



## Love of Art

By Pat Terry

When Carol Cross retired very early from a coveted ABC-TV job, she left to follow a passion—and today she's working from home, in a spacious West Loop loft, collecting, selling and living amidst Mexican folk art.

"I was a video tape editor in the Channel 7 sports department – a very high pressure job," relates Cross, a sports fan, golfer and tennis player. "I didn't exactly get tired of that, but television had changed and was about to change some more. I thought: 'Why wait 'til I'm 65? There's a lot out there, and I want to experience it.'

"I knew if I didn't do it then, I never would," says Cross, whose parents waited too long. By the time they visited Rome to see the Coliseum—her mother's dream—Carol's father was too sick to get off the tour bus with her.

Early retirement was a tough choice, though: 10 years of lost salary and union pension contributions. "But you can always make more money, you can't make more time," she believes. More recently, Carol sold her house of 30 years in the Old Town Landmark district, in part to generate a steady income.

### LIFE-LONG COLLECTOR

Always a collector, Carol began with trading cards as a child, and moved on to American folk art. "But I was interested in original art, not prints or copies, and it was getting very expensive, so I had to focus on something else."

On a vacation to Mexico, Carol visited Oaxaca—"I'd been told it was rich in folk art"—and instantly fell in love with the city, its people and its art.

"Of all the cities in Mexico, it probably has the most variety of folk art," she says, including hand-painted wooden figures, hand-woven rugs, pottery, some jewelry and antiques and beautiful textiles. She even found a dressmaker creating little doll dresses in the traditional style.

At first Carol returned to Oaxaca each year for a few weeks, buying some art and trying to sell it in Chicago. Buyers appreciated it, and she began taking longer trips—unpaid leaves for two, three and four months—to visit the villages around Oaxaca, meet the artists and buy artwork to take back to Chicago. "The news director at the station really made it possible," says the grateful collector, "and I'll always thank her."

Since early retirement, Cross leaves Chicago after Christmas and returns in April or May with a car full of artwork. She occasionally orders art to pick up the following year—“because I really do seek out the unusual.” She sells the art at shows and by appointment through her company, Fish Out of Water (*fish-outofwateronline.com*).

Over the years, Carol has made good friends among the artists and their families, working with perhaps 30 different artists, and she’s often invited to share meals and special occasions. One friend named her baby after Carol.

In turn, Carol informally teaches them English, in an Arkansas accent, brings along gifts and—an accomplished photographer—presents 10 of the families with a new photograph each year, documenting the children’s growth. Unlike many people, Carol buys their artwork upfront, rather than on consignment “because they need the money,” she says.

### **WEST LOOP LOFT**

As did Carol, when she sold her charming, 1,400-square-foot Old Town house in March 2005. Taxes were soaring, she needed a steady source of income, and it was time to move on.

“A friend, who lived in the West Loop, kept urging me to move there. She said there’s a lot going on, it’s a up-and-coming area, transportation is pretty good,” recalls Carol, who also likes the historical feel—and the fact that she can walk to the Loop.

She found the loft through serendipity, dropping in at a local realty company. After visiting several small

apartments—with little continuous wall space for her art—she knew she couldn’t live in a “cubby hole.”

“When I walked into my apartment for the first time, I just said: I want to live here,” says the delighted renter, who moved into the converted, 2,600-square foot loft in a mixed commercial-residential area. Nearly double the size of her house, the loft offering an open, airy backdrop for her art.

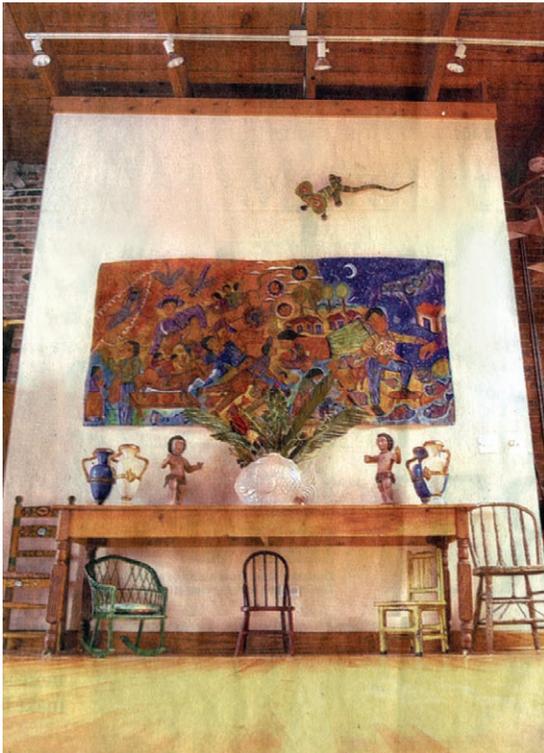
Carol initially wanted the large space for a “fabulous 14-foot table”—which, ironically, didn’t fit in the stairs, nor in the freight elevator, which broke down halfway through the move. But everything felt else went smoothly, in Carol’s organized fashion.

“One of the most extraordinary things about the loft is a fabulous old skylight above the kitchen and part of my dining area,” Carol says. “You walk there in the morning and you almost need sunglasses (the old skylight still opens). I like to think of the rest of my apartment as not just dark, but cozy,” she laughs.

Although her Old Town house had lots of windows and light, the former film editor has no regrets—“except for the parking space,” she says. “And maybe the yard.”

It has taken a while, though, to adjust to the West Loop, Chicago’s former skid row, down at the heels, with drunks sprawled in doorways and a perception of danger. “I have it worked out pretty well now,” Cross explains. “In the daytime, I feel no different (than in Old Town). I’m getting used to the nighttime, but I’m not about to take a stroll to the United Center at 2:00 in the morning.”

Photo by Keith Hale, Sun-Times Photos



## LIVING, BREATHING ART

Reaching her apartment is a serious workout: up a long, steep flight of stairs past the landlord's two-story wholesale company. At the landing, Carol's loft door opens to reveal another steep staircase, which ends in a huge dining-living room-kitchen area defined, in part, by exposed brick walls, original beams, minimal furnishings and lots of art.

To the left, a collection of tin Jell-O and cake molds adorn the wall above a wooden shelf displaying a large, shiny tin helicopter and four tin chairs – echoing the look of exposed heating ducts around the loft. “I buy what I like and if it doesn't sell, I decorate with it,” explains Carol. So the décor is constantly changing.

To the right of the staircase, only two paintings adorn the living room walls—everything else is an object—both by Roman Llaguno. The stunner is a vivid colored depiction of rural Mexican figures, some floating above ground as if in a magical novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Below, a library table displays a large fish vase holding dried flowers.

Farther along the wall, toward the huge street-side windows, a massive armoire houses gifts from various artists, including a miniature, carved and hand-painted dragon. Nearby, two chairs, one a distressed bentwood rocker, flank a round side table made from an iron (hog) rendering pot replete with raised cows and corn motif.

Farther out on the oak floor, freestanding second-hand sectionals form an L-shape around a coffee table created from a section of redwood.

The west wall, facing the staircase, boasts new work from Chicago artist and educator Charlie Heinrich: stunning four-foot masks made from recycled paperback books. In collaboration with Carol, Heinrich also designed an innovative light made from a large antique colander and hung upside down. The round table and five side chairs below came from a Waukegan firehouse. Carol tapped her love of textiles to cover the table with a green striped fabric designed by a Bolivian artist, and topped it with a piece of slightly chipped piece of glass salvaged from a neighbor.

“I like taking ordinary things that were used for something else, and making them into something extraordinary for my space,” says Carol. And Heinrich has helped her— turning old wooden Mexican porch railings into a mantle-like headboard and

an old mannequin into a floor lamp for the master bedroom. He transformed “a fabulous stand for an antique birdhouse,” into a floor lamp standing, appropriately, near Carol’s birdhouse collection.

### **VIEW OF THE WALL**

Her other collections include totem poles, Mexican pottery, painted wood Mexican figures, paintings, textiles, chairs and miniature chairs, as well as a nicho (small boxes) grouping.

One textile collection is prominent of necessity: several hand-made and embroidered huipiles (unique Guatemalan “ponchos”) hang from burglar bars across a sliding glass door near the dining table—hiding a close-up view of the brick wall next door.

Beyond the dining area, a long freestanding work island marks the visual perimeter of the open kitchen. Along the rear wall, a range, sink and refrigerator fold seamlessly into the wide L-shaped arrangement of upper and lower oak cabinets; a collection of Mexican pottery adds pizzazz above the cabinets.

A long, high-ceilinged hallway—dubbed Memory Lane, because Carol’s hung lots of objects from

her Old Town hallway—exhibits such objects as a Menomonee Street sign and myriad rusted metal pieces refashioned into hard-to-define artwork. “I don’t know what they were used for, they just give a texture,” says Carol.

Opening off one side of the hallway, the guest bedroom, a bedroom turned gallery and the master bedroom and bath boast more artwork—paintings, sculpture, funky lamps and various objects. Down the hall, a huge laundry room, a storage room and small library complete the apartment.

How can someone on a budget afford to collect this art?

“It is not a sacrifice, it’s a choice,” says Cross, who doesn’t spend money on makeup, alcohol, fancy clothes or manicures. “Those things don’t do anything for me, but when I buy art, I can live with it. It’s a lasting thing.”

Surrounded by the marvelous, colorful pieces she’s collected, Carol has already decided what to save in case of a fire: “One thing is my grandmother’s bible, the others are art that my son made (when he was little) and all the pictures of my family.”