worse than control. It would probably be biographical." Who interests him? "Isaiah Berlin. A great figure, great painter, great writer, friend, essayist, portraitist."

Are the football teams really satisfying him creatively, I wonder? "That's a good question," he says with an expression that suggests the internal answer is another screaming and heartfelt "NO!" It might actually be an excellent moment to send him a begging letter.

Oh you pretty things



DERWENT MAY

**AROUND £100**  
*Untitled*, by Eimearjean McCormack

This delightful print on a woodblock of birds and a bath costs £130 in *Hot Off the Press*, a show of printmaking by recent graduates of the London art schools. Until January 26 at Curwen & New Academy Gallery, 34 Windmill Street, London W1. 020-7323 4700; www.curwengallery.com



**AROUND £1,000**  
*Teapots* by Jane Bowden and Emma Petersen

These teapots of silver and glass were made by the Australian sculptor Jane Bowden with the glass artist Emma Petersen. They cost £1,000 each on the Australian Contemporary stand at Collect, the Craft Council's international art fair. Jan 25-29, V&A Museum, London SW1. 0870 8422208; www.craftscouncil.org.uk



**AROUND £10,000**  
*Morning, Wave Breaking*, 2007, by Maggi Hambling

This oil on canvas costs £12,500 in Maggi Hambling's powerful new show, *Waves and Waterfalls*, until Feb 2, at Marlborough Fine Art, 6 Albemarle Street, London W1. 020-7629 5161; www.marlboroughfineart.com

