

Deck the Walls

Bare walls be gone. Local gallery owners share their secrets on creating a museum-worthy (and budget friendly) collection at home.

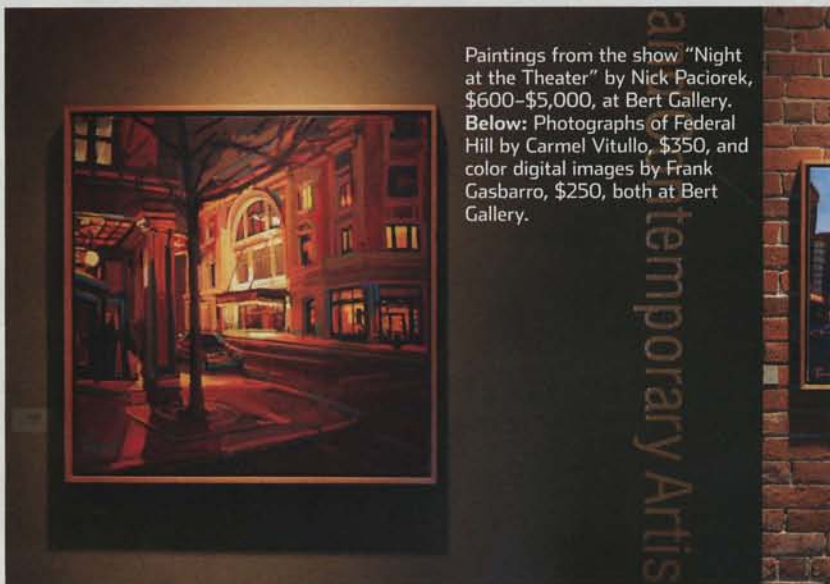
By Megan Fulweiler Photography by Nat Rea

AMERICAN IMPRESSIONISM



A recent exhibit at William Vareika Fine Arts, "Homage to the Sea," featured works by American Impressionist painters.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, touring a museum, once generated laughs for his comment: "I don't know much about art. But I know what I like." In reality, Ike was on the right track. Of course, the essence of beauty lies with the beholder. Nothing should come into your home that you don't love. Approach collecting the way you did learning to swim: Be fearless, jump in and immerse yourself, but at the same time, heed the lifeguards. Before you know it, you'll be treading water with the best of them.



Paintings from the show "Night at the Theater" by Nick Paciorek, \$600-\$5,000, at Bert Gallery. Below: Photographs of Federal Hill by Carmel Vitullo, \$350, and color digital images by Frank Gasbarro, \$250, both at Bert Gallery.



Art Class

RISD sales, estate sales, flea markets, auctions—art is all around us. Galleries are great sources. Like scouts, they peruse the scene to find the best prizes. But every pro we polled underlined the importance of educating your own eye before you buy anything through a gallery or from an artist.

"Museums are a wonderful place to begin," says Cathy Bert from Providence's Bert Gallery. "Read all you can, get to know the different mediums, sign up for lectures, look and ask questions." This is particularly apt if you're contemplating purchasing a contemporary painting or sculpture by an unknown.

"Find out where they went to school, have they been in shows, are they represented in any collections or have they won any awards? If you're uncertain, it's okay to call a gallery and ask them what they know about the artist, too," Bert says. Mid-career artists—the kind Bert prefers—have persevered for twenty years and will most likely keep on going.

Try not to get caught up in a big name you can't afford. "If you love, for instance, the Frank Benson, but it's selling for \$2,000, a good alternative is to find another lesser-known artist of the same period—maybe one who attended the same art school—and of the same quality," Bert advises. Not all art will appreciate, but good quality work will, most likely, maintain its worth or grow.

Getting focused helps. "I frequently advise clients to choose a specialty. For example, landscapes, portraits or, perhaps, a specific time period like between the wars—it can be just about anything," says William Vareika at the William Vareika Gallery in Newport. "Having a theme narrows the search and also increases the excitement. Eventually you'll step back and see that your collection as a whole has become a work of art."

Money Matters

If you're dealing with a gallery, be honest about your budget. According to Bert, it's possible to find wonderful pieces for about \$500. Remember that works on paper are generally less expensive than oil paintings. Think wood engravings, etchings, drawings and watercolors. Never mind if you

can't have a painting by your number-one artist, you can still take home one of his creations and for a lot less cost. Rhode Island artist Sydney Burleigh's (1853–1931) paintings may run into the thousands; a Burleigh drawing could be listed at around \$400.

Photographs are another beautiful option. Among the many worthwhile Rhode Island artists producing works on paper to consider, Bert suggests wood-engraver Grace Albee and photographer Carmel Vitullo. Another money-saving strategy? Buy a smaller piece. If you can't swing one of contemporary Rhode Island artist Nick Paciorek's larger canvases, many of his scaled-down works fall into the several-hundred-dollar category.

Keep in mind, rather than paying all at once, some galleries will help you arrange a series of payments instead. There are even galleries (Bert and Vareika are two) who allow clients to "trade-up." If, down the road, your bank balance increases, or your tastes change, you're welcome to turn in the work you originally purchased and receive a credit (perhaps appreciated) toward a new buy. Galleries charge a commission, a percent of the final cost (usually anywhere from about 40 to 60 percent). But



Oil paintings by Angiola Churchill (circa 1958 to 1960), \$3,000–\$3,500, at Adam Tamsky Fine Art. Frames, which run \$700 to \$900, are custom made from chestnut and date back to the 1940s.

Price Hikes

Additional factors, apart from name recognition and condition, can raise a price. On a grand scale, take two works of similar wave-tossed shores by American landscape and marine painter William Trost Richards. One is substantially more (\$42,000) than the other (\$35,000). Why? "American scenes are often more desirable," Vareika says. "The pricier one (top) depicts the coast of Jamestown (where Richards had a home) and the other is a British view."

Along this same vein, a painting of a boat with billowing sails and blue sky will wear a heftier tag than a composition starring a busy shipyard by the same guy. And a painting of two men in a field will probably cost more than a tree on a mountain—done by the same artist—if the artist generally does not include figures.

With an older painting, provenance also plays a big part. This can be anything from knowing the piece comes directly from the artist's family or from a well-known collector to crumbly stickers from prior exhibitions pasted on back. Just like antiques, the more history the better.

And, finally, if it's the original frame, in excellent condition, that's a big plus, Tamsky tells us. Not only does it boost the value, it enhances the work. A forties or fifties driftwood-like frame on a painting from the same era? A consummate match.





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Preservation Pointers

Four ways to care for your collection:

- 1) **Never, ever attempt a DIY cleaning on a painting.** Water—heaven forbid!—can seep between the cracks and ruin the surface. Ask a gallery to recommend a pro instead.
- 2) **Protect your pieces.** Frame your works on paper with archival-quality mats, conservation glass (or, even better, nonreflective museum-quality glass) to protect against ultraviolet rays and make certain they never touch the glass. And whenever possible, opt for period frames; Adam Tamsky stocks them.



- 3) **Light your art properly.** Easy solutions include picture lights attached directly to the frame or mounted on the wall, recessed lights, track lights and floor lights. Serious collectors would be better served with a custom system. Sandra Liotus Lighting Design in Newport provides conservation art lighting services and design from start to finish. Though pricey (\$15,000 to \$30,000), these high-tech systems require minimal maintenance and produce no infrared or ultraviolet rays.

- 4) **Insure your investment.** A painting purchased at a local sale for \$20 falls under your home owner or personal property protection policy. But for any piece considered “special,” which, according to Christa Robichaud at All-state Insurance in North Kingtown, translates “not found in the everyday home,” you will require a rider or “special endorsement.” To qualify, you’ll need an original receipt or an appraiser’s verification. Check to see how often you’ll need to update.

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here's good news: There's no Rhode Island sales tax on art in nine designated arts districts (see arts.ri.gov for locations), which means once in awhile it's okay to splurge.

**Rule of thumb:
Symmetrical groupings
look best in formal
settings and
asymmetrical ones
in casual or more
contemporary rooms.**

"When my wife and I started collecting, maybe once or twice we would put down \$300, a whole week's work back then. Years later, though, we still love the painting. It's all about passion," says Adam Tamsky at Adam Tamsky Fine Art in Providence.

Visual Intrigue

Most gallery owners are happy to visit client's homes and assist with hanging. While walls are the most common locale, smaller works can also be displayed along the mantle or on wall-mounted shelves as long as there's a grooved edge to prevent slipping. Easels are classic and portable, so you can have your still-life in the bedroom one week, in the living room the next.

If you're worried about fashioning a correct arrangement for several works, the rule of thumb (it's not written in stone) holds that symmetrical groupings look best in formal settings and asymmetrical ones in casual or more contemporary rooms. It's a personal call, but watercolors with watercolors or prints with prints lend a unified look. If you want to mix and match, similar frames or subject matter can provide cohesiveness.

Some people like to preview their arrangement by laying them out on the floor first. Another way is to trace the frames on paper and fashion templates. If you want to get fancy, reduce the dimensions and use graph paper. Whatever you decide, measure your spacing carefully before hammering. And double check that the hook is up to the job.

How high is the age-old question. Bert prefers the standard recipe, about fifty-eight to sixty-one inches from the floor. This way the heart of the picture greets the center of most people's eyes. Adjust accordingly so no one has to strain to see. **B**

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