A testament to love

Passion marks work included in Janssen collection at OU

BY GEORGE LANG

Stepphe Janssen has never played by anyone’s rules. Born to a wealthy, industrialist family in Brussels, Belgium, during the Thirties, the members of his family never understood, nor cared about his passionate interest in art. They preferred the hard sciences of chemistry and mathematics over the aesthetic pleasures to be derived from great paintings and sculpture.

However, Janssen’s life-long fascination with fine art has culminated in one of the most expansive, expansive and varied collections in the United States.

“The Stephen Janssen Collection of Contemporary American and European Art” is currently on display at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, 410 W. Boyd on the University of Oklahoma campus in Norman. The collection, which will hold court at the museum through Feb. 25, is an astonishing testament to love — Janssen’s love of adventurous vanguards in the world of modern art and love for his partner, R. Michael Johns, who succumbed to AIDS last year and for whom the collection is dedicated.

Janssen acquired his interest in art from his mother, who, on a whim, bought Pablo Picasso’s “Acrobats and Young Harlequin” at Adolf Hitler’s sale of “degenerate art” in 1937. Although Janssen’s father relied on his wife for spending $18,000 on something so impractical, her perceived improvidence paid off seven years ago, when the work was sold at auction for $38 million.

He purchased his first painting at 16, a work by Oscar Dominguez, which he still owns and displays in the dining room of his sprawling, 11,000-square-foot Southwest-style mansion in Carefree, Ariz., just outside Scottsdale. Following his procurement, he soon discovered the work of artists such as Karel Appel, Asger Jorn and Pierre Alechinsky, who plied their art in the Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam artistic axis known as CoBrA.

The CoBrA artists figure prominently in the Fred Jones exhibition. Tom Topzerer, curator of the exhibition and director of the museum, said the paintings are distinguished by their strong visceral and emotional content.

“The theme of the exhibition has to do less with subject matter, and more with the passion in the artwork,” Topzerer said.

“Janssen is a testament to love, both deep emotional subject matter,”

Janssen’s tastes are not characterized by delicate impressionism or the recently in vogue photorealist movement. The art he collects stems more from the brazen, hard-edged work of Jean-Michel Basquiat or the grotesque sculpture of Robert Arneson. Subtle techniques are jettisoned in favor of brush application, along the lines of Jackson Pollock’s arresting paint splatters or William DeKooning’s tree branch methods.

“The best way to describe these works is that they are very painterly paintings,” Topzerer said.

“The paint is not thinly applied. The paint becomes an object.”

Janssen is perhaps best known in art circles for the prices he pays for some works. Ten years ago, at an art auction, Janssen began bidding for “Paris Montparnasse” by Jean Dubuffet, an artist inspired by the artistic NOODINGS of children and psychiatric patients. Although the painting by Dubuffet, which had just died, was appraised at about $250,000, bidding spiraled upward and upward, with Janssen eventually paying $770,000 for “Paris Montparnasse.”

Until recently, Janssen’s collections were not heavily courted by museums, but a recent ARTnews list naming him one of 1994’s top collectors rectified the situation. His collections are now in heavy demand, with many European art houses clamoring for the works. The Fred Jones exhibition is the only American venue for the current tour, which will see Janssen’s art taken to various points in Europe throughout 1995 and 1996.

Since Johns’ death, Janssen has said he doesn’t want to collect anymore, choosing instead to buy occasional pieces but with increasing irregularity. Instead, he has turned his focus toward AIDS activism, helping to fund artists, educational programs and exhibitions which discuss or illustrate the nature of the disease.

As part of his activism, the collection will be accompanied by a photography installation, “Survivors Not Victims: Portraits by Patrick V. Brown.” The 30 photographs, also owned by Janssen, are installed in a series of three cemeteries and emphasize images of persons living with HIV and AIDS.

Topzerer said that the art on display at the exhibition is designed to elicit a strong response from those who witness the showing. Subtlety is not the order of the day.

“You will not see art in this exhibition that was done with the artist’s brush placed lightly in hand,” Topzerer said.

“This art deals in physicality.”