

The Journey: Frances Perkins

New attorney finds common thread in the art and legal worlds

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APR 19, 2023



Frances Perkins

Photo: Eric England

In her new downtown Nashville office, high in The Pinnacle at Symphony Place, Frances Perkins is adding an important piece — a modern abstract painting by New York City-based artist Maximilian Schubert, a friend from her past career as an art consultant.

Perkins joined Sherrard Roe Voigt & Harbison as an associate earlier this year. She has two degrees, one in law from Belmont and one in the history of art and architecture from Brown University. Perkins worked in international fine art and design for nearly 15 years —

building collections, organizing exhibitions and advising clients.

The two positions have more in common than the public may think, she tells the *Post*.

As a lawyer and an art consultant, Perkins is accustomed to being in what she describes as a trusted adviser role. The two worlds may seem different, but there are similarities in the people she interacts with.

“A lot of people think the art world is this rarefied place that only people of a certain social status are engaging in, but it’s not like that at all,” she says. “Most artists, until they become successful, are working a side job and really struggling to make ends meet. It’s really an amazing cross-section of society.”

She continues: “That’s the same with the law. You have clients who are big corporate clients, you have clients who are pro se clients, so they’re representing themselves, and you do pro bono cases where people are incarcerated, or people are indigent and can’t pay for legal services.”

Perkins ventures that she may have never left the art world had she and her husband not opted to move to Nashville in 2017. She had time to reflect on her life, having left the New York City gallery she co-owned, Eli King Frances Perkins, behind.

“It’s kind of like what it feels like when you’re 22,” she says. “I just turned 40. To have that opportunity again — everything is brand new. It just felt so refreshing and it felt like a really good opportunity to make a change.”

Going to law school wasn’t the plan all along. She was inspired after hearing independently from both her mother, a writer, and mother-in-law, a history professor, who both regretted having not attended law school. Volunteering at the Nashville Rescue Mission and at the James A. Cayce Homes shortly after moving to Nashville, Perkins became intrigued by the different sides of the city and thought studying law could give her power to make a difference. Perkins is part of the firm’s business and commercial litigation group and hopes to be able to serve bilingual clients — she speaks Spanish, Portuguese, French and Italian.

“I do feel like going to law school, it really pulls back the veil a little bit,” she says. “It reveals to you how politics operate, how cities operate. It shows you how laws are made, but also how courts interpret that and the downstream effect of that. It touches everything you do in life.”

Perkins insists she is not disillusioned with the art world, and continues to do art advising, though a certain structure brought by her new position is more welcome these days. She sees Nashville as a wonderful place to have a family, and she and her husband did just that eight months ago, welcoming a son.

"I didn't have a child when I was in the art world, and it meant that I traveled a ton for work, which was so much fun and so exciting," she says. "It also meant that I could keep really irregular hours. I could be really spontaneous. That's not something I can do now. I have a schedule."

Law is an area of stability and structure while art is more avant-garde, as Perkins sees it.

"There's a little tension there," she says, "but both of them are very necessary for our society to function."

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Hannah Herner joined the Nashville Post to cover health care in 2022. She previously worked for The Contributor street paper and freelanced for the Nashville Scene.