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How to build an affordable art collection with pieces under $100

The time has come. Those empty, bland walls in your home just aren't cutting it anymore, and you're finally ready to give them a fresh look — not with another poster, but with some real art. There's only one problem: Money is tight.

Not to fear, there is hope. According to Alex Goldstein, owner of the Fridge, an alternative art and performance space on Capitol Hill — and an avid collector himself — "Even really high-end artists tend to sell affordable versions of their work." Goldstein estimates that he owns several thousand pieces of art, including hundreds of paintings and a wealth of sticker art.

Just because you're not able to shell out thousands of dollars for a piece of art doesn't mean that you should throw in the towel. There's plenty of quality, affordable art that is just waiting to be found. (For the purpose of this guide, that means under $100.) The key is knowing where to look, how to look and what to look for, as you start up — or build up — your collection. And yes, you can even find good deals at those intimidating-looking galleries. (They really aren't all that scary, once you realize many of them sell works within your price range.)

Jason Hamacher, who opened Lost Origins Gallery in Mount Pleasant in 2017, puts it this way: "If money is a barrier, my thought process is, 'How do we get to the bridge? How do we get this art from my wall to their wall?' " According to Hamacher, he'll work with prospective buyers on pricing if they find something of interest outside their budget. Earlier this year, his space was named best new gallery by the Washington City Paper.

Some galleries specifically sell pieces for buyers on a budget, as with Park View's Sense Gallery. According to the gallery's art director Mandy Cooper, Sense mostly features works under $500. "It's really kind of targeting that base of people who are interested in starting a collection," she says.

Now it's time to get down to buying art. But before you step out to make your first purchase, heed these Dos and Don'ts, courtesy of the experts. To help you avoid making a rookie mistake, we asked Goldstein, Hamacher and Cooper what to do and what not to do.

DO pick a piece with which you connect.

Ultimately, deciding what art to buy comes down to how much you connect with it. Have a thing for bright pink polka dots? Do you really dig

Bob Ross and wish you had a retro landscape painting in your home? Whatever piques your interest, your purchase should be driven by personal taste, not popular trends. “When someone walks into a space and they connect with the art — whether it’s the color, size, shape or a place they’ve seen — it should evoke an emotional response,” says Hamacher. “What’s the point of buying something just to purchase something?”

DON'T be afraid to negotiate.

So you’ve found a piece of art that speaks to you, but the sticker price is double what you can afford. It isn’t necessarily taboo to ask the artist (or the dealer) to come down in price, but you shouldn’t aggressively try to finesse a deal, either. “It doesn’t need to be like a Middle Eastern market,” Hamacher jokes. “But if you see something that you like, and it’s not in your price range, it’s always worth it to ask.” Hamacher suggests approaching the gallery owner, or if they’re in the room, the artist, and be honest with how much you can pay. You might not get the exact price you want, but you could be met halfway and still save quite a bit of money.

DO establish a connection.

Part of the fun of art buying is the spontaneity of it — stumbling on a piece that you fall in love with at first sight. This shouldn’t be your entire strategy, though. If you love work from a certain artist, keep in touch with them and follow them on social media. This could be especially helpful if their work is mostly out of your budget, and negotiating didn’t work. “If you simply let them know that you love their work,” Cooper says, “it could encourage the artist to make work at more accessible price points if they don’t already have work within your range.”

DON'T dismiss prints.

This is especially sound advice if you plan to keep your purchase under $100. Many artists reproduce images as prints, offering them at a significantly lower price than originals. (Some prints can run $50 to $75 — and occasionally even less). “We do show paintings that are original, one-of-a-kind pieces, but we often will have limited-edition prints as well, for a fraction of the price of the originals,” says Goldstein. Shows at Cooper and Hamacher’s galleries also have featured prints for under $100.

DO pay attention to quality.

“The quality of the work is important,” according to Goldstein, “something that you think is well made, that looks like the artist [put] great care and labor into the piece.” Quality, in this case, speaks more to the blood, sweat and tears it took to make the art itself rather than the type of material used. “I have pieces that I’ve collected that are made of found objects,” Goldstein says, “but they’re still very well-made, interesting-looking pieces.”

DON'T expect to get rich.

Yes, there have been times when someone unknowingly buys art at a yard sale, only to discover that it's worth millions. But thinking of art collecting as a fast track to retirement is the wrong approach, says Goldstein. "Trying to predict what work is going to go up in value is like playing the lottery," he says. Buying should be treated like any other hobby. At the end of the day, you will be stuck with the pieces you choose, so choose wisely and not solely for the investment.

DO search online.

Social media — most notably Instagram — can be a great way to discover emerging artists. "There's A Creative DC or East City Art and more great social media pages that share what's going on at different galleries in D.C.," says Cooper. Goldstein agrees, having gone as far as meeting artists through Instagram who've gone on to show at the Fridge. Many artists also have online stores where you can easily shop and buy. D.C. painter Dana Ellyn (danaellyn.com) sells prints of her political and animal-themed art for as low as $10, with free domestic shipping included.

DON'T limit the places you go.

Traditional galleries aren't the only game in town. An open mind can really pay off, according to Hamacher, who recalls a time when he stopped at Goodwill in Hyattsville and found the D.C.-centric art piece he'd been wanting: a set of cherry blossom canvasses. "Buying art is an experience," he says. "It's either a great experience or a stressful experience. But it's about being open to that experience."

There are many places to discover great art. Check out some of these suggestions for finding yourself — or someone on your shopping list — that perfect piece.



Photographer Joe Shymanski talks to customer Annette Lafferty at the 2005 Downtown Holiday Market. (James A. Parcell/The Washington Post)

Holiday markets

It's the most wonderful time of the year — at least, when it comes to buying art. During the holiday shopping season, the area is saturated with markets that can be a free, accessible way to discover affordable art. Spots including the Downtown Holiday Market, the Heurich House Museum's Christkindlmarkt and the Takoma Park Holiday Art Sale are usually bustling with local artists who are trying to get their work in front of a wider audience. You also will probably find inexpensive artworks that aren't just prints. At the Downtown Holiday Market, for instance, Everything Will Be Amazing is selling images of D.C. landmarks that combine hand-painting and silk-screening, priced for as low as $19. The Takoma Park Holiday Art Sale and Christkindlmarkt also feature vendors selling original fine art, photography, pottery, crafts and more. Unlike buying art online, it's generally easier to negotiate price, since in many cases you'll be speaking directly with the artist.

Downtown Holiday Market. *Through Dec. 23. F Street sidewalk between Seventh and Ninth streets NW. Open daily from noon to 8 p.m. Free. downtownholidaymarket.com.*

Christkindlmarkt. *Dec. 6-8 (hours vary). 1307 New Hampshire Ave. NW. $4-$10. heurichchristmas.org.*

Takoma Park Holiday Art Sale. *Dec. 7, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. 7500 Maple Ave., Takoma Park. Free. takomaparkmd.gov.*

Bazaart Holiday Art Market. *Nov. 29, noon to 6 p.m., and Nov. 30, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. American Visionary Art Museum, 800 Key Hwy., Baltimore. Free. www.avam.org.*

Alternative spaces

DIY spaces such as Rhizome in Takoma and the Cheshire in Adams Morgan are better known for music than art. But interesting exhibitions happen within the walls of these multipurpose spaces, too. Much of the art is experimental in approach and might not fit into a mainstream gallery. Pieces also tend to be lower-priced (often starting at $100, and sometimes even less than that). Located in D.C.'s Chevy Chase neighborhood, the pizza joint Comet Ping Pong is another place to discover art: On Saturday, the musician and visual artist Janel Leppin will sell her intricate weavings, made from colorful performance clothing, starting at $100. (Leppin also will perform live with the El-Reys, Antonia and other music groups). Across town, the woman-run art collective Hen House is hosting "Tiny Show 2," an exhibition of small works by over 100 female, trans and non-binary artists, at the DIY space Good Fast Cheap D.C.

Rhizome. *6950 Maple St. NW. rhizomedc.org.*

The Cheshire. *2412 18th St. NW (rear). thecheshiredc.org.*

Janel Leppin opening/performance. *Saturday at 10 p.m. 5037 Connecticut Ave. NW. $12. cometpingpong.com.*

Tiny Show 2. *Through Sunday. 524 Rhode Island Ave. NE. Free. henhousedc.com.*

Small galleries

For many first-time art buyers, walking into a gallery can be agonizing, especially if you're the only customer and feeling like a fish out of water. Purchasing art from a dealer may seem more formal, but it needn't be more intimidating. Small galleries like Lost Origins, Sense and the Fridge (among others) regularly showcase emerging artists and are usually the first to highlight them before they catch their big break. (The Fridge was the first gallery to offer D.C. artist Rose Jaffe a solo show before she went on to collaborate with Apple.) You'll find some high prices at galleries — $10,000 is not unheard of — but many also will offer prints for a fraction of that. And if there's a piece that's out of your price range, it's worth it to tell the gallery or artist just what you can afford. Just be respectful of the process, this isn't quite the same as haggling over a purse at a flea market.

Lost Origins Gallery.
3110 Mount Pleasant St. NW.
lostorigins.gallery.

Sense Gallery. *3111 Georgia Ave. NW. sensegallerydc.com.*

The Fridge. *516 ½ Eighth St. SE. thefridgedc.com.*

Open studios

Many artists periodically open their studios to the public, offering buyers a chance to meet them. You won't find this kind of transparency at a gallery: It's here that you'll see firsthand the resources and tools artists use to make their art. Twice a year, the Jackson Art Center, a multi-artist studio building in a converted Georgetown elementary school, hosts open studio events where you can meet the creators and find work for sale before anyone else. Other coming events include open studios at Mount Rainier's Artists by the Tracks enclave, the largest cluster of working studios — including the Otis Street Arts Project and the Washington Glass School — in what's known as Prince George's County's burgeoning Gateway Arts District.

Jackson Art Center Open Studios. *Dec. 8, noon to 4 p.m. 3050 R St. NW. jacksonartscenter.com.*

Artists by the Tracks Open Studios. *Dec. 14, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. 3700 Otis St., Mount Rainier. Free.*

Auctions

When it comes to scoring an art bargain, auctions are a different ballgame. You could potentially walk out with an art piece from a world-renowned painter — think Andy Warhol-level — for thousands of dollars less than the appraised value. The D.C. area has several auction houses, one of the most notable being Alexandria's Potomack Company, which

auctions fine art, jewelry and furniture through in-person events and on its website. The schedule is updated regularly online, and you can view the catalogues for each event before their start time. To bid, you have to first register at the Potomack Company's website before you start making any offers. In person, bidding is fairly straightforward — the auctioneer announces the lot number of the piece up for grabs and its starting price, and if you want to make a bid, all you have to do is raise a paddle until they acknowledge you. The auctioneer will continue to raise the bid price until one bidder remains, at which point they will give a warning before selling the piece for the last bid amount (also known as the "hammer price"). If you can't make the auction in person, there are options to place bids by telephone, email or — if you're stuck in the 1980s — by fax. Auctions are ideal for art buyers who feel uncomfortable negotiating prices but still want a good deal. Even better, fundraising auctions — such as the ones typically held by nonprofit arts organizations such as Transformer or the Washington Project for the Arts — can also be good places to snag works below market price.

Potomack Company. *1120 N Fairfax St., Alexandria. potomackcompany.com.*

D.C.-centric shops

There are a number of shops that specialize in merchandise from the local maker community. Shop Made in D.C., which has an online store and four bricks-and-mortar shops — in Dupont, Georgetown, the Wharf district and inside Apple's Carnegie Library building — sells prints, paintings and other works that are mostly under $100. Many of these pieces are D.C.-centric — think landscape paintings and drawings of the city — though you can also nab fine art pieces that aren't beaming with D.C. pride. (Pro tip: follow Shop Made in D.C. on Instagram, as the store does a solid job highlighting new works that are in stock and providing information about the artists behind these works.) Takoma Park's ArtSpring is another alternative if you're looking to start — or add to — your collection. The store, which supports Hyattsville's nonprofit Pyramid Atlantic Art Center, is a volunteer-run operation and sells paintings, pottery, painted furniture and more work from regional artists that are within the $100 price range. Both Shop Made in D.C. and ArtSpring are run just like any other retail store: List prices are usually final, unless there is a sale.

Shop Made in D.C. *Various locations. shopmadeindc.com.*

ArtSpring. *7002 Carroll Ave., Takoma Park. artspringmd.com.*

Nonprofits

At any given point, there's likely to be an art event somewhere in the Washington area that caters to a highly specific type of art aficionado. Some are even geared to those of us on a budget. Alexandria's Del Ray Artisans gallery hosts a biennial "$100 & Under" exhibition in which gallery members sell their art, as the show's title explains, for $100 or less. The pieces include ceramics, paintings, sculptures and fabric art. As

pieces get sold, the gallery replenishes the work with fresh artwork. Pyramid Atlantic Art Center does a similar event each year — called the "10x10 Invitational" — with a twist: All the works are 10 inches by 10 inches, and priced at $50. Regional and national artists from all disciplines donate their work to the show, and all proceeds are funneled back to the nonprofit. In the same vein as Del Ray's "$100 & Under," new pieces will be rolled out during its multiweek run.

$100 & Under. *Through Dec. 1 (hours vary). 2704 Mount Vernon Ave., Alexandria. Free.*
delrayartisans.org.

10x10 Invitational. *Through Jan. 5 (hours vary). 4318 Gallatin St., Hyattsville. Free.*
pyramidatlanticartcenter.org.

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