

## Passing the Philanthropic Torch: Jordan Schnitzer Giving to the Future

[In the Spotlight](#)

BY NED HAYES



Jordan Schnitzer is a busy man. He manages a portfolio of 13,000 artworks and a real estate empire spanning several states. Three museums in two states are named for him. But right now, he's looking a little beleaguered. He is eager to talk to *Artslandia* about art, but an important business meeting is running long.

Yet he takes the time to ask me a question: "Any favorite artists?" When I admit that my daughter, an art history major, infected me with a love for Warhol, he ushers me into a small annex behind the receptionist.

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The room is an art collector's dream. Contemporary canvases and sculptures fill all the available wall and desk space, showcasing work from the family's personal collection. Scattered on the floor are museum catalogs and tote bags from the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. Outside the door is a dynamic white sculpture by Viola Frey, and at the top of the staircase is a luminous Kehinde Wiley. The west wall holds over a hundred binders that document art owned by Schnitzer and his Family Foundation. I see familiar names: David Hockney, Jasper Johns, Helen Frankenthaler, and seven binders of Warhol. Before he dashes off to resume his business meeting, Schnitzer seizes one of the Warhol binders and hands it to me with the glee of a child who's found a brand new Pokémon.



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Art has always been a refuge for Schnitzer. The 68-year-old father of four manages a real estate empire across six states, and the complicated concerns of that billion-dollar commercial enterprise are often on his mind. But he returns to art for solace.

“Like everyone, I have worries with business and family,” says Schnitzer when we talk. He looks up at a canvas on his office wall covered in gyrating color, a 1991 piece by Lucinda Parker titled *Ave Eva*. “Yet looking at this Lucinda Parker piece, when I see the shapes and color and energy, I’m taken on a journey. It’s like a mini vacation. Art nourishes your soul. It lets your mind and heart soar. I come back refreshed, renewed.”

Schnitzer is also remarkably public and seems to want to share everything he owns. He says a moment of epiphany came in 1995 at the Portland Art Museum. Schnitzer watched a boy enjoying the contortions of a Robert Longo photograph. He recalls that “a light went on— I already knew I had a passion for the arts, and suddenly, I had a passion for sharing this art experience with everyone.”

In subsequent years, Schnitzer fulfilled the promise of this lightbulb moment. He bought contemporary and modern art piece by piece and shared all of his acquisitions with the world. Since 1995, his eponymous foundation has accumulated one of the largest private collections of post-World-War-II prints and multiples in the nation. Simultaneously, the foundation created one of the largest lending programs to allow accredited museums to borrow from the vast and varied collection, for free.

Exhibiting institutions must fulfill basic accreditation requirements and pay transport fees, but unlike many other collectors and private owners, Schnitzer charges no display fees, which makes his art accessible to the smallest facilities in the most out-of-the-way places. This is by design, says Schnitzer: “We don’t want just the big cities to have this; we want this wonderful art in small places, where people don’t usually get to see work by these artists.”

Still, the movement toward sharing his extensive art collection isn’t purely for personal satisfaction. Schnitzer also sees art as a way of influencing the cultural discourse. “The fact is that we are bombarded with messages and media. Art is the last refuge where no one can tell you what to think or how to feel.”

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As an example of the kind of cultural influence he believes is essential, he cites the work of MacArthur Fellow and award-winning artist Kara Walker. “Art forces us to face our own values, which is sometimes uncomfortable. And that’s needed right now,” explains Schnitzer. “For example, Kara Walker is one of the most important Black artists of our generation... Walker’s art challenges us. I don’t think anyone can walk by her work and not be shaken up; it shakes you to your core. Her art makes us think how easy it is to stereotype people and forces us to confront our own values.”

Schnitzer states that his Family Foundation has worked to place powerful work like Walker’s into new locations all over the country and has funded symposiums around work that focus attention on racial injustice and arts representation. Schnitzer sees this engagement as deeply important: “Artists are always chroniclers of their time to reflect for us what is going on in society.”



Schnitzer also emphasizes the work of Native American art in his contemporary and modern art collection. In recent exhibitions, he and his team have worked with local curators to place the works of Native artists like Rick Bartow and Joe Feddersen alongside the more well-known works of Warhol, Johns, Frankenthaler, and Chuck Close. “We love working with Native American communities,” Schnitzer says. “I glow thinking about how these artists can speak to young people. I can’t change the state of



politics in this country on my own, but I can get this incredible work out to museums, especially to inspire kids with the hope that they need.”

The turn toward Schnitzer sharing his extensive collection with the public emerged naturally from a storied family history of philanthropy. However, the act of giving back didn’t begin with large funds. “When we were starting out, our family didn’t have a lot of money,” says Schnitzer. “My mother had to stretch the bills every month, but we gave back. We gave of time to start with. Eventually, we were able to give back with money as well.”

Schnitzer’s father, Harold, founded his real estate business in the ’50s while his wife Arlene curated canvases at Portland’s first contemporary art showcase, the Fountain Gallery. Schnitzer himself worked as a janitor as a young man in one of his father’s buildings, and when he bought his first painting at the age of 14—*Sanctuary* by Portland painter Louis Bunce—from his mother’s gallery, he had to pay for it in installments. When the family’s hard work paid off in the late ’90s, Harold and Arlene established The Harold & Arlene Schnitzer CARE Foundation, which serves as one of two primary philanthropic vehicles for the family, and also created a unique school-based, youth-focused grant-making program under a new name.

“In addition to working with our own family to pass down a culture of giving, we established the CommuniCare program,” explains Arlene, now 90 years old and still actively invested in philanthropy.

Arlene’s emphasis on youth voices is not just lip service. The CommuniCare model challenges student groups to research, interview, and evaluate nonprofit organizations based on a mission statement and criteria each group develops for themselves. Students make all the funding decisions. The program has also expanded over the past several years, from 10 schools to 32 schools in 2019, with further expansion to come.

Today, the program provides 10 to 1 matching on all funds raised by students, with a cap of \$15,000 per school program. To date, students have granted over \$1.4 million in funding. Recipients of this largesse over the past 22 years include over 320 nonprofit organizations and school programs in Oregon. “We



are so proud of these young people and the great job they do allocating resources out to our community,” says Arlene.

The CommuniCare program introduces teens to the concept of philanthropic thinking: They enter into a long-term program evaluation and giving process which requires investment, understanding, and critical decision-making. Kristen Engfors-Boess, Program Manager for CommuniCare, puts the emphasis on empowerment.

A community program administrated by youth is a distinctly different model than most organizations headed by billionaires. Often, there is an assumption that decision-making around philanthropic arts funding exists on a rarified level of society, inaccessible to the average person. Josh Payne, Marketing Director for the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation, stresses that the ethos of both Schnitzer foundations are egalitarian in the extreme. In the work they administrate, Payne says: “We are telling people they belong there—art belongs to everybody. We want to give people the moment of realization that all of this is for them.”

Students who have participated in the funding work have gained new insight into the needs of their communities. The CommuniCare program “really opened my eyes to the needs of all the organizations and to all that is being done in my community,” says 18-year-old Helen Tuttle, a recent Roosevelt graduate. In 2019, her CommuniCare-sponsored team collaboratively allocated \$8,793.41 in funding to three groups who work in youth arts, homeless teen programs, and Native American youth workshops. “The most rewarding part was finally being able to decide and give out the money to the people I know really deserved it,” says Tuttle. “The program helped inspire me to get more involved. I absolutely see myself investing in my community in the future.”

As Tuttle progresses in her philanthropic journey, she may one day join an arts board or contribute personally to a nonprofit’s mission. Many nonprofits are creating early “on-ramps” for young philanthropists and community activists like Tuttle. Portland Opera, for example, has created an age-specific Young Patron Society, which is composed of philanthropists ages 21–40 who learn board administration and artistic advocacy skills.



David Salerno Owens, Director of Equity and Strategic Initiatives for the Lake Oswego School District, is an ambassador board member at the Portland Opera. He sees the growth of a giving mindset as the essential lifeblood for artistic organizations. “Philanthropy is central for keeping the arts alive and thriving—the arts are driven by older clientele, and what we’re trying to do is to diversify and bring in young professionals,” says Salerno Owens.

Alongside their many gifts to visual arts museums, the Schnitzer family has contributed heavily to performing arts programs such as the Portland Opera and Oregon Symphony for many decades. Gifts total over \$150 million. Jordan Schnitzer also continues to give of his time, with past board positions with Oregon Ballet Theatre and Portland Center Stage at The Armory.

Yet the legacy of the Schnitzer family may ultimately lie not merely in the financial gifts given to grow the performing and visual arts but more importantly, in the planting of the seeds of artistic and philanthropic responsibility. Schnitzer is pleased with the influence he and his family have had in the arts nationwide. “The joy I get from sharing the art is exponentially greater than the joy I get from loving the art,” Schnitzer says. “The pleasure of sharing, of being the steward, that gives me sheer joy. I hope others will feel that joy as well.”

He does not see himself as particularly exceptional, but he does feel an exceptional obligation to give back to his community. “We are all pretty lucky. A lot of people came before us to make these communities wonderful. They worked hard; they sacrificed, and we have an obligation as well to leave our community better than we found it.”

Schnitzer stands from his chair; he looks carefully at the Lucinda Parker canvas—the colorful Ave Eva. A moment later, he smiles. “Everyone can be a philanthropist, whether that’s putting a dollar in a church basket on Sundays or giving your time. There’s no monopoly on helping others. You can never do enough.”