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## Fine Arts

### Art Is For All: A Brief Look At Art Collecting Through The Ages

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#### HISTORY

The practice of collecting art began in 15th century Italy when the Medicis became benefactors to artists, artisans and craftsmen. Although in matters of state they ruled with an "iron hand," when it came to the arts the Medicis were extremely appreciative and well informed. Under their rule art became a part of everyday life, available to the ordinary man and woman. When visitors went to the "Nation's States" at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, they shared the mutual experience of awe, inspiration and amazement in the beauty of the art that enriched all.

From the 15th century through the 19th century, patrons commissioned artists to produce specific works. They were not free to create what they wanted but were considered employees by the elite. In fact, in the 17th century, Rembrandt had numerous assistants working under him in order to service his many patrons.



*"The Blue Boy" (c. 1770), by Thomas Gainsborough. Thought to be a portrait of Jonathan Buttall, the son of a wealthy hardware merchant. Photo: public domain*

During the early and high Renaissance (15th and early 16th centuries), Isabella D'Este ranked with the Medici family as a major patron of the arts. She was one of the few wealthy and powerful women of the time to play a decisive role in this arena, indefatigably employing Mantegna, Perugina and other famous Masters to decorate the rooms of her home.

In 1837 the Barbizon School of Realists/Naturalists began. Artists began painting en plein-air (meaning outdoors). By the time this movement ended in 1870 the "workshop" tradition of artists and assistants was over, thus giving way to the solitary artist and the development of the amateur artist. Patronage, however, continued into the Great

Impressionist Period that followed the realists. Artists were commissioned to create portraits of their friends' children, and paintings of everyday life in the French countryside. And, artists of the 19th century were not only subject to their patrons, but to the salons where artists competed for acceptance of their works.



***"The Arrival of the Normandy Train, Gare Saint Lazare," Claude Monet. Artists were commissioned to paint images of everyday life in the French countryside. Photo: public domain***

The 20th century brought great movements in art and painting and an explosive revival of collecting. Matisse and Derain inspired the Fauve Movement. Great artists such as Max

Beckman defined Expressionism. Cubism came to the fore with Braque, Picasso and Juan Gris – and patronage continued. During the 1920s and 30s Peggy Guggenheim, the Fords, Rockefellers, Hirshhorns and Whitneys were the new Medicis. Thanks to them we have some of the finest museum collections in the world.

Abstract and environmental art came to prominence in the 1940s when artists no longer painted or sculpted in only one style or medium. Rather, they chose a multitude of ways to express themselves. The period of 1940-50 was characterized as Abstract Impressionism in America with artists like Pollack, DeKooning and Motherwell creating gestural, expressive and totally abstract works. This was followed by Pop, Op, Hard Edge and Color Field Painting during the 1950s and 60s; the works of Warhol, Lichtenstein, Louis, Rothko and Johns canvases were often large, thereby satisfying the need for decoration in public spaces and new buildings. By 1965 conceptual art and neo-realism art began to emerge. Artists like Pearlstein, Beuys, Sultan and Jenson represented these stylistic directions.

### **COLLECTING TODAY**

While the patrons of today support the arts with all the zeal of their predecessors, artists no longer create art for a particular patron. They create because they derive pleasure from the excitement of creation, the sense of achievement, and the triumph of translating sensory impressions of the viable world into a personal language of lines, surfaces, forms and colors. In turn, collectors and buyers for museums, corporations, private businesses or homes experience a deep pleasure in surrounding themselves with beautiful works of art. At the same time, like patrons of the past, the modern-day patron wants to own the best work by the most respected artists in order to gain prestige in the community.

Today, we all experience art on a daily basis, not just in museums. While the Medicis brought art out of the gallery and museum and deposited it into our cathedrals and government buildings, today art has further infiltrated our everyday lives. Art enriches our cities and streets and we all have the opportunity to enjoy art through multi-media, our natural surroundings, and our institutions. Art has invaded our collective consciousness on many levels. We sit on a bench that is purely functional, or on an Alan Segal bench that is also a work of art.





***“Garden Seating,  
Reading, Thinking,”  
Functional Art, Kinji***

***Akagawa, 1987, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Photo courtesy: (private collection of) Lisa Barnes***

We purchase linens and ceramic ware by Australian artist Ken Dove. Absolut Vodka utilizes the imagery of Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, and Ed Ruscha to capture additional market share in the United States. A Honda drives off from a museum in an award winning television commercial. Even the great fashion house of Yves Saint Laurent sees fit to include a unique line of suits in a tribute to Van Gough's "Sunflowers" and "Iris." Art today is multifaceted and astute, making us increasingly aware that its value lies more in aesthetic integrity than the price/earning ratio one may find in the Wall Street Journal.

### ***WHO DECIDES?***

Conventional wisdom has it that all areas of art collecting can occasionally suffer eclipses but eventually return to favor. From the collector's point of view, the theoretical solution has always been simply to buy "good art," works that will transcend the whims of fashion and stand the tests of time. This lead us to the inevitable questions; what makes art good, and who gets to decide? It is probably safe to say that technical achievement in art will always be valued, and will always be rediscovered. Beyond that, there is only educated opinion – and it is constantly changing.

If you had lived in London or Paris at the turn of the century and owned a Murillo, you probably would have been the envy of your fashionable friends. Most likely, you also would have been quite rich. Throughout the 19th century and up until the First World War, his work was the object of vogue – almost a cult – among British and French collectors. Whenever one of his paintings was sold at auction, it was certain to be at the top of the price list. Murillo's prices were, in fact, on par with Rembrandt. Today Murillo's work and Rembrandt's are miles apart in value. Murillo did not stand the test of time like artists such as Rembrandt and Reubens. There are simply no eternal verities in art. A Rembrandt may be worth more than a Murillo, yet prices for works by Old Masters, however rare their appearance on the market, have lagged behind Contemporary American artists and the French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. During the 1980's, a Jackson Pollock sold for more than a Rembrandt or a Leonardo Da Vinci. In 1986, a single Jasper Johns, "Out the Window," painted in 1959, sold for \$3.63 million, the exact same amount as Da Vinci's "Lamb," one of two authenticated works still in private hands.

It was private buyers that changed the rules. A comprehensive list compiled in the early 1990's shows the top 100 items ever sold at auction. No fewer than 89 of these paintings were produced after 1870; eighty-five of those are by Impressionists or Post-Impressionists; the other four are by Abstract Expressionists. Only five Old Masters – a Pontormo, a Renaissance bronze by Adriaen De Vries, a pair of Venetian paintings by Francesco Guardi, a Rembrandt, and an Andrea Mantegna – make the list at all. Impressionism, Modernism and Contemporary art continue to flourish. These styles and techniques continue to be appreciated by artists and collectors.

In selecting art for your personal enjoyment, choose it because you love it. Love it simply for the pleasure and enjoyment it brings to your heart. If it sings to you, buy it, take it home and cherish it!

*Lisa M. Barnes was a partner in Richard Thomas Galleries and is a current owner of Thomas Charles Editions of Phoenix, AZ. Lisa is the founder of an International Art consultancy and Appraisal firm which has appraised and curated art collections for numerous corporate and private collectors, hotels, and government institutions in the U.S. and abroad. She is a member of the American Appraisers Association, the New England Appraisers Association, the Arizona Claims Association and the Forensic Expert Witness Association. She has studied at Harvard University and Oxford University, the Louvre and Jeu de Paume in Paris, and the British Institute in Florence.*

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