

to say in art history class, 'Here is an image of the *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo De Vinci, and when you go to the Louvre in Paris you will be amazed at how small it is and may be more amazed by the 200 tourists crowded around the painting than the actual piece. And when you go to Turkey and see the Hagia Sophia, make sure you see the mosaics on the second floor,' Thompson said.

"Marr kept inserting that word 'when' into all of his lectures on fine art history," he said. "So when I graduated from Hendrix, there was only one thing in the world I wanted to do – go to Europe and the Middle East (e.g. Turkey) and experience firsthand all of the things I had been studying in art history!



My Hendrix experience led to an insatiable appetite for understanding and exploring the world around me."

Thompson stayed, lived, traveled and worked in Europe for a year during 1990 – 1991, an enriching and life-changing experience he owes to his days at Hendrix, he said.

"At orientation, Dean Churchill said to the incoming class, 'The reason you were selected is because we see the spark of leadership in you,'" Thompson recalled. "That really struck me."

After graduation, Thompson waited tables and worked as a graphic designer, painting on the side. He entered the Arkansas Arts Center's Delta artists' show and built a base as an artist.

Though he sold some of his work, Thompson was completely puzzled by the process of pricing his art. He decided that, as a dealer, he would have a more stable income and would learn firsthand how to price art.

Initially he worked from his apartment as an art consultant. His first big break came when he sold six or seven paintings to Charles Morgan, former Acxiom Corp. company leader and Hendrix College Board of Trustees member. It was his first big corporate sale and led to more sales to Acxiom, as well as new clients, including Alltel, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, and Stephens Inc.

"It just started to domino," he said. Sales to the Arkansas Arts Center led to business with Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, which has led to relationships and deals with other important fine art museums and collectors across the country.

"I realized really quickly that Arkansas companies like to buy Arkansas artists, and I wanted to represent the very best Arkansas has to offer as a way to set myself apart," Thompson said.

With no storefront, Thompson hosted art parties in an apartment. In one night, he earned more money than he did in one month as a graphic artist.

"It mushroomed really quickly," he said, reaching \$1 million in yearly sales by his fifth year. "It just serendipitously happened." It also happened with a lot of hard work, focus, and determination.

Over 12 years, Thompson developed a reputation with artists and clients. The next logical step was to open a bricks and mortar gallery. Four years ago, he did just that. His gallery is part of the Argenta area's renaissance.

"When we opened, there was a firm footprint and clear vision for the Argenta community," he said. "We dovetailed nicely as the type of business they wanted down here."

Thompson likewise had a clear vision for his gallery. He had been to professional

galleries in Chicago, New York, and Paris and wanted his gallery to be on par with anything in the world.

"I knew what a real gallery looked and felt like," he said.

Touches like a private viewing room, receptionist desk, and an office are just as important as what is on the walls, he said.

In 2009, *The Oxford American* magazine asked Thompson to develop an exhibition to coincide with its Best of the South Gala honoring actor and Mississippi native Morgan Freeman and Little Rock author Charles Portis.

"I started looking more broadly at the South," he said. "I wanted to represent the best of the best in Southern Regionalism."

His gallery now includes work by Mississippi artist William Dunlap, which Thompson describes as "a real coup," as well as Delta artist Carroll Cloar and many others who not only show at Thompson's gallery but have work in major museum collections across the country, including The Museum of Modern Art, The Smithsonian, The Whitney and the Metropolitan, to name just a few.

"We want to give our collector client base the very best they can have in the art buying/ art collecting experience, whether they are focusing on important emerging talent or household names," he said. "At our gallery, the well-seasoned collector, as well as the beginning one, has a wide spectrum of quality art in which to view and purchase. We are the only gallery in the state which offers such an experience."

The Best of the South show has become the biggest show of the year.

"It broadened our client base by broadening the type of artwork we made available to the public," said Thompson, who now has clients from Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Jackson, Memphis, New Orleans, New York and St. Louis.

In addition to working with artists and clients from across the country, Thompson is proudly part of a cadre of Hendrix alumni in the art world, including **Jennifer Carman '00**, an art appraiser who recently curated a show at Thompson's gallery by the late Heber Springs photographer Mike Disfarmer.

He's not surprised though.

"Hendrix students and alumni are bright, talented, driven, and entrepreneurial, and they strive for success," he said. "My passion that got ignited at Hendrix was art. I knew with every fiber in my body that's what I was going to do and approach it with the very professional attitude."

Now celebrating his 17th year as one of the leading art dealers, gallerist and consultants in Arkansas, Thompson is looking forward to the next 17 years and beyond.

"I love what I do and I do what I love."