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The Grand Quest

Frederick Weisman's
Decade-Long Dream to Find
an L.A. Home for His Celebrated
Modern Art Collection





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Frederick Weisman's Decade-Long
Dream of Finding a Home for His Celebrated
Modern Art Collection

BY DEBORAH SOLOMON

IT'S A SWELTERING MORNING in San Antonio, with the mercury nearing a hundred. But heat doesn't stop Frederick Weisman. By 10 a.m., the 75-year-old Los Angeles art collector has arrived by limousine at the Blue Star Art Complex, a strip of galleries occupying former warehouses on the fringes of downtown. The whole city knows he's here. His arrival in Texas the night before was reported on the evening news, accompanied by footage of Weisman and his entourage of eight stepping off his private plane at the city's Million Air International Airport.

Weisman, a short, genial, energetic man whose fortune is based on distributing Toyotas, has come to Texas for a special occasion—an exhibition at the San Antonio Art Institute of works from his collection. A round of parties has been organized in his honor, and his next two days will be spent hobnobbing with prominent San Anton-

ians who can't wait to tell him, "Ah juss luuuuv your collection!" Weisman isn't here, however, merely to be complimented. His plan is to comb the local galleries and scout new talent. He's on a shopping spree, he's got millions to spend, and the town is jumping to please him.

One of his first stops is the Film Haus Gallery, a small, whitewashed loft on South Alamo Street that is exhibiting works by a Texas artist named Mike Pogue. The proprietors are expecting him and have set out some sodas and a bucket of ice. Weisman, dressed in his customary outfit of a monogrammed shirt, custom-made slacks and Gucci loafers, doesn't bother to pause for a drink as he hops around the gallery and admires each work. "It's great to see what Texas artists are doing," he says enthusiastically, as he dabs sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief.

Suddenly he stops before a work he particularly likes. Pogue's "Moosolini" is a brash, jokey sculpture consisting of a giant moose nose topped by bright green antlers. Beside it hangs a sign: "\$229.95 Cheap." It's not high art, there's nothing serious about it, and that Weisman seems to be

Weisman in his study with sculptor Duane Hanson's "Old Man Dozing" and works by, among others, Franz Kline, Paul Klee, Jackson Pollock and Robert Graham.

Weisman is emblematic of the new collector—independent, promotion-minded and determined to start his own institution.

considering buying it causes consternation among his entourage. Would he actually add this preposterous moose by an unknown artist to a collection that consists of Picassos and Pollocks and the biggest names in modern and contemporary art?

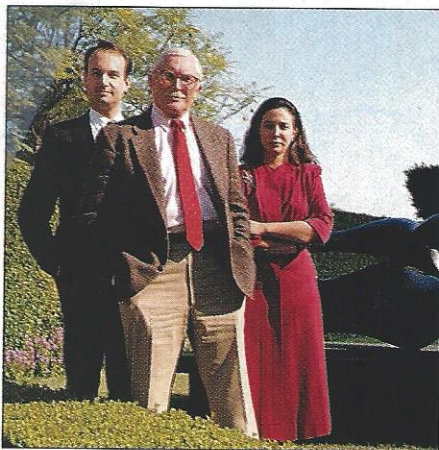
"Someone put handcuffs on him," murmurs Charles Arnoldi, a Venice artist who has come along on the trip with his wife, Katie. Weisman has been collecting Arnoldi's work for years, and one of his sculptures is featured in the show at the San Antonio Art Institute.

Standing nearby is Henry T. Hopkins, a seasoned art historian and former director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art who now oversees Weisman's collection. "It may be the best joke in the show," he says of the moose, "but the least interesting work of art."

Weisman, however, isn't dissuaded. "I think I know where I'll put it," he says. "I have a place in the board of directors room." He asks his curator to take care of the billing instructions, and then he's off to the next gallery.

FOR MORE THAN three decades, Frederick R. Weisman has been buying art, and the results are impressive. He is widely regarded as one of the country's leading collectors of 20th-Century art, and his name is familiar to virtually everyone in the art world. Such a reputation obviously wasn't built on Moosolinis alone. Since 1952, when Weisman and his former wife, Marcia, began their collection with the purchase of Jean Arp's sculpture "Self-Absorbed," he has steadily been acquiring important works by important artists, from Cezanne to Giacometti to Arshile Gorky. The value of his collection is conservatively estimated at \$60 million.

But unlike most collectors specializing in blue-chip art, Weisman isn't interested merely in amassing master-



Weisman's museum staff includes administrator Charles Castle, left, director Henry Hopkins, curator Nora Halpern Brougher.

pieces by certain name artists. An easygoing, open-minded man, he buys whatever grabs his eye. He sees himself as a kind of art ambassador, jetting off in his private plane (painted midnight blue with a galaxy of stars by artist Ed Ruscha) to cities as distant as Lisbon or Jerusalem to show his collection, discover new artists and generate good will. "The art is almost secondary compared to the excitement of supporting artists," says Venice painter Laddie John Dill, who accompanied Weisman to San Antonio. "He thrives on the energy. It keeps him alive."

Still, Weisman's collection, with all its quirks, wouldn't be of interest to many people if his only intention was to support young artists and stock his house in Holmby Hills with their creations. Weisman's ambitions are far grander in scope. Like the artists he collects, he wants to be remembered. His plan is to start his own art museum, one that could eventually make his name as familiar as those of Frick, Guggenheim, Morgan—and his former brother-in-law, Norton Simon.

Weisman's search for a dream museum has occupied him for almost a decade, with his efforts intensifying in recent years as he races against his own mortality. His first choice at present is UCLA, and he is hoping to announce any day that he is moving his hoard of treasures to the campus. But whether

or not the deal goes through, the negotiations in themselves are a significant reflection of the changing nature of art collecting. Weisman is emblematic of a new breed of collector—independent, promotion-minded and singularly determined to start his own institution. As such, he poses a challenge to traditional big-city museums, whose vast holdings have been built up over time by gifts from collectors.

Weisman's efforts to find a museum first gained national attention last year after he tried to move his collection to the Greystone mansion, a lavish, decaying estate in Beverly Hills. Though the City Council initially voted, 4 to 1, to lease the mansion to Weisman, the project dissolved amid mounting discomfort with the idea of a museum devoted to art that "looks like it was made yesterday"—as one council member disparagingly put it. Despite widespread support from the L.A. art community, two council members proposed instead that Greystone be sold to raise money for schools. Unwilling to be pitted against the school system, Weisman dejectedly withdrew from the deal in November, 1986, after two years of negotiations.

It wasn't the first time a major art collector was spurned by Beverly Hills. Twenty years earlier, uranium magnate Joseph Hirshhorn had tried to move his collection to Greystone but was defeated by the city in a conflict over parking facilities. He took his treasures to Washington, where he built the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

Richard Koshalek, director of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, hopes Weisman will keep his collection in Southern California. "It's very important for the collection to stay in Los Angeles," he says. "Fred has lived here, he's been very supportive of California artists, he's put his collection together here, and I think for sure it should stay here. Having it would make the city as a whole a much richer environment."

For now, Weisman's 2,000-piece collection is dispersed in several locations. One group of about 300 works, known officially as the Frederick R. Weisman

Deborah Solomon is the author of "Jackson Pollock: A Biography" (Simon and Schuster).



Renate Gobel's "Floating Pool Figure" at the Weisman house with, at poolside, Fernando Botero's "Eve," left, and his "Cat."

Collection, is the source of a number of traveling exhibitions. A second collection, consisting mostly of Japanese art, hangs in Weisman's office in Glen Burnie, Md., where his Toyota distributorship has been based since he started the company in 1970. His personal collection occupies his house, a sprawling Spanish Colonial on North Carolwood Drive flanked by neighbors Barbra Streisand and Burt Reynolds.

As his address might suggest, Weisman lives lavishly. He has a cook, a butler and five cars (a Rolls, a Bentley and three Toyotas). He also has an adoring, pretty girlfriend, Billie Milam, who is several decades his junior. "Women just throw themselves at him as if he's a movie star," says Milam, a conservator at the Getty Museum. "I've

had women push me and step on my toes in order to meet him."

Carolwood, as Weisman refers to his home, is easy to recognize. A pair of massive bronze breasts rising above the tall front hedges alerts the visitor that this isn't exactly your average deluxe house. The breasts are part of "Large Torso" by Colombian artist Fernando Botero, and the flamboyant sculpture provides a clue to what lies beyond the wrought-iron gates. Weisman's house is a sybaritic palace, a kind of art-packed Disneyland where sculptures are planted in the unlikeliest places—including the pool—and the walls are crowded with big, prestigious paintings by Willem de Kooning, Jasper Johns, Helen Frankenthaler and many other "old masters" whom Weisman routine-

ly shows beside works by younger artists such as Arnolli or Dill.

When it comes to sculpture, Weisman's taste is simply outrageous. Two full-size nudes by sculptor John de Andrea passionately embrace in an upstairs bathroom; they look so convincing that first-time visitors invariably let out a yelp. Another De Andrea—a kneeling female nude relaxing on a sofa—can be found in a guest room. Downstairs, beneath a stairwell enlivened by a huge, haunting red-and-black Clyfford Still painting, stands sculptor Duane Hanson's "Molly of Miami," a decrepit bag lady who looks as if she mistakenly stumbled into Carolwood and can't find her way out. She is kept constant company by Hanson's "Old Man Dozing," in the study.

Weisman seems to enjoy nothing so much as giving tours of his home. "You know who *that's* by!" he says again and again, pausing before a Cezanne or a Miro or another Hanson and smiling when a visitor volunteers the correct answer.

Other works are less recognizable, but Weisman is proud of those too. He often says, "You don't have to have a big name to make important art." The statement, like most of Weisman's, sounds so upbeat that one might think it was prepared by an advertising agency. But Weisman believes his cheery sayings. A relentless optimist, he is full of plans not only for himself but also for everyone he meets, and he can barely spend an hour in a new city before proposing, "You know, they could build a great cultural center here!"

WEISMAN IS so involved with his art collection that it's easy to forget that he works for a living. As president and chief executive officer of Frederick Weisman Co., he employs more than 500 people to run eight subsidiaries, including a car-importing company, a real estate concern, an insurance firm, a computer company and the largest division, Mid-Atlantic Toyota Distributors. The Frederick Weisman Co. is the largest privately owned revenue producer in Maryland and last year grossed \$1.1 billion in sales. Weisman divides his time between his East Coast headquarters and ground-floor offices in his home.

He is said to be worth more than \$100 million—a figure on which he refuses to comment—but Weisman is no stodgy CEO. One night during his San Antonio trip, a group of Texans presented him with a gift of paint-splattered white overalls and matching painted cowboy boots—which he wore to a formal reception in his honor at the city's Art Institute the following night. (The boots were a size too small, but so what? He had his chauffeur stop by a shoe store to have them stretched.) At the reception, Weisman was asked to make a speech. He got up on the podium, put on a serious face and told the crowd of 200, "I'm not going to make any speeches tonight." A two-beat pause. "I don't think I'm dressed for that." Everyone laughed.

"Fred really has a lot of fun with his



Weisman's Lockheed JetStar, with celestial paint job by Ed Ruscha.

art—much more fun than other collectors," says Margo Leavin, a prominent Los Angeles art dealer who has known him for years. "There's a kind of special energy. He has a plane and the funds to be able to be immediately responsive. If an artist has a show 10,000 miles away, he can say he'll be there, and he will."

While no one denies that Weisman enjoys his collection, there are those who question whether enthusiasm alone is enough to ensure a successful museum. A museum, after all, is not merely a showcase for one person's possessions, but also a scholarly institution that attempts to provide a historical context for the objects in its custody. It depends on the kind of diligence and erudition that is the very opposite of Weisman's freewheeling approach to collecting, leading many people to wonder, Why does Freddy Weisman want to start such an institution?

A persistent rumor in L.A. art circles holds that Weisman undertook the

project to get even with Norton Simon, founder of the Pasadena museum that bears his name. The two men go back many years. Soon after his marriage in 1938 to Simon's younger sister, Marcia, Weisman went to work for his in-laws and eventually became president of Hunt-Wesson foods. Simon was chairman of the board. After 20 years under Simon's thumb, Weisman left to go into business for himself.

Weisman says forthrightly that his relationship with Simon has always been strained, particularly in regard to their social lives. "Norton was always shy socially," he says. "He's the type of man who always had a charismatic friend, so if he was at a party and he was talking to people, there wouldn't be an awkward pause." Weisman says that, by comparison, he's the more easygoing of the two, "and Norton envied that to a certain extent."

Their relations continue to be less than cordial. In 1985, Simon sued his sister and Weisman over Kandinsky's

Henry Hopkins has \$500,000 a year to buy art for Weisman's collection, while Weisman himself spends about five times that annually on acquisitions.

"Nude," which the couple had promised to donate to the Pasadena Museum before it was bought by Simon. In 1978, when Simon took over the museum, filled it with Old Masters and relegated modern art to the basement, the Weismans decided to auction their Kandinsky. A judge ruled in Simon's favor, awarding him the \$1.1 million the painting had brought at auction.

For all the tension between Weisman and Simon, both men insist that one's involvement in art has nothing to do with the other. One specializes in contemporary art, the other in Old Masters. "It's a different kind of art," Weisman says. "Totally different."

Simon, 80, who has recently fallen ill and spends his time at home with his wife, actress Jennifer Jones, and a retinue of eight nurses, sees no connection between his museum and the plans of his former brother-in-law. "I think contemporary art is a field of its own," he says, adding that he considers himself "very remote" from the current art scene. His only connection to postwar art is that "I see it on television now and then."

While both Weisman and Simon claim to be barely aware of the other's recent activities, the irony is that the two men want their collections to go to the same place. Earlier this year, Simon gained national publicity when he announced his intentions to deed his art collection to UCLA. Though none of the details have been finalized, Simon's plan provides for the university to take over the Pasadena museum after his death and to move the bulk of his collection to a second museum built in his honor on the campus. The site for the proposed museum, a bustling corner at Wilshire Boulevard and Veteran Avenue, is now a parking lot.

Weisman, too, has been negotiating with UCLA to be the eventual keeper of his collection—and to help the deal along, he has promised the school some perks. In informal discussions with university officials, he says, he has offered to pay the cost of building a museum, which he estimates at \$8 million, and also to provide an operating budget of

more than \$1 million a year. But the deal is still tentative, and as of this writing it is impossible to know whether the Board of Regents will eventually decide to lend the state's facilities to Weisman's collection, Simon's collection, or possibly both—assuming the two men are willing to show side by side.

Weisman denies that his recent discussions with UCLA were motivated by Simon's plans. He says he has been talking to school officials on and off for many years and attributes his interest in the university to the "national recognition" it could bring his museum. UCLA officials are unwilling to discuss their negotiations with Weisman. "All that I'm at liberty to say is that I have nothing to say," says Michael McManus, assistant vice chancellor, public communications. "Any conversations we may have had with [Weisman] have been done in the strictest of confidence, and to violate that confidence is something I'm not prepared to do."

In the year since the Greystone deal fell through, Weisman has considered offers from about a dozen other places—including the city of Paris—eager to have him build a museum on their turf. His first choice continues to be UCLA, but another possibility is the city of Santa Monica, which plans to build a cultural center on the site of the aged Civic Auditorium.

IF WEISMAN STILL has a way to go until he finds his perfect museum, he has already hired a staff to run it. Working out of a temporary office on the edge of Century City, his staff includes Nora Halpern Brouger, a 27-year-old who serves as his curator; Charles E. Castle, an administrator who started out at the Getty Trust in Century City; Eddie Fumasi, the registrar; Robin Green, a public relations man who had previously worked at the Metropolitan and Guggenheim museums in New York, and, most important, museum director Henry Hopkins.

It is Hopkins, more than anyone, who has endowed Weisman's undertakings

with unquestionable professionalism. A heavysset, white-haired, 60-ish man who made his reputation a decade ago as the director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Hopkins is a highly regarded figure in the art world. His imposing appearance and Old World elegance—he customarily greets women with a peck on the cheek—have only enhanced his popularity. That he was willing to leave his San Francisco post to head up the much-smaller Weisman Collection surprised many observers when the news was announced in May, 1986.

Hopkins accepted his new position on the condition that he be given complete control over shaping the collection, with no interference from Weisman. This was accomplished by setting aside about 300 works that constitute the core of the proposed museum, which Hopkins can add to as he pleases. He has \$500,000 a year to spend on new works. Weisman, who spends about five times that amount on acquisitions each year, has agreed to install his own purchases in his house only—unless Hopkins approves them for the museum. The relationship between the two men is akin to that of the old-fashioned husband and wife, with Hopkins overseeing the business and Weisman tending to the house.

Hopkins is the first to admit that the Weisman Collection—the name given to the group of works he oversees—is far too eclectic for its own good. While it does excel in certain periods, such as Abstract Expressionism and contemporary British art, there are also huge gaps, such as an absence of works by the pioneering German Expressionists. "Fred doesn't necessarily like aggression," says Hopkins, who hopes to make the collection more consistent, so that it presents the kind of coherent overview he sees as a critical function of any museum. "It tries to be too much at one time," he says of the collection. "It doesn't have a sense of direction."

Even so, Hopkins believes that the Weisman Collection, with all its gaps, is no less valuable as a cultural resource than the large, encyclopedic collections

Weisman's house is a sybaritic palace, a kind of art-packed Disneyland where sculptures are planted in the unlikeliest places.

owned by major museums. His years of experience as a top-level administrator at art museums in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Fort Worth have left him disillusioned with American art museums, which he believes are becoming increasingly standardized. "Museums reflect the taste of [art] dealers more than anyone else," he says, adding that a collection such as Weisman's, which was built on intuition, offers a lively alternative to what he sees as the market-dominated collecting patterns of larger museums.

Hopkins' contention that a small museum representing one man's taste can better serve the public than a big, all-encompassing museum is considered subversive in art circles, for it challenges the role of the country's great museums as the rightful custodians of culture. Indeed, how are museums to survive at all if the major collectors on whom they are dependent insist on going their own way? The question is not merely hypothetical. With the emergence of the Pop Art movement in the '60s, the art world witnessed a tremendous boom in collecting, and a great many people quickly amassed impressive collections. Many of these people now seem to be drawn to the idea of starting their own museums—and reaping the social prestige such a project affords. This is particularly the case among California collectors.

In the Los Angeles area alone, many collectors are well on their way to having their own museums, albeit on a limited scale. "Dynasty" executive producer Douglas S. Cramer has a building on his Santa Ynez ranch where he regularly exhibits his collection. Developer Eli Broad, one of the founders of MOCA, owns a four-story building in Santa Monica that serves as the base of his art activities. L.A. real estate mogul Ed Broida not long ago announced his plans for a full-scale museum in SoHo in New York City, though the project, at the moment, has been abandoned. Armand Hammer is said to be making discreet inquiries into the possibility of installing his collection at the Grey-stone mansion, which remains empty.



At home, Weisman cozies up to Duane Hanson's "Florida Shopper"; at left is Niki de Saint Phalle's "Two Snakes."

"The philanthropy era has come to an end," says Sherri Geldin, associate director of the Museum of Contemporary Art. "There was a time when collectors saw museums as the ultimate destination of their collections, but those days are over." While lamenting the loss this represents to a museum such as MOCA, she also questions the wisdom of banishing works of art to a small, privately owned showplace. "In the long run," she says, "it's unclear how these works will become part of the larger framework of art history."

Earl A. (Rusty) Powell III, the low-key director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, cautions that a collector who is interested in establishing a museum may have enough money to start one but not enough to guarantee its existence indefinitely. "It takes a substantial amount of money to run a museum," he says.

Weisman, who says he has never considered donating his collection to either of the county's two major museums, offers no apologies for his decision. He says no museum is large enough to absorb his collection wholesale and guarantee that it remain intact. Nor, he says, would an existing museum ever agree to honor his unusual practice of showing younger artists beside more established ones. "We're trying to show that young artists are doing important things, and we want to

be able to continue our theme."

Weisman's independence has cost him the friendship of various collectors who feel that he has garnered national publicity for himself without contributing to the local art scene. One prominent collector, who played a large role in the founding of MOCA and who asked that his name not be used, says antagonistically: "I'm at a loss to see anything Fred has done to support public institutions. We have different philosophies. [Mine] is to build a good collection rather than promote it."

It angers Weisman that there are those who describe him as a mere self-promoter with no sense of civic responsibility, and he is quick to remind detractors of his extensive contributions to the county's two art museums. A longtime LACMA trustee, he has given the museum substantial donations of money and art. Last year, he underwrote the Jonathan Borofsky show at MOCA at a cost of \$150,000, and he agreed to lend the museum his prized "Pink Angels" by Willem de Kooning for six weeks of its yearlong inaugural exhibition.

He also is active in museums outside California. For years he has served as a trustee of the Baltimore Museum of Art. And he is a supporter of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the city in which he was born and raised before he moved to California with his family in 1918. Weisman recently gave the Walker \$1.5 million to build a sculpture plaza, with a fountain by Claes Oldenburg, dedicated to the memory of his Russian-Jewish immigrant parents, William and Mary Weisman.

Still, criticism persists. Weisman's ex-wife, Marcia, one of the founders of MOCA, often telephones her husband to try to persuade him to attend various local art events, but without much success. "Fred has no profile in the community," she says, adding that he wouldn't "need" to start his own institution if he tried harder to channel his energies into ones that already exist.

Marcia Weisman, a quick-witted, stylish 69-year-old, adds that she

hopes her comments don't sound like the gripings of an embittered ex-wife. She continues to live in the Beverly Hills home she shared with Weisman until their divorce in 1979, and her relations with him have remained amicable. She talks to him almost every day and keeps a photograph of her ex-husband and their three children in her dressing room. Their eldest child, 47-year-old Richard, lives in New York and manages the investments of tennis players. The Weismans' two other children are severely handicapped and are institutionalized—Nancy, 44, in Santa Barbara and Daniel, 43, in Devon, Pa.

There are those who say that Weisman's art collection would be far less distinguished if it weren't for Marcia's large role in assembling it. Norton Simon, for one, sees a "day and night" difference between the two collectors, and says, "Fred has more money to spend, and he spends it faster." He declined to elaborate further on the nature of Weisman's taste.

Marcia Weisman, who nowadays collects mainly drawings, says she doesn't see any difference between Weisman's taste and her own. "My interest was there from an earlier age," she says, "but we got caught up in it together." When they divorced, they split up their thousands of works one by one. Marcia's first pick was Jasper Johns' "Map." Weisman chose Giacometti's "Dog." "He got all the Moores," she says ruefully, while adding that she occasionally borrows one or two back.

IT'S A SHINING September morning, and a video screen in Fred Weisman's Lockheed JetStar flashes with the information that the plane is flying at 458 m.p.h. at an altitude of 35,000 feet. The plane is headed for Los Angeles, having just left San Antonio, where a small crowd had gathered at the airport to see the collector off. As Weisman and his entourage boarded the plane, someone had handed them each a yellow rose, symbol of Texas, and voices rang with the message, "Y'all come back, y'hear."

Aboard the plane, Weisman relaxes by reading the society items in the San Antonio newspapers, several of which relate to him. One headline reads, "Arts Patrons Preview Weisman Show." "Did Chuck see this?" Weisman says, jumping up excitedly and handing the paper to Charles Arnoldi, whose picture

is in it. "Chuck, do you have this?" Yes, Chuck has it. He nods silently.

Weisman goes back to reading the papers, but then somehow the question of VCRs comes up; someone has asked him how many VCRs he owns. "Billie!" he shouts, summoning his girlfriend. "Billie, how many VCRs do I have?"

Charles Arnoldi turns around in his seat. "Who cares about VCRs," he says. "I thought you were talking about Picasso!"

Weisman beams. "I've got more Picassos than VCRs," he says.

An hour or so later into the trip, Weisman is passing the time by reflecting on his collection. He can talk about it forever, about his dream of discovering gifted young artists, about his vision of involving more and more people in art. "I want to get people looking at the sky and looking at sunsets," he says enthusiastically. "I don't think it can be done unless they're looking at contemporary art."

Hopkins, seated beside him, says, "He sounds like a 17-year-old idealist, and that's the most remarkable thing."

The plane begins its descent. For a moment the ride is frightfully rocky, prompting Weisman to shout, as a joke, "Who's watching the store?" But by the time the plane touches down at Van Nuys Airport, everything is under control, and the two hours gained by flying west endow the morning with a sense of promise.

Now that he's back in California, Weisman seems to accelerate his pace. He scurries from the plane, ducks into his rented hangar for a moment ("I share it with David Murdock," he boasts, referring to the businessman and Regency Club owner) and then bounds toward the Toyota van that will deliver him to Carolwood. Suddenly, he's a man in a hurry, eager to get back to his office and tend to the future of his Toyota business.

But just as he's stepping into his van, something occurs to him. He gets out, walks around to the back and peers inside to make sure he hasn't forgotten anything. He need not have worried, for everything is in place, the suitcases stacked neatly beside one another. Resting among them is a medium-sized package wrapped in heavy brown paper, a mystery gift he brought back from Texas. What could it possibly be? "It's 'Moosolini,'" Weisman says, "and I'm going to hang it up today." □



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