

## ART

By REED JOHNSON  
Times Staff Writer

## Mexico's López shapes collection

Fortunate son Eugenio López Alonso has built a contemporary collection ripe with Latin American inspiration.

**G**REETING guests on his penthouse rooftop, Eugenio López Alonso seems to have all the requisite props for his jet-set playboy lifestyle. Swingin' bachelor pad crammed with expensive artworks? Check. Second home in Beverly Hills, done up in chic, high-Modernist style? Check. Two yippy dogs, named Jasper (as in Johns) and Pollock (as in Jackson)? Yup. Posse of glamorous, attractive pals hanging out nearby? Check. Private source of steady income? Um, you're kidding, right?

As sole heir to Mexico's Jumex juice fortune, López could live like a pasha without lifting a finger for the rest of his life. But unlike so many of his pampered peers, the 38-year-old scion has put his millions (or rather, his family's) where his mouth (or rather, his discriminating eye) is.

In the late 1990s, López began to acquire a reputation as perhaps the most important contemporary art collector in Latin America. Armed with his family's checkbook and guided by savvy advisors, he sought out and purchased important pieces by the likes of Cy Twombly, Donald Judd, Ed Ruscha, Jeff Koons, Nancy Rubins, Francis Alys, Larry Pittman, John Baldessari and other artists of international stature.

López also emerged as a steadfast patron of up-and-coming Mexican artists such as Gabriel Orozco and Damián Ortega, helping to shift their careers into high gear. All told, he has spent an estimated \$50 million to \$80 million of the family luce on objects of art.

Since March 2001, López's striking assemblage of contemporary works, officially known as La Colección Jumex, has been open to the public, housed in a 15,000-square-foot white cube of a building on the grounds of the giant Jumex plant in Ecatepec, a gritty industrial area about half an hour north of the capital. Although the collection — tucked behind steel vats of apple and pear juice, and requiring passage through two security checkpoints — isn't easy to get to, it's well worth the trouble: López's 1,300-piece collection is one of the largest private art collections open to the public in Latin America, as well as one of the world's most important public showcases of Latin American art. (About 15% of the collection consists of works by Mexican artists.)

Today, López is a frequent flier on the global art-buying circuit, the kind of shopper whose arrival can send auction-house minions tripping over themselves. Although he still holds the largely ceremonial post of Jumex marketing director, his real vocation is scouring auctions and art fairs and chatting with artists, gallery habitués, curators, museum directors and fellow collectors.

"He's on the move constantly," says Abaseh Mirvalli, 36, the Iranian American director of the Jumex Foundation, which administers the art collection. "He is such a great part of picking the pieces, that if he wasn't traveling and educating himself and reading and meeting, we'd really lose."

## Cash and credentials

**F**ORTUNATE sons who set themselves up as connoisseurs always risk being ridiculed as dilettantish poseurs. But López is respected for his taste and foresight as well as his bank account, and is widely credited with raising the global profile of contemporary art and artists here in his hometown.

His foundation recently underwrote a major exhibition of work by L.A. artist Ruscha at Mexico City's Rufino Tamayo

Museum, the capital's premier public venue for contemporary art. Mirvalli says that the foundation awards about \$3.5 million in scholarships every year. It also lends art for exhibitions and supports a variety of educational programs in Mexico and the United States.

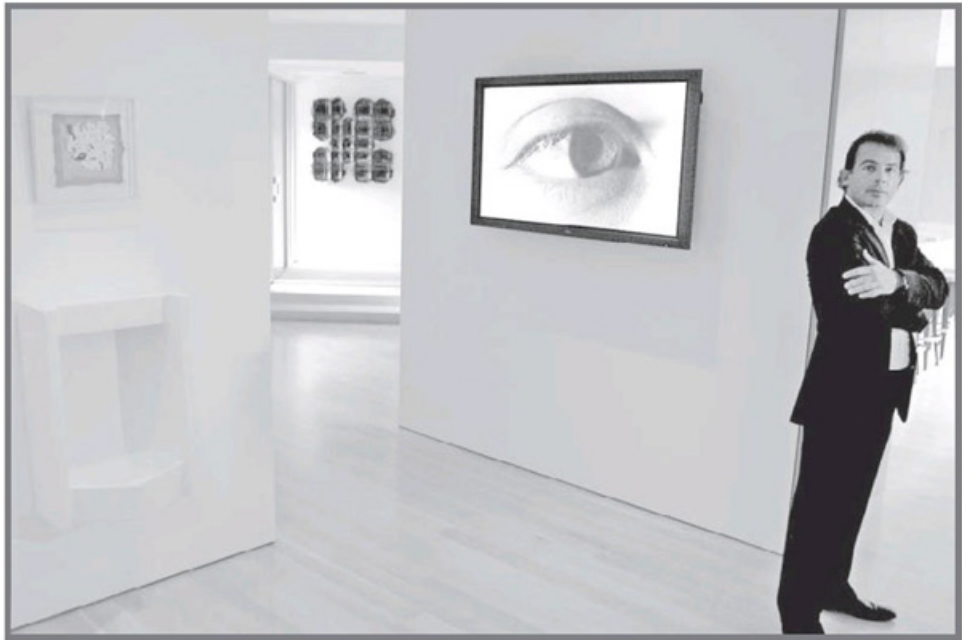
Ramiro Martínez, the Tamayo's director, lists López's principal assets as "an excellent eye," "good advisors" and "an excellent eye." "good advisors" and "an excellent eye" to form a truly international art collection that also has managed to integrate top-notch Mexican artists. "I believe that this has aided in the visibility of contemporary Mexican artists outside of Mexico," he says.

By digging into his own pocket to support contemporary art, López has encouraged more rich Mexicans to support cutting-edge video, conceptual, in-

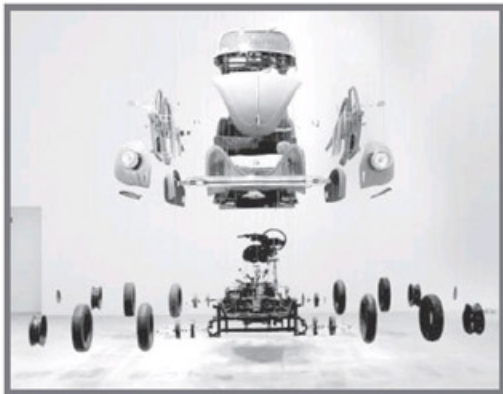
stallation and digital works. That takes a rare talent in a culturally conservative country like Mexico, says Richard Koshalek, president of Art Center College of Design in Pasadena and former director of L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art, on whose board López sits.

"People collect in Mexico, but they tend to be very traditional in their tastes," Koshalek says. "I think what really interested me in Eugenio was his exploratory instincts. He seemed to have an eye on the future, he seemed to be concerned with emerging artists. That takes a tremendous amount of intellectual courage."

Though skeptical at first of their only child's aspirations, López's parents have come to accept and even embrace them. It helped, López says, when he befriended Carlos and Rosa de la Cruz, Cuban American husband-and-wife collectors from Miami. "I went to see their



**IN BEVERLY HILLS:** Eugenio López Alonso's home collection includes an untitled work, upper left, by Robert Ryman; "Urinal," bottom left, a 1985 creation by Robert Gober; and "Tension Superficial," right, a 1991 piece by Rafael-Lozano Hemmer that has motion sensors enabling the eye to follow the observer.



**'COSMIC THING':** Damián Ortega's 2002 work on display at MOCA in L.A.

collection, and that was very good for me because then my father could relate to someone Latin, older people, successful, businessman, businesswoman, with four or five children, which they were all married, Catholics, with all the right credentials."

One of the biggest beneficiaries of López's largesse is the metropolis he has adopted as a second home: Los Angeles.

What López calls his "special attachment" to the City of Angels began when he was a boy and his father (also named Eugenio López), the chief executive of Jumex, owned an L.A. restaurant. The family visited Southern California often. López the younger, restlessly searching for his own identity, decided to uproot himself and go west (by northwest).

"Basically, I always wanted to live outside of Mexico, either New York or Los Angeles," he explains. "I wanted to get out of my own shadow, maybe, my own friends, my own circle of people. It was like always the same, you know, and I needed a change. And it was also that I was working with my father my entire life, had been there, and trained and educated to be always with the company, running the company. So this [Los Angeles] was like fresh air for me."

"I love Los Angeles. I have chemistry with that city."

Within a few years he'd opened the Chac Mool Gallery in West Hollywood with his then-business partner, Estella Provas, thereby establishing the beachhead he would need to become a collector. Today he laughs at his naiveté.

"The gallery in Los Angeles? Oh my God, it was a mess!" he says. "I thought that people from Japan would travel to California to buy Latin American art, artists from Oaxaca. I had no idea about the market at all."

But he quickly learned, devouring books on art and poring over Sotheby's catalogs. Meanwhile, he put his business and social skills to work.

Charming, bilingual and inevitably described in magazine profiles as "boyishly handsome," López is reported to be a world-class schmoozer. The blow-out private parties he throws in Mexico

City and at his Beverly Hills sanctuary have brought Mexican and U.S. art-world cognoscenti and socialites together, linking two metropolises that, despite their "sister city" status, can feel like separate worlds. Yet publicly, López has kept a low profile, working in what Art Center's Koshalek describes as "a very quiet, respectful way."



**A PATRON'S PUSH:** López, left, in 2000 with sculptor Gabriel Orozco.

## Making his move

**L**ÓPEZ'S stature as an important player on the L.A. haute-culture circuit was certified when he gave up Chac Mool to join MOC's board of trustees last April.

Already, he has earmarked a \$75,000 gift to the museum to beef up its Latin American holdings. [...]

"I prefer to buy the best from the best, than the worst from the best," López says, meaning he'd pass on an inferior work, even if it were by a big-name artist.