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The New High-Tech Patrons

Silicon Valley power players, from Marissa Mayer to Marc Andreessen, are beginning to buy art—and museum directors and dealers are eager to help; Creating a 'farm team' of young donors. By Ellen Gamerman

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Tech entrepreneurs are starting to peer out from their hoodies and explore the art world, and dealers and museum boards couldn't be more thrilled. WSJ's Ellen Gamerman joins Lunch Break with a look at the new players, and the culture clash it's setting up with Wall Street's elite. Photo: Getty Images.

Next week, San Francisco will unveil a major public art installation using 25,000 energy-efficient lights to illuminate the city's Bay Bridge in countless abstract combinations.

The Bay Lights, set to run every night for the next two years, will also spotlight a new role for the area's tech entrepreneurs: patrons of the arts.



Winni Wintermeyer for The Wall Street Journal

BETA TESTING Leo Villareal, a tech-world favorite, with his computer-assisted light sculpture that will illuminate San Francisco's Bay Bridge in abstract patterns every night for the next two years.

Created by artist Leo Villareal, the \$8 million computer-assisted light sculpture has been financed by some high-profile tech donors including [Yahoo](#) CEO [Marissa Mayer](#) and Internet power couple Mark and Alison Pincus. Mr. Villareal, who designed the bridge's light patterns using software he created, is also emblematic of a new breed of artist that is especially attractive to wealthy technology executives. A former researcher at [Microsoft](#) co-founder Paul Allen's think tank in the early 1990s, Mr. Villareal weaves that tech background into his work.

"This was a whole I.T. job, which you wouldn't associate with a monumental piece of public art," Mr. Villareal said one chilly evening on a San Francisco pier as he tested the work with his laptop. Every time he stabbed at the keyboard through a hole in his glove, the lights rearranged across the bridge.

Around San Francisco, tech entrepreneurs who spent years building businesses and accumulating wealth are starting to peer out from under their hoodies and explore the art world. As the Internet industry matures, the people who helped make it happen are having children, buying houses and taking tentative steps into philanthropy—and now the art world. It's a lucrative emerging market that is gaining the attention of museums, dealers, consultants and other art-world heavyweights.

"Art comes between buying the Ferrari and getting the kids into college," said New York mega-dealer Larry Gagosian, who added that he sees "tremendous potential" from tech entrepreneurs as they grow older.

As they have with risky and fast-growing startups, the new tech players are putting a distinctive spin on the art scene—both in the type of work they collect and the low-profile way they acquire it. Many tech collectors exploring the market, for instance, are seduced by works with a digital twist.

"An engineer will look at a photograph or video art in a way a banker couldn't—we think in ones and zeros, we think in terms of screens," said Trevor Traina, a 44-year-old collector of photography who sold his first tech company to Microsoft for more than \$100 million.

Unlike on Wall Street, where a trophy canvas can work as a passport to highflying social circles, flaunting isn't part of the tech culture. "If you saw these people, you'd never guess that they have money—it's all about just being cool," said San Francisco dealer Chris Perez, who works with about 20 tech clients.



Simon Upton/The Interior Archive

Trevor Traina, who sold his first company to Microsoft for more than \$100 million, is amassing a major photo collection.

Two years ago, as a service largely to its growing base of tech clients, Christie's began shipping artworks to San Francisco ahead of the major modern and contemporary art sales, said Ellanor Notides, who runs the Christie's San Francisco office. She said tech clients are chasing pieces by market darlings like Gerhard Richter, whose work sold for more than \$34 million at Sotheby's last year.

Lately, some art insiders have been buzzing that the wife of Google co-founder [Larry Page](#), Lucinda Southworth, is starting to buy art. (A Google spokeswoman said the company doesn't comment on executives' personal endeavors.) Tech entrepreneur and investor Marc Andreessen collects—including works by Robert Rauschenberg—as do tech venture capitalists Matt Cohler, who favors contemporary photography, and Jim Breyer, who owns pieces by emerging artists in China and Brazil.

Mr. Breyer, a board member of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, finds parallels between art and startups. He loves taking a chance on lesser-known talent and often visits galleries while traveling abroad on business. He particularly admires artists like Picasso who show the capacity to reinvent themselves. "It's a personal characteristic not only of the artists I gravitate to but the entrepreneurs," he said. (Mr. Breyer sits on the board of [News Corp.](#), which publishes The Wall Street Journal.)

The new collectors' interests sometimes contrast with the more traditional tastes of tech pioneers before them: [Oracle](#) CEO [Larry Ellison](#) buys centuries-old Japanese art. Yahoo co-founder and former CEO [Jerry Yang](#) hunts for leading examples of Chinese calligraphy. Microsoft's Mr. Allen collects masterpieces by blue-chip artists like van Gogh and Mark Rothko.

Now San Francisco museums are stepping up their pursuit of the tech industry, particularly as companies like Twitter, Pinterest and Dropbox settle in new offices in the city rather than Silicon Valley.

Mr. Traina, the Internet entrepreneur, loaned his impressive photography collection for a show at the city's de Young Museum last year. Dave Morin, an early [Facebook](#) employee who is now CEO and co-founder of the private social network Path, just joined the board of SFMOMA.

Since 2010, SFMOMA has brought on 12 new trustees—at least half from the tech community, according to museum deputy director of external affairs Robert Lasher. He added that in addition to donating money and loaning artworks, tech contributors are helping retool the institution's digital strategy and guide the museum to a more global role in a nearly \$555 million expansion.

Next week, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco's annual Mid-Winter Gala is expected to be populated by a number of tech-world all-stars. Yahoo's Ms. Mayer bought a table while Apple lead designer Jonathan Ive is expected to come as well. Organizers are hoping for the return of past attendees like Yelp co-founder Jeremy Stoppelman.



Ligorano/Reese/Catharine Clark Gallery/Nora Ligorano (photo); Tech collectors chase works like Ligorano/Reese's fiber optic tapestry.

From her glass-walled office at Web retailer One Kings Lane, co-founder Alison Pincus has been working her contacts for San Francisco's Contemporary Jewish Museum, which recruited her for its board last year. At her company's headquarters, which sits in the same San Francisco building as Twitter and Yammer, the Givenchy-and-Balenciaga-clad Ms. Pincus described going to last year's TED conference in Long Beach, Calif., with a mission: to convince friend and fellow art collector David Krane, a general partner at [Google Ventures](#), to join the museum's board. She succeeded.

Ms. Pincus, whose husband, Mark, is founder and CEO of the social-gaming company [Zynga](#), also lends the museum her expertise. The 38-year-old mother of two is helping revamp the museum store, where the home page now showcases little more than a small mezuzah. The shop needs "bespoke products," a sleeker website and items not limited to Jewish themes, she said.

As art and tech circles overlap more frequently, a cottage industry of dealers and specialized consultants has sprung up to offer advice. San Francisco art adviser Sabrina Buell is a Stanford graduate and former New York gallery director who helps tech honchos—some of them old college pals—begin collecting art.

The 36-year-old San Francisco native meets clients in her downtown office, with its high ceilings and exposed ductwork, first asking them broad questions about their tastes—abstract or figurative? color or muted? Then she goes analog, loading them up with resource books and catalogs. "I like people to look at a thousand things before they buy one," said Ms. Buell.

Her clients tend to avoid status symbols. "If you're young and you walk into someone's house and see a Picasso, it would be like, 'Whoa'—just because you have the capacity, you don't have to buy the most expensive things," she said. Still, her clients often get blue-ribbon treatment, with galleries and auction houses sending art directly to their homes so they can see the art up close while mulling a purchase.

Ms. Buell, whose great uncle is Napa vintner Robert Mondavi, bought her first work of art when she was 15, a Michael Kenna photograph she had written about for an English class. Today she fills the loft she shares with her partner, industrial designer Yves Behar, with edgy contemporary works. Ms. Buell and her colleague, Mary Zlot, trade in discretion: Zlot Buell + Associates doesn't even have a website.

Despite the stepped-up activity, some art dealers still bemoan what they call the indifference of the tech world and write off tech billionaires as glorified engineering nerds who skipped art history to play with their computers.

Others see a shift happening, thanks in part to the booming art market. "It once was a very culturally vapid community, but it's become incredibly rich lately," said Adam Sheffer, a partner at the New York gallery Cheim & Read. "I think people are coming to realize fine art has come to be worth something."

Dealers who work with tech clients are protective of them, wary of a culture clash with snooty art climbers. When a tech entrepreneur who favors Patagonia jackets and sneakers told San Francisco dealer Claudia Altman-Siegel he was headed to the Swiss art fair Art Basel, she had some advice: "I was like, 'No one's going to be nice to you if you're not dressed up,'" she said.

Then again, relative anonymity can be a plus. San Francisco tech investor Art Berliner, managing director of Walden Venture Capital, said when he walks into certain New York galleries he rarely gets the hard sell—or any sell at all—because most people don't know who he is.

Mr. Berliner, whose eclectic collection includes work by Israeli artist Michal Rovner, keeps some of his pieces in his office. He said his artwork helps set a creative tone and soothe nerves when entrepreneurs come to pitch their businesses: "Having art around does make the scene less intimidating."

Apple senior director Jeffrey Dauber owns a \$50,000 video work by artist Lincoln Schatz that features layered video images of Mr. Dauber engaging in his morning ritual—including a shot of him pulling down his pants. The voyeurism resonates with a man whose industry helped redefine the idea of privacy.

"The thing about being in tech is, I have no illusions—I know we're being watched," said Mr. Dauber, who keeps his extensive art collection in its own house in San Francisco.

Dick Kramlich, an early pioneer in the tech venture capital scene, plans next year to open a private museum of new media art—which includes video, film and computer-assisted installations—in a Napa Valley building designed by Herzog & de Meuron, the architecture firm behind Beijing's Bird's Nest and the Tate Modern in London. The 77-year-old chairman and co-founder of New Enterprise Associates said the collection's tech orientation was his wife's idea: "She said, 'Look, you're going down to Silicon Valley every day, I think if I did something in this area it might be of interest to you,'" he said.

Internet entrepreneur Mr. Traina, who recently launched a new startup called IfOnly.com, now has 300 master works of photography on the six floors of his mansion in San Francisco's Pacific Heights. During a recent tour, walking by a room

wallpapered in peacock feathers, he pointed out classics by Diane Arbus (Mr. Traina bought one of her iconic photographs of identical twins for just under \$500,000 at Sotheby's in 2004) and contemporary works like a Doug Rickard photograph of a computer screen showing a Google Street View of a depressed city neighborhood.

Raised in a moneyed family among art lovers—his father had a world-class collection of Fabergé cigarette cases—Mr. Traina promotes the art world to his tech buddies. He organized the Mid-Winter Gala for the Fine Arts Museums in part to lure a "farm team" of young donors and future board members. Trustees now include Zachary Bogue, a tech investor married to Yahoo's Ms. Mayer, an SFMOMA board member.

The institution returns the favor by opening up singular experiences to Mr. Traina, who recalls a trip to the Netherlands he once took with fellow board members. Early one morning, he was allowed to visit an Amsterdam museum while it was still closed. "This very nice woman left me alone in a room with five Vermeers," he said. "I realized the power great art can have."