

Peter Cochrane

An influential art dealer, he championed a new generation of artists in the 1960s

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The modest charm and diffident manner of Peter Cochrane, who has died aged 91, masked a mischievous and inquiring mind, which had made him an influential and respected art dealer for more than 30 years.

In the 1950s, at Arthur Tooth & Sons in Bruton Street, Mayfair, he was active in bringing new European and American art to London, and in the 1960s he promoted a younger generation of emerging British artists.

Following the closure of Tooth's in the late 1970s he pursued his personal interests as a collector and deployed his great knowledge in diverse fields, including 20th-century European painting, decorative arts and especially late 19th and early 20th-century ceramics, for Christie's auction house. He was careful to retain his independence, refusing a salary in latter years so that he could declare "they can't fire me because they don't pay me anything".

Cochrane was born in Ash, Surrey into an army family and educated at Wellington and later Sandhurst. However, in his early 20s an interest in art brought him into the London art world .

By 1938, he was working at the Redfern Gallery, then one of Cork Street's most progressive and adventurous galleries and, later, a centre for the promotion of work by younger British artists. In his first year he worked on a retrospective exhibition for the painter, Christopher Wood.

After wartime service in Italy, Cochrane returned to the Redfern. He was involved in presenting significant first exhibitions for a postwar generation, including Alan Reynolds, Victor Pasmore and Patrick Heron.

In 1950 he joined Tooth's. The family firm had strong links with Paris and every year presented a major show of impressionist, post-impressionist and early 20th-century French painting. Cochrane was a frequent visitor to Paris, and throughout the 1950s and 1960s was at the forefront in promoting new European and American artists to British audiences.

Cochrane took a special interest in the abstract painting being developed by Jean-Paul Riopelle and Nicholas de Stael in France, in the work of Jean Dubuffet and the Cobra painters including Asger Jorn, as well as some of the young Americans then active in Paris, such as Sam Francis and Ellsworth Kelly.

Cochrane became a particular friend and confidante of EJ Power, the English collector and radio and radar pioneer. By the early 1960s, Power had - through his acquisition of work by Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Dubuffet and others - one of the most important new art collections anywhere.

Power and Cochrane visited Paris frequently, with Power buying work through Tooth's to avoid the constraints of the British postwar exchange controls. Power had a fine eye, acquiring, for instance, a whole group of paintings by Ellsworth Kelly, one of which he later gave to the Tate. However, Cochrane was a vital ingredient in the process of building the collection and introduced Power to the work of several artists, most notably the Spanish painter Antoni Tapies, for whom Power formed a special regard.

In the mid-1950s Tooth's began the Critics Choice series of annual exhibitions. Most of the important critics - including Laurence Alloway and David Sylvester - took it in turn to make their own selection.

In the 1960s, Cochrane promoted a new generation of British artists, including first one-person shows for Allen Jones, Peter Kinley and Howard Hodgkin, all of whom continued to show with him into the 1970s when Tooth's merged for a number of years with Waddington Galleries before finally closing at the end of the decade.

Although he was a successful dealer Cochrane was always sceptical about the role of the artist's agent. "No one is more moody, emotional and untrustworthy than a dealer," he confessed to an artist. For Cochrane, it was his passion for individual works of art which propelled him into the art world rather than the showmanship or the pleasure in making a sale that motivates many dealers.

Cochrane had always been a collector by instinct, not just of painting and sculpture but distinctive objects of almost any kind, provided that they were of aesthetic interest. After his divorce from Patricia, whom he had married in the late 1930s, Cochrane lived in a Clarence Gate mansion flat. The walls were covered with small works by great mid-20th-century artists, including Dubuffet, Jorn, Yves Klein and Cy Twombly, all bought very early in their careers, as well as younger contemporaries.

The floors gradually filled with cardboard boxes containing collections of egg cups, tie presses as well as his beloved Carltonware. Most of this material had been picked up on market stalls and shops in Portobello Road and elsewhere. These boxes built up in deep piles, to the point at which a visit could only be achieved by navigation of a tortuous obstacle course.

Cochrane was always deprecating about his depth of knowledge and the quality of his eye. He was totally without affectation, while dressing with a style that would allow him to wear a gold Ashanti weight on a chain around his neck in contrast to a conventional English business suit. Hugely respected and admired by collectors and artists for his discernment and for an ability to see beauty in unusual objects, Cochrane was an art dealer with a passion for the aesthetic rather than the financial value of a work of art.

He is survived by his son Gavin; a daughter, Cara, predeceased him.

• John Peter Warren Cochrane, art dealer and collector, born October 15 1913; died November 13 2004