



# The pick-up artist

Collecting *ART* is the exclusive privilege of the wealthy? Not so. Art expert *Mark Hughes* reveals how anyone with a *PASSION* for art can discover the joy of creating their own *gallery*.

WORDS: ALEXANDRA BROWN

If you are reading this magazine, we already know you appreciate fashion and beautiful things and like to bring them into your home. But when it comes to venturing into the world of art acquisitions and collecting, the concept can be intimidating. Art advisor Mark Hughes insists it doesn't need to be; all that's required is a little education and time spent looking, and you'll soon be on your way to making your first purchase and building a collection. Here are Hughes's tips for both first-time buyers and those looking to expand their collections.

## WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE AN ART COLLECTOR?

Collecting art should not be a pleasure reserved for those privileged few with multiple mortgages and greying hair. In fact, Hughes says many well-known collectors started as young as their teens and with very little in the kitty. His advice is to put a small sum of money aside each pay to go towards your first and future

purchases. "I have a couple of friends who had little art budgets and over time ended up with medium-sized art budgets," he says.

According to Hughes – who during his 20 years in the industry has worked in New York and Sydney, and regularly attends international art fairs and exhibitions – Australia is one of the world's most affordable places to buy art. "I would say a starting point would be about \$2,000," he says. "I think for that amount of money one could buy a work on paper, an inexpensive photograph, and maybe even a smallish or medium-sized painting by a contemporary or younger artist.

While Hughes stresses the importance of making a considered purchase when it comes to that initial buy, he admits: "I like the idea of someone making their first purchase and that being the start of an addiction."

## GET IN THE KNOW

Hughes says the most fundamental step in accumulating a beautiful collection is

education and taking the time to look at as much art as you can.

"Start by visiting museums, as they house works that have already been acknowledged by curators as being notable," suggests Hughes. Write down their names, go to Google, and start reading articles and so on [about the artists].

Following that, visit galleries in your area, start looking, and keep looking.

"I caution people not to rush into making speedy acquisitions," says Hughes. "If they love something, that's great, but I also think everyone should take the time to follow an artist or learn more before returning to the work."

Of course, with this approach you do run the risk that someone else could snap up the piece you've got your eye on, but as Hughes points out, if the artist is good you can be assured that they will continue to create work and improve over time. "Most people have a story of the one that got away, but it's never the 10 that got away," says Hughes.



## LEARNING ABOUT YOURSELF THROUGH THE ART WORLD

"Looking can be hard work and is also an exercise in processing your own emotional response to something," says Hughes. "Your reaction might be: 'I hate that', but you don't really know why you hate it, or it might be: 'I love it, why do I love it?'"

This self-analysis is important. Moving from your first purchase to a prolific collection involves ongoing inquiry.

Hughes suggests asking yourself questions, such as: what is it that you like about the artist's work? What excites you? Is it the colour? Is it the fact that your mind travels when you look at the work? Through this process of analysis you'll discover the "language" of the artwork and can then recognise and look for that language in other works.

## WHERE TO BUY

When you're at the stage where you're well read and understand what you do and don't like and why, the time may be right to take the leap and make that first purchase.

Hughes recommends going to reputable galleries that are able to provide you with what he describes as "added value". "Galleries have a job to represent, support and promote an artist, hopefully over a long period of time. Other than selling the artists' work, those galleries are also responsible for enabling curators from art museums to learn about that work." If a gallery is carrying out that function, you know that they've a reputation to uphold and have selected artists they believe have a future.

Over time, you might find that a gallery has a similar aesthetic to you. So, for example, out of the pool of artists they represent, you find you like more than half of those artists. Generally this is because you share an appreciation for the specific language of the works – whether that's because the gallery shows mostly abstract paintings, focuses mainly on photography or hones in on sculpture – you're drawn to that gallery and establish a connection to it. To help you discover galleries attuned to your tastes, get on as many mailing lists as you can and visit those spaces.

## WHAT MAKES AN ARTWORK "GOOD"?

Ask 10 art experts that question and you'll almost certainly get a different response from each of them. "I think it's an instinctive thing," says Hughes. "I think a good artwork speaks an older language in

a new way and is able to communicate regardless of whatever or wherever it's coming from. I'd like to think that a good artwork can communicate with us in the same way music and literature can cross cultures. It's a specific voice but one that we can all understand.

"When you go to the Art Gallery of New South Wales and you see an amazing Fred Williams painting or an amazing Sidney Nolan or a Tom Roberts ... those artists are there for a reason. There were many artists at that time, many people painting at that time, but the difference between those artists and the others is that they had the talent, the vision and the ability.

"The way that one looks at value in art is a complex picture. This sort of added value is in a sense a recognition of artists who have a gift and talent and make work that somehow speaks more succinctly about the times we live in, about the culture we participate in. Those in the know – people

## "GOOD ART CAN COMMUNICATE WITH US IN THE SAME WAY MUSIC AND LITERATURE CAN CROSS CULTURES"

in the art world, people for whom art is their livelihood or profession, like curators – they can usually recognise when something is special and those are the artists who will make their mark in culture over time."

## MAKING SMART PURCHASES

"I think one should always buy art for love to begin with: the money aspect follows," says Hughes. "That said, one doesn't like to think that you're not putting your money somewhere sensible regardless of what you're spending it on."

To determine whether or not you are paying the right price for your piece, try checking online databases that detail the price an artist's work has sold for at recent auctions. This can be problematic though, as it's not always a true indication of value. The artist you like might have only been sold through independent galleries and, like any other commodity, prices for art are often dependent on the market and the consumer sentiment at that time.

Hughes's advice is to ask the gallery. "If you see something priced at \$10,000 and you can't understand why, ask the gallery to

explain," he says. They can reveal if the artist has a track record that might influence the price tag, variables such as if they've shown in museums, what they're currently doing, what projects they've been involved in and if they've been commissioned by a corporation.

## WHAT QUALIFIES AS A "BAD" BUY?

When it comes to making a poor investment, Hughes offers this insight: "A purchase is usually a mistake if it cost you quite a lot of money and you find that two years down the track you've outgrown it. There's nothing in the work that sustains itself, it certainly doesn't sustain you, and you find that as you've become more educated and more sophisticated in your decision-making, the work has far less value than it did before."

Do bear in mind though that just because you outgrow a piece it doesn't always mean that work has lost its value. According to Hughes if it hasn't lost its value it's a "good" mistake. A "bad" mistake is when something had no value to begin with. "You kind of got ripped off and sadly, you're stuck with it. But there's always a silver lining to your mistakes, you learn," says Hughes.

A useful principle is to practise caution and consider younger artists. And take heart if you've already made an error of judgement. "People usually do make mistakes early on and that's okay – it's part of the process of getting to know yourself," assures Hughes.

## THE JOY OF COLLECTING ART

As well as being a great way to invest in something you're passionate about, collecting art can be enriching and fulfilling. "The world is a better place if people have an interest in humanities, if they have some interest in either music, theatre or art. I see people embark on an art journey when they know very little. Then they enter and become part of the art world and say that it's been an amazing journey and that they've developed their minds as a result."

Another rewarding aspect of immersing yourself in this world is the chance to become involved in its communities. Joining art groups and associations, such as Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art's Young Ambassador's group, or the AGNSW Contemporary Collection Benefactors, are a way to meet other art enthusiasts whom you can learn from and share your love of visual arts. ■

Go to [www.markhughesart.com](http://www.markhughesart.com).