

OBITUARY

Norah Stone — colorful art maven, SFMOMA trustee

By Charles Desmarais

Norah Stone, a widely admired cultural philanthropist and art collector known for sartorially flamboyant entrances at social occasions, quietly made her final exit when she died early Friday, Sept. 6, at California Pacific Medical Center. Her death, after a months-long fight with cancer, was confirmed by her husband, Dr. Norman C. Stone. She was 81.

Stone served as a trustee of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art for 10 years, among other charitable activities. Reached via email while traveling, Neal Benezra, director of the museum, called her “a consummate collector and connoisseur, an inspiring woman with incredible personal style, a true friend to so many, and a bright spirit in all of our lives.”

“Very simply,” he said, “she was a remarkable human being.”

Stone was born Norah Sharpe in Alberta, Canada, on Aug. 6, 1938. She studied nursing at the University of Alberta and worked as a surgical nurse at several hospitals in the Bay Area, then earned a degree from the San Francisco Law School, becoming a senior attorney at Pacific Telesis Group in San Francisco.

In 1967 she supervised the first volunteer nursing staff at the Haight Ashbury Free Clinics, and had held volunteer positions at the Child Abuse Prevention Center in San Francisco, NARAL and other health-oriented organizations. In art, in addition to her support of SFMOMA, she served on the National Committee of the Whitney Museum and the Tate International Council.

Norah was introduced to Norman Stone in 1984 on a blind date that changed her life, according to a 2012 profile in *The Chronicle*.



Catharine Bigelow / The Chronicle

Arts patron Norah Stone, in customary flamboyant attire, was an avid S.F. collector. She has died at 81.

“When they met, Norah assumed he was broke because they walked everywhere,” *The Chronicle*’s Carolyn Zinko reported. After they dated for some time, he revealed he was the son of wealthy insurance magnate W. Clement Stone. They married in 1986, beginning together to build a collection of contemporary art that brought them international attention.

Along with Norman, Benezra said, Norah “was a passionate supporter and generous donor to the museum. Her legacy includes

works by artists such as Matthew Barney, John Baldessari, Joseph Beuys, Jeff Koons and many, many others.” She chaired the committee to celebrate the museum’s 2016 expansion, among other activities.

She credited her husband with exciting her interest in fashion, and the two have been a highly visible, not to say idiosyncratic, presence together at cultural events for decades.

The late Wilkes Bashford, a prominent clothier, told *The Chronicle*, “Only people as self-confident as they are could dress the way

they dress without it appearing as if they were trying too hard, or as if it were a put-on ... on them, it’s a natural, authentic way of dressing.”

In a phone interview, Norman made it clear that Norah’s style was only part of her personality.

“She loved to connect people and to help people,” he said. “It was a part of her. She did it in a way with intelligence and humor. She made things fun.”

“She transformed my life,” he said. “She introduced me to a Buddhist practice that we both followed. She’s part of me, a thing I feel in my heart chakra.”

Each year for more than a decade, *Artnews* magazine has named the Stones as among the top 200 collectors worldwide. In Calistoga, the Stones built a second home outside San Francisco that includes what they called an “art cave,” carved into a hillside, with 5,000 square feet of galleries for their extensive collection. The property, which they christened “Stonescape,” features a swimming pool designed by James Turrell

that is also a stunning art installation.

Once every two years, the Stones have thrown a grand private party for art-world friends. Next year, Norman said, “there will be another, conceptualized by Norah: ‘Women Matter,’ all women artists.” He said he would not hesitate to go forward with the event. “That was Norah’s plan.”

Norah Stone is survived by three siblings, Ted Sharpe, Linda Smiley and Ronald Sharpe, all of Alberta province; three stepdaughters by a previous marriage, Megan Neal, Diane Phillips and Nancy Lambert; four stepchildren via marriage to Norman: Amy Tingley Stone, Mark Stone, Bryan Stone and Norm Clifford Stone; and seven step-grandchildren.

A private memorial is planned. In lieu of flowers, the family suggests donations to the American Civil Liberties Union.

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