

# Bill KOCH

## PERCEPTION AND REALITY

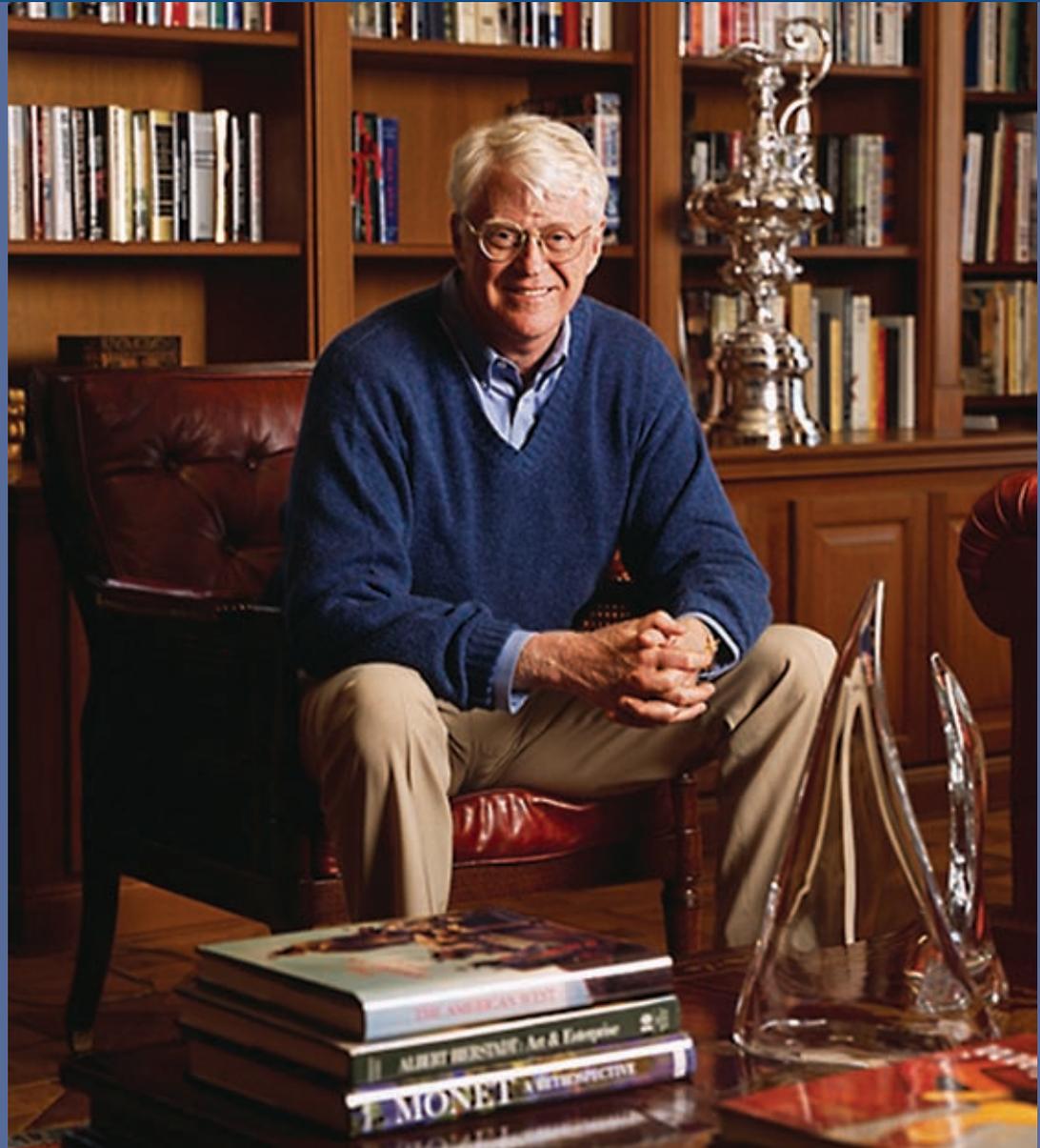
By Christina Wood

Bill Koch cares. He cares about kids – his kids, our kids, any kids. He cares about education, deeply. His eyes light up if you ask him about the Old West, sailing the high seas or Thomas Jefferson’s choice in wine. Bill Koch cares about winning. He cares about teamwork and technology. He cares about family. He respects talent and, when it comes to art, he knows what he likes.

### **KOCH IS NOT RULED BY A SINGLE PASSION. THE ULTIMATE CONNOISSEUR, HE COLLECTS THEM.**

Monets and Modiglianis. Winchester rifles. Sioux beadwork. A forest of family photographs and cherished memories. Four world sailing championships and a victory in the 1992 America’s Cup that still has people talking. A business that routinely appears on the *Forbes* list of America’s Largest Private Companies. A doctoral degree in chemical engineering from MIT. A wine cellar that challenges the imagination. And so very many stories.

“My wife calls me a hoarder and says I should go on that TV show,” Koch says, referring to TLC’s *Hoarders: Buried Alive*. “I’m not as bad as they are,” he insists, despite the

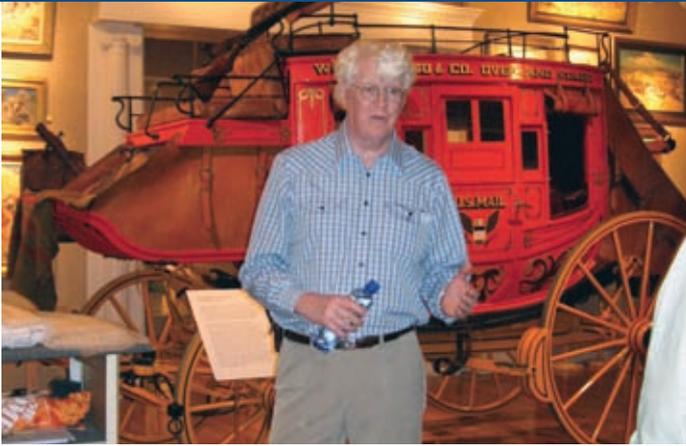


potential lurking in his office in West Palm Beach. A carved masthead – a gift from a friend – stands in one corner, a carton of tightly rolled blueprints or diagrams in another. A large, framed painting of a sailboat has been sitting in the middle of the sofa for a month. A swarm of books, photos, keepsakes and trophies inhabit the shelves. A tight-knit family of computer screens encircles his desk. A fluffy purple toy, part of his six-year-old daughter’s collection, sits by the window, drinking in the ocean view.

His wife, Bridget Rooney Koch, granddaughter of Pittsburgh Steelers founder Art Rooney, also says he has too many projects. In that respect Koch says, “She’s absolutely right.”

Born and raised in Wichita, Kansas, Koch has served on

the boards of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Smithsonian Museum for American Art and the President’s Circle for the National Academy of Arts, Science and Medicine, among others. He chaired the Kansas Crime Commission. He recently joined the Board of Trustees at the Society of the Four Arts in Palm Beach. Last year, he was among the top 50 philanthropists in the country, according to the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*. He believes in the way things are done at Bak Middle School of the Arts in West Palm Beach and supports the school’s efforts. He founded Oxbridge Academy of the Palm Beaches, a private preparatory school in West Palm Beach, in order to create an environment where students fall in love with learning.



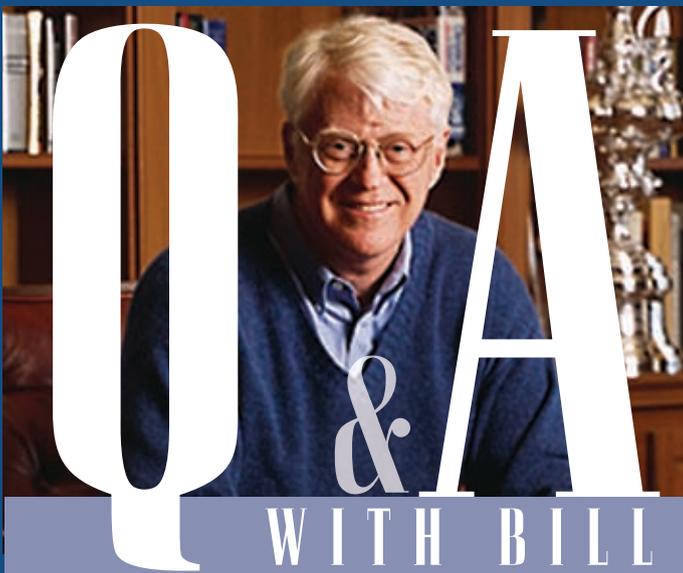
"He doesn't do anything by half measures," says Elizabeth Broun, the Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Renwick Gallery. "He is one of the most obsessive collectors I know. He combines a love of art with an intensity focused on its history. He's making sense out of who we are as a people." Surrounded by the works of Remington and Russell, by Sitting Bull's breastplate and General George Custer's field belt, by gold nuggets, corsets and cowboy gear, by Jesse James' revolver and the only known image of Billy the Kid along with all the other art and artifacts featured in

"Recapturing the Real West: The Collections of William I. Koch," an exhibit that was recently on display at the Society of the Four Arts, Broun says, "He has these passions." From that, she says, "He creates something amazing."

"I like to separate perception from reality and concentrate on the reality," says Koch, who has called Palm Beach home since 1988. In the exhibit drawn from his vast western collection, which by his own estimate contains in the neighborhood of 1.5 million objects, his vision played out on densely covered walls, where the work of a master might be watched over, closely, by a buffalo head. In the crowded galleries, art could not slip away from the culture and context that originally nurtured it.

"This is not a normal kind of installation," Nancy Mato, executive vice president and curator at the Society of the Four Arts, admitted shortly after the exhibit opened. Not surprising, considering Koch is not your normal rich guy. "With him, it truly is collecting what he loves. He's not buying for investment or the important names."

As a teenager, Koch spent summers on the family's ranch in



**What is your motivation in loaning art from your various collections to museums around the country and the world?**

It's a way of sharing it with people who wouldn't otherwise see it. In New York, they have a panoply of art but if you show it in Billings, Montana, people rave about it. I've had six or eight showings there. When I showed in Wichita, Kansas, they had record attendance and I got a lot of nice letters. If you do something nice, it's nice to be appreciated. I've gotten so that I don't

like the big museums. I get requests all the damn time. I loaned some paintings to the Metropolitan in New York, to the Louvre in Paris. What I've found with these big institutions is that I'm lucky to get a thank you letter. What I do now, if a big institution wants to borrow a painting, I'll say fine, we'll trade. I'll loan you mine if you loan me one of yours of comparable value and quality.

**Do you still offer tours of the art in your Palm Beach home?**

We have a program to give tours to the art schools and to other schools around here that want it. I think we've shown it to about 5,000 kids, maybe I'm wrong, maybe it's 1,500 but it's a big number. [Official estimates put the number at approximately 500 students annually.] My idea is to expose kids at a young age so they can appreciate it.

**Why is it important to expose kids to art?**

Well I don't know. It influenced my life as a kid in a positive way. Art is very important to our culture. Actually it's important to every culture. It makes you a better person; makes you better understand our lives and other cultures. I think that's a positive thing.

**What's at the top of your to do list these days?**

My passion right now, I'm building this western town [in Colorado]. I'm essentially creating a living museum of the history of the west. I just want to preserve this time period and do it in my own way. I've hired historians to help me. I've been buying up

Montana. It wasn't a vacation. "My dad sent me up there to work, 10 hours a day, seven days a week." The pay was 50 cents an hour. "Those were the days," he says. "In order to win the respect of the other working men, which every young boy wants, I had to work harder and be as strong as they were and as self-reliant. It was a great experience for me. I just fell in love with it."

Koch keeps the romance alive with help from the art with which he surrounds himself. "A brilliant artist can communicate emotion," he says. The iconic watercolors of Charles Russell evoke warm memories of Montana and the placemats his mother once set out on the table. The obvious intensity in a cast of Auguste Rodin's *Thinker* reminds him of the preparation necessary for a deposition, lawsuit or a big race. He bought *Field of Oats and Poppies* by Claude Monet because it reminded him of a pasture on his father's ranch where he had picnicked as a kid. "The tree line, the color in the grass looks almost identical to what it looks like in Kansas on that field in springtime," he'll tell you.

"That's what I do. I only buy things that make me feel good,



Photo by Jennifer Vogt

lift my spirits or have a very personal meaning for me, such as my love for the west."

Fortunately for everyone who visited the recent exhibit based on his western collection – or the two previous exhibits at the Society of the Four Arts celebrating Koch's maritime and eclectic art collections and the patrons of museums in Boston, Wichita, Topeka, Yellowstone, Oklahoma City, New York City, Paris and all the other places where his art has been displayed plus the thousands of students who have been invited to tour his home – Mato reports, "He wants to share what he loves." [a&c](#)

other people's collections so I can furnish and stuff the town. The only things that aren't going to be totally authentic: I put radiant heat in, I put electricity in and I put modern day plumbing. I have outhouses but I put modern plumbing in the outhouses.

#### **What do you plan to do with the town once it's built?**

It's a place for my children to play, a place to get to know one another. We have six between us [Koch has four children from previous relationships; his wife brought another child to the house in Palm Beach; together they have a six-year old daughter]. I want them to get along and not fight the way my brothers and I did. My wife has 34 immediate relatives. They're very Irish; they're fun to be with. I want to have a place for them to stay. Then I want to use it for entertainment for my businesses. I have a coal mine and some gas drilling properties within 10, 15 minutes of my ranch. In addition to that, I want to bring in historians and have debates and let them argue over a bottle of whiskey in the saloon. It would be fun to debate whether Wyatt Earp was a good guy or a bad guy.

#### **What kinds of books do you like to read?**

I've read novels in the past but most of my reading now is history. I'm tired of reading scientific books or political books.

#### **Are you a perfectionist?**

As part of my independence, I have my own standards of perfection and my own way of doing things. I do that in spite of

what other people say or think. I get gratification out of doing things in the best possible way that I could do – and then still being successful. I try to take that approach in virtually everything I do. Shoot for perfection as best that I can, by my standards, and then try to be successful. I'm doing that with the school, I'm doing that with my art collection.

#### **What is the standard for perfection at the school you recently founded in West Palm Beach? What makes Oxbridge Academy different from other private schools?**

We're doing something very unique; we're saying children come first. The reality in teaching is that you've got to get the kids interested. If they're not interested, they won't learn. You've got to make it entertaining and you've got to show them that algebra is a good skill to have. What we're doing is having the kids come up with projects; it's called project education.

#### **Can you give us an example?**

If you want to have a model sailboat that can sail on its own, remote-controlled, from Florida to England you're going to have to learn about aerodynamics, hydrodynamics, weather, structural engineering, control technology, communications and you're going to have to find out how to gather the information, how to put a team together, to get all the various experts and then how to motivate them to achieve a simple objective. That's a terrific educational experience. There's a whole lot of very interesting things about it. It gets kids thinking out of the box.