

LEGENDARY: THE COLLECTION OF TORBEN V. KRISTIANSEN



Torben V. Kristiansen with the Pablo Picasso painting *Portrait of Jacqueline in France* at his gallery, July 28, 1972
Photo: Dan Scott
Courtesy of the *Vancouver Sun*, a division of Postmedia Network Inc

TORBEN V. KRISTIANSEN was a dashing fellow, full of derring-do. This may seem like an unusual description for the high-end art dealer, who died on July 1, 2023, at age 92, but it is apt. Born on November 4, 1930, in Denmark, Torben lived a life that was as vibrant as the masterpieces he cherished. Early in life, he had a passion for aviation and pursued a career in the sky, first as a fighter pilot in the Royal Danish Air Force. After the Second World War, he went to the United States on a NATO exchange to learn to fly the legendary P-51 Mustang fighter.

When he went back to his hometown in Denmark, one of his old adversaries said he did not believe Kristiansen was a pilot. “Torben said, ‘Well, you stand in the [main] street in the village tomorrow at 12 o’clock and I’ll prove to you that I am,’” recounts David Heffel. “Apparently he flew down the main street with his P-51, upside down, 10 feet off the ground.” Torben’s daughter Merete adds, “He ripped the roof off a church with the draft. His mom was really mad at him.”

That was it for his air force career, and he became a steward for Scandinavian Airlines (SAS). In 1956, he was recruited by CP Air and moved to Vancouver, BC. He started buying art in Europe, transporting it, and selling it in Canada. He then fully switched gears and went on to become one of Canada’s top art dealers. In 1960, Torben purchased the historic Art Emporium, a gallery started by pioneer Vancouver photographer Philip Timms in 1897. The Art Emporium was one of the city’s oldest and one of Canada’s top art galleries. Torben quickly became one of the pre-eminent art dealers in Canada, and the Art Emporium was the place to buy historic paintings in Vancouver for decades, particularly works by the Group of Seven, Tom Thomson, Emily Carr and E.J. Hughes.

Torben’s entry into the Canadian art world coincided with its commercial flowering. “I remember we had a Lawren Harris [Lake Superior painting] in ’72 for \$2,500,” he told the *Vancouver Sun* in 2010. “They are way over a million now. In fact at the Vancouver Art Gallery in ’62 they were \$250, and in ’68 they were \$1,000.” Torben would know because in 1976 he held a giant exhibition and sale from the Harris estate, six years after the artist died. “I had 62 Harris, how about that?” he recalled in 2010.

Torben was astute and a pioneer in the Canadian art world—he imported important European art, showing it alongside Canadian contemporaries, in addition to forging relationships with international artists such as Karel Appel and Andrew Wyeth. In 1975, his gallery was the first in Vancouver to mount an exhibition by the Professional Native Indian Arts group, which included Norval Morrisseau and Daphne Odjig. A natural storyteller, Torben could convey his knowledge and passion with a style that was uniquely his own.

The Art Emporium was a short walk up Granville Street from Heffel Gallery. Torben and Kenneth G. Heffel became competitors and friends in the 1970s, forming a relationship that would continue to the next generation of Heffels, David and Robert. Torben was more than a frequent visitor to Heffel’s previews and attendee at its auctions—he was an integral collector. With a skilled eye and sharp business acumen, Torben curated an extraordinary collection of Canadian art that is as legendary as the man himself.

Heffel is proud to present *Legendary: The Collection of Torben V. Kristiansen* this spring, with sales to follow. In addition to this May 23 auction, please view works included in the curated online sale, which runs May 2 – 30, 2024.

We extend our gratitude to John Mackie of the *Vancouver Sun*, a division of Postmedia Network Inc., for his original article. This edited version is based on Mackie’s piece “This Week in History, 1930–2023: Jet-Setting Vancouver Art Dealer Torben Kristiansen Dies at 92,” published August 18, 2023.

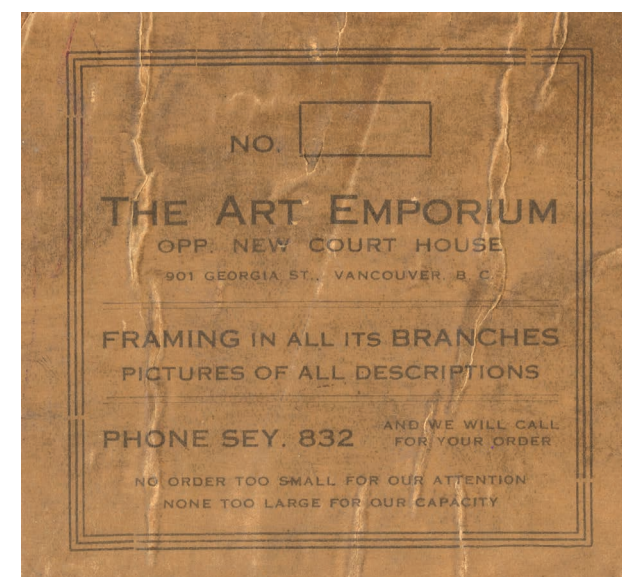
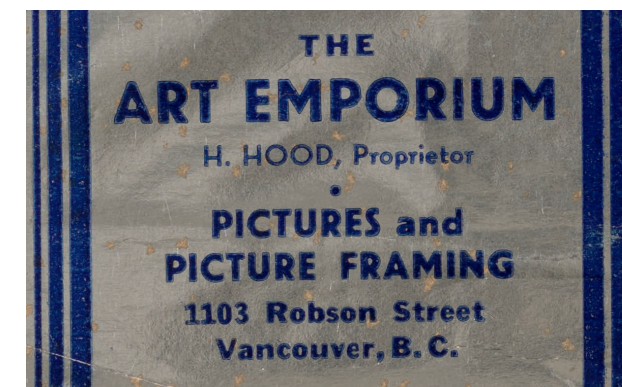
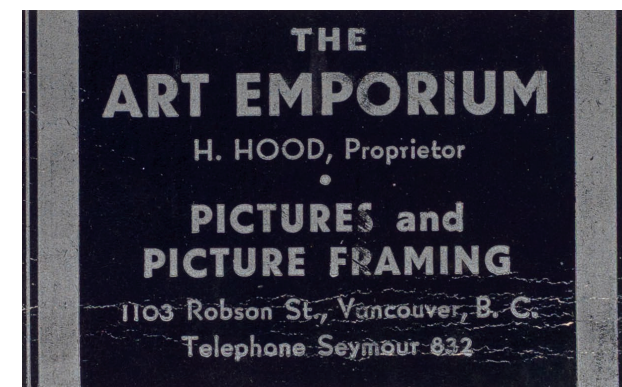


Torben V. Kristiansen piloting the P-51 Mustang as a member of the Royal Danish Air Force, circa 1952
Courtesy of the family of Torben V. Kristiansen



Torben V. Kristiansen descending off an SAS commercial airplane
 Courtesy of the family of Torben V. Kristiansen

RIGHT: The Art Emporium business cards and labels throughout the years
 Courtesy of the family of Torben V. Kristiansen



IN MEMORIAM | TORBEN V. KRISTIANSEN (1930 – 2023)



AFTER HE HAD lived a life of fearless adventure, death came to close the eyes of my friend Torben V. Kristiansen at the age of 92.

TVK was how I knew him and how I referred to him since the day we met at his gallery, the Art Emporium, in Vancouver. He and I were fierce competitors in the art world but remained close friends for more than 40 years. His contribution to the Canadian art market was a *tour de force* that shaped the value of the artists he championed. My relationship with TVK, however, transcended the boundaries of the art world. It was a kinship founded on a shared passion for the arts, history and travel.

What I found unique to his personality was the valour with which he faced all the challenges that life and work brought to him. I witnessed his recovery from invasive surgeries, with a resolve to conquer the toll his body had undergone without a whisper of regret. It was an extension of the same resolve with which he conducted his business throughout his life, relishing his conquests and refusing to dwell on his losses. His confidence in both the pursuit of art and real estate had no rival.

TVK's zest for life was infectious, and his endeavours compelling. Of all the traits of his temperament, his sense of humour prevailed. It was this quality that drew me to his company in the many travels we undertook to destinations in Hawaii, California, Florida, New York and Europe. I witnessed an unknown side of his personality, his quest to pursue the finest in life—in food, wine, music and entertainment—everywhere we went. This was not merely a phase of his life, but rather a state of mind, a commitment to living life on his terms, unafraid to be misunderstood.

Undeterred by health challenges during the last two decades of his life, he remained active in both art and real estate enterprises with the same vigour he had exerted since his arrival in Canada as a young Danish immigrant over 65 years ago. He would reach out frequently to exchange views on art or issues of everyday life, always intersecting with a tale from his repertoire of humour, recounted with impeccable timing. In the autumn of his life, he built a home with Patricia, a kindred soul, who remained devoted to his care until the end.

With his passing, Canadian art lost one of its most ardent advocates, the last of a generation of art dealers who invested in the art they believed in and espoused for others. Dealers who were not only committed to purchasing and promoting art they supported but also took pleasure in enjoying it for themselves. Everyone's life is a story. Each has an end. From romancing airplanes in the skies to climbing to the apex of the Canadian art market, the life of Torben V. Kristiansen was a remarkable journey, leaving a legacy that will persist for generations.

—A.K. PRAKASH, CM, Toronto



TOP: Torben V. Kristiansen with *Early Snow, Alberta* by A.Y. Jackson, October 18, 1976
Photo: Boris Spremo / *Toronto Star*
Courtesy of Getty Images

BOTTOM: Torben V. Kristiansen as a member of the Royal Danish Air Force
Courtesy of the family of Torben V. Kristiansen

RIGHT: Lot 208, *Verts ombreuses* by Jean Paul Riopelle

