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Seattle Arts Ecosystem Research Project

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Abstract

The Francine Seders Gallery was an important player in the Seattle art scene from the 1960s until its close in 2013. Seders ran her gallery with a low key, unintimidating sales approach, welcoming artists, art enthusiasts, collectors, and students to her space to indulge in the enjoyment of the art. The Francine Seders Gallery represented well-known, established, and developing artists such as Jacob Lawrence, Michael Spafford, Mark Tobey, Barbara Earl Thomas, Marita Dingus, and Alan Lau. Years later, the Francine Seders Gallery is remembered as an industry standard, as many gallerists continue to seek her advice and influence.
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**Seattle Arts Ecosystem and the Francine Seders Gallery**

Seattle sits on a far corner of the country, nestled in between the Olympic and Cascade mountain ranges, with Puget Sound on one side and Lake Washington on the other. The region’s lumber and coal industries grew with the extension of the Northern Pacific Railroad in the 1880s. Fishing, shipping, and manufacturing industries grew throughout the late 1890s and early 1900s. Following the Boeing Company’s introduction of the 707 commercial jet in the 1950s, the city adopted a futuristic vision of innovation (City of Seattle, n.d.). Seattle’s vision of the future can be seen in the fairgrounds built for the Century 21 World’s Fair in 1962, which include the Space Needle, the Monorail, and the Pacific Science Center. The fairgrounds eventually became the Seattle Center, which has developed into an arts and cultural hub of Seattle. One outgrowth of the success of Century 21 was the multitude of arts and culture establishments that has amplified the art scene in Seattle since the mid 1900s.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Seattle attracted an expanding community of artists. New arrivals joined the population boom following World War II, drawn by the affordable cost of living, the natural beauty, and the strong arts education program at the University of Washington. Growth in the visual arts sector led to the opening of new art galleries primarily in the Pioneer Square neighborhood, spurring the establishment of the Pioneer Square First Thursday Art Walk in 1979, and the foundation of the Seattle Art Dealers’ Association in 1990 (Seattle Arts Dealers Association, n.d.). Francine Seders Gallery, located in the Greenwood area, seven miles north of downtown, was separated from the gallery cluster at Pioneer Square, but was a key player, emerging as an important touchstone for artists, art enthusiasts, and students in its forty-seven
years of operation, becoming a model of a successful commercial art gallery and an active member of the arts community.

Francine Seders Gallery provided a space where artists, university students, and collectors felt welcome to learn about art. Greg Kucera, who now owns a successful gallery in Pioneer Square, recalls visiting the Francine Seders Gallery as a high school student from Federal Way. Motivated by Seders, he began collecting art at a young age, paying on an installment plan (Farr, 2014). Veteran art journalist Sheila Farr remembers the community aspect of the art field in the 1960s and 1970s: “I think at that time… it was such a small community. Artists really knew each other and gathered and supported each other. There was a real sense of community” (personal communication, May 21, 2019). Artists attended each other’s shows and introduced each other to dealers. Seders acknowledges that shows held at the gallery by local artists grew a much larger crowd than visiting artists from out of town:

But in most cases, the space is not important. It's more who is there, the other artists are supportive too… It becomes kind of a family together. It used to be, [but] I don't know if it's still the same, because I don't know if the artists know each other as well as they used to. (personal communication, May 21, 2019)

Artist and writer Barbara Earl Thomas saw the Francine Seders Gallery as a place where art was spoken and actions happened. In the 1960s and 70s, Seattle had a smaller population and the pace of life was slower (personal communication, May 31, 2019). Galleries such as Seders’ were regularly visited by Seattle residents, and the proximity of the Francine Seders Gallery to the University of Washington made it easy for university students to frequent the gallery. Some, like Thomas, became artists themselves. In 1984, she joined the artists represented by Francine Seders Gallery, staying until its closure in 2013.
Francine Seders

Seders never intended to become an art dealer. As the result of a series of unexpected events, her own background as a lawyer and librarian, and her natural love for artists and art, she was able to cultivate a space for artists to take risks and for people to enjoy their work. The gallery represented esteemed artists such as Mark Tobey, Michael Spafford, and Jacob Lawrence, as well as artists coming into their own, like Thomas.

Seders was born in France in 1932, and as a child studied piano and often visited the Louvre (Farr, 2013). She earned a degree in law and worked in Paris for the Societé Citroen, an automobile manufacturer. After her sister Annie moved to the United States to attend the University of Idaho, Seders followed, joining Annie and her new husband Gerald in Wallace, Idaho. Soon after, the three moved to Tacoma, Washington and Seders began attending the University of Puget Sound and working at the Tacoma Public Library. After receiving her BA, she earned a degree in Library Science at the University of Washington in 1963 (Farr, 2014).

While Seders attended the University of Washington, she worked for the Otto Seligman gallery in the University District, assisting Seligman with his European contacts and clients. She enjoyed working with art and artists, and her law and library background helped with the business aspect of the gallery. Seders was instrumental in planning the 1966 Mark Tobey show at the Seligman gallery while Seligman visited Tobey in Switzerland. She helped produce a thirty-six page catalogue with reproductions of the works for the show (Farr, 2013). Only two months after the show, Seligman died suddenly in his sleep. With encouragement from Tobey and others, Seders bought the gallery and started to make it her own.
Not Just a Gallery Space

When Seders lost the lease on Seligman’s University District gallery space, she relocated to Greenwood Avenue North and North 67th Street. A converted residence, the house was built in 1919 in a classic Seattle residential architectural style: a wood-paneled and wood-frame single family home. It looked like a house on the outside and functioned like one on the inside as well. Seders herself cites the character of the space as an aspect that set her apart from other gallerists. She used other rooms in the house besides the main exhibition spaces to show art. Instead of stowing art away, unseen when it was not part of a show, she displayed it upstairs or even in the bathroom. “Marita Dingus not too long ago, told me that that's one thing she loved. She said, you had a show, and instead of feeling the work is going away,… you could walk upstairs and see some of your work, and it felt good that it was out” (F. Seders, personal communication, May 21, 2019). The Greenwood Avenue house also had space for storage in the basement and in other rooms, which meant that Seders could pull works out quickly, to show collectors if needed.

The residential character of the building provided opportunities for sales in ways that typical commercial galleries could not. Seders recalls, “The fact that also you could hang something even in the bathroom… I sold a lot of things out of that bathroom because they give ideas to people” (personal communication, May 21, 2019). Clients could more easily visualize the art on the walls of their own house after seeing it in a home-like setting. Seders often let work out on approval to clients, allowing them to see what the art would look like in their own home. “I like the fact it didn't look like a commercial space… When I started with Seligmann on University Way, it was just a commercial, ugly looking space with two walls. You can't do very much with that” (personal communication, May 21, 2019).
Thomas remembers going to the gallery on the weekends as a student at the University of Washington, and watching Seders’ father perform one-act plays. She enjoyed the atmosphere at the gallery and would often speak to Seders’ father and the gallery assistant in French (personal communication, May 31, 2019). She sees the building as an important aspect of the Francine Seders Gallery’s tie to the Seattle arts ecosystem. “Her building had something time-locked about it… now it is very historic, a part of what Seattle was and what it grew from. And you are able to chart how things turned out clearly from that time” (personal communication, May 31, 2019).

**The Subtle Salesperson**

Seders brought her personal approach and values to being an art dealer: she was not pushy with clients nor towards her artists. She says, “What interested me was the contact with the artists and the clients. So it was more of a personal level, you know. As long as I could pay the bills, that was pretty much what I wanted” (personal communication, May 21, 2019). University students, collectors, and artists all felt welcomed in the space. Farr used to frequent the gallery: “Francine just let people come in and look, and she was just there and she’d say ‘hello’ and then, you know, you’re on your own unless you really wanted her help. And I think that created a really welcoming environment for people in some ways” (personal communication, May 21, 2019). People did not feel intimidated to walk into the gallery.

Seders consistently stood behind and supported her artists, and many credit her with creating an environment that supported their creative growth and accomplishments. In an article announcing the close of the gallery in 2013, the artist Gail Grinnell described the gallerist’s role: “Chatting with Francine was balm for my achy soul. For artists like myself, it is important to risk
failure in order to progress. Francine made literal room for risk-taking” (Ayers, 2013, para. 7). Seders herself recognizes the importance of her role as a sounding-board for her artists:

   I was not a friend of my artists in a sense. But I think they felt that they [could] come and tell me their problems... I was behind them 100 percent, but I would never have used their name for something for me. It was all for them. (personal communication, May 21, 2019)

Seders possessed the rare ability to understand exactly what her artists needed to produce their art. Sometimes, it was just some encouragement. Sometimes, as in the case of Spafford, it was defending his controversial art on multiple occasions. Fellow art dealer Kucera explains: "She has wedded herself to artists, through thick and thin... She has done more for her artists than I dare say any other dealer in town has been able to do" (Sillman, 2013, para. 11). The tone and substance of her relationships with artists helped to shape the character of the Seattle gallery scene.

The University Guard

   When Seders took over the Otto Seligman gallery, she inherited his artists too. After awhile, she let some of his artists go. “I kind of weeded out nicely, slowly but surely... I did not care for them. Or I didn't get along with them” (F. Seders, personal communication, May 21, 2019). One of the artists that stayed with her was Spafford, a professor at the University of Washington. Thomas refers to a strong part of Seders’ portfolio of artists as the “University Guard,” which included Spafford, Ray Hill, Wendell Brazeau, and the renowned Jacob Lawrence.

   Lawrence was already a well-known American artist when he accepted a professorship at the University of Washington. He and his wife, fellow artist Gwendolyn Knight, moved from New York to Seattle in 1971 (biography.com, 2014). Spafford introduced him to Seders and
Lawrence showed with her until his death in 2000 (Ayers, 2013). Lawrence described Francine Seders Gallery to the Seattle Times: “It’s a very intimate gallery, very warm. You don’t get a feeling of commercialism there” (Mathieson, 1991, para. 3). As one of the leading figures of twentieth-century American art, Lawrence brought the gallery some added stature. In an interview with Farr, Seders said, “I think having Jacob Lawrence made a big difference for us, because it put us on the national map… I organized a lot of shows for him and was going with him to all those museums” (Farr, 2013, para. 26). Following Lawrence’s death, Knight withdrew his work from the Seders Gallery and sent it to the D.C Moore Gallery in New York City.

Although an upsetting and uncomfortable situation for Seders, Thomas recognizes that, with Lawrence gone, Knight’s ties to the city of Seattle diminished (personal communication, May 31, 2019). Her roots were in New York.

**End of an Era**

The early 2000s brought an increasing number of art galleries and artists to Seattle, and as a result, dealers grew more aggressive in their sales approach. Seders continued her modest approach, not willing to change the way she conducted her business. According to Thomas, this shift became apparent when artist Fay Jones left Seders to show at the James Harris Gallery in Pioneer Square (personal communication, May 31, 2019). However, many artists, including Thomas, Dingus, and Alan Lau stayed with Seders.

On Christmas Eve, 2013, the Francine Seders Gallery closed its doors for the last time. The closing marked the end of an era. At the age of 81, Seders sold the house at 6701 Greenwood Avenue North but continued to sell art to a small number of clients from her nearby home. Many gallerists, including Kucera, still turn to Seders for advice and guidance. Granted
emeritus member status with the Seattle Art Dealers’ Association (SADA), she remains active in the Seattle art community and is writing a book about the gallery scene in Seattle.

**Moving Toward the Future**

The sophisticated technology developed in the 2010s changed the commercial art field significantly. The introduction of online shopping and fast shipping forced retailers to alter their business models and scale back on brick and mortar stores. The commercial art industry followed this trend, with websites like artsy.net providing a platform for online art sales. For art dealers like Seders, the adjustment to selling art online was not welcome. Seders preferred to know her clients personally and felt uncomfortable selling art to people that she had never met. She did not believe that online customers could fully understand the artwork in the way that was possible through direct contact and relationships. “I think they buy an image, more than anything else” she says, (personal communication, May 21, 2019). As a result, the Francine Seders Gallery did not invest in an online presence.

With the introduction of social media like Facebook and Instagram, artists have options to become more directly accessible to the public. As an artist, Thomas recognizes that the stakes rose as artists increased their presence on social media and began emailing newsletters to their personal lists. Thomas sends out a newsletter to keep people informed about her projects, “Just to let people know I am moving and shaking” (personal communication, May 31, 2019). She acknowledges that, as a result of technological change, the gallerist’s approach has changed greatly. In addition to gallery shows, artists must now keep a constant presence online and on social media to keep their audience engaged.

When asked what advice she would give to individuals in the art community today, Farr advocates for the continued promotion of artists by gallerists. Currently, more and more artists
are beginning to move away from representation at galleries and towards self-promotion by producing their own shows or working with other artists to do so. However, the role of the gallerist involves more than exhibiting the artists’ work at shows every now and then. Gallerists also help promote their artists by forming connections with museums, and keeping accurate records of their artwork and exhibitions (S. Farr, personal communication, May 21, 2019). It is the art dealer’s job to manage the business and promotion of the artist, allowing them to focus to their work.

Seders has kept up her relationships with many of her artists. Thomas frequently joins her for dinners, and Seders continues to attend Thomas’s shows when invited. Although many new artists make up the Seattle art scene, Seders stays involved in the community with activities such as serving as a jury member for the Neddy Award at Cornish College of the Arts. She hopes to publish her manuscript about the Seattle art scene online, as a living document, so that others in the field have the ability to add their experiences. However, she has already left her mark on the Seattle arts ecosystem through the influence she had and the relationships she made with her artists, collectors, and gallery visitors. Francine Seders Gallery helped put Seattle on the map as a city devoted to artists and the arts.

Method note:

This case study was developed by Rachel Ballister, MFA 2020, as part of Seattle University's MFA in Arts Leadership applied research practicum focused on the Arts Ecosystem Research Project. Interviews were conducted with Francine Seders, gallery owner; Sheila Farr, arts journalist; and Barbara Earl Thomas, artist, past Executive Director and current Major Gifts
Officer at the Northwest African American Museum; as part of this research during Spring Quarter 2019. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing.
References


