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With so many artists and galleries to choose from,
how does one go about starting an art collection?
See what's out there and trust your instincts, says
GEMMA TIPTON – because buying art may be a
serious business, but it should also be pure pleasure

how do you become an art collector? The obvious answer is by buying art; and at its most basic level, collectors are art buyers who end up having more art than space to display it. Works in storage, or stored in ranks leaning against walls, are the sure sign of a collector. So too is the obsessive seeking of new works of art: for to a collector the collection itself becomes the thing, rather than its individual elements. Josephine Kelliher, Director of Dublin's Rubicon Gallery, who represents artists including Nick Miller, Eithne Jordan, Maud Cotter, Tom Molloy and Michael Kane, adds that "collecting contemporary art is also about so much more than acquiring objects. After you buy, you have a connection with that artist, and an experience linked to each purchase". But that's jumping ahead... Back to the original answer – if you become a collector by acquiring, where do you start when it comes to buying art?

Again, the obvious answer, and one you'll hear again and again, is "buy what you like". But how are you to know what you like? And how do you avoid making expensive mistakes? "If you know 'a Collector'," suggests Kelliher, "ask if they will take you on a tour – you may not like the same things but their experience and insight into the perceived mysteries of that world will be helpful." Nevertheless, there's an anxiety attached to buying art that goes beyond the anxiety involved with buying a new suit, dress, or car; even though at different levels, the price comparisons may be similar. As well as being something to look at on the walls, art has evolved to be a commodity that speaks volumes about its owner, so no wonder people are so anxious to get it right.

The problem is that in this country we are not educated in visual art as children, so, faced with it as adults, it can be a little like watching a sport you don't know the rules to, or a film in a foreign language without subtitles. What are you seeing, and how are you meant to go about coming to terms with it? When we are young, our exposure to music begins with nursery rhymes, followed by pop: the Bay City Rollers, Spice Girls, Jedward – depending on your vintage. Then as we grow up our tastes get more sophisticated and diverge – hip-hop, opera, jazz, classical...

Not so for art. Enter the art world as an adult and it feels like an alien place where people are trying to tell you what to like, and it can be hard to distinguish one painting of some red and orange rectangles over another. Why do people swoon over, and spend millions on, a Rothko and not over another painter who seems, essentially, to do the same thing?

Having gone around the galleries, both commercial and not for profit, and looked, looked and looked again; having spent time at IMMA, the RHA, the Crawford, the

Hugh Lane and the National Gallery and whichever regional galleries are closest to you; and having taken what everyone else says with a pinch of salt, you can start to get a sense, amid all the shouting, about who's hot, who's happening, and who to buy now... of what it is that you actually like. "A common tendency," warns Kelliher, "is for a new or young collector to try and acquire established names (those auction-authenticated Big Guns) but I think young people should buy young artists... In principle, buy an artist who is around your own age, to start and try to find the next generation's big names."

The fashion analogy is useful. A few years ago, enormously ugly handbags, festooned with chains and padlocks, were all the rage. I hated them. I have a feeling most people hated them too, even the people who owned them. They were bought because they were decreed fashionable, and a year later, they went into the backs of wardrobes, never to see the light of day again. What you're looking for with art is the opposite of a handbag with a padlock on it – you're looking for a piece that you can look at day in, day out, year after year, and of which you will never grow tired. Then it's a good piece of art, and one day the world may come to see that artist as a maker of a *great* piece of art. And that answers the Rothko question – the reason people swoon over Rothko is that, to those who like his work, you could never get tired of looking at it, and you'd always see something new in it.

"And don't forget," adds Kelliher, "visual art is the one art form you can experience at little or no cost since most galleries, museums visits, exhibitions and public talks by artists are free!" You can buy prints from as little as €250 to €300, and smaller drawings and paintings can be purchased from €500 to €750, although after that, the sky is, genuinely, the limit. The point is, starting a collection doesn't have to cost the earth. So yes – do buy what you like, but first spend the time on discovering, beyond the vagaries of fashion and infatuation, what it is that you really do like. Not anyone else, but you. ■

DO AND DON'T:

How to buy art

DO buy. If you love it, leave it, can't stop thinking about it, and still love it two days later, and even if you can only just about afford it, buy it. It will reward you for a long time to come.

DO ask if you can put a hold on a piece to think about it. Some galleries will let you, some won't, but there's no harm in asking.

DO ask to know more about the artist, look at other work by them, see former catalogues.

DO keep an eye out for studios' open days. Many artists who don't have gallery representation sell from the studio on open days, and it's a great way to see more art.

DON'T be shy about asking for a price list. These days it's a rare gallery that will be coy about selling. The days of waiting lists, and works held for more important buyers, are pretty much gone.

DON'T be fooled by anyone talking about investment values. It's a general rule of thumb that, apart from some exceptional cases, most contemporary art is like a new car: it loses some of its value the minute it leaves the gallery. It may well appreciate later, but that's another story.

DON'T expect to like everything in the top galleries and museums. Not only do tastes diverge, there's also, alongside the brilliant, some truly dreadful art out there...

Happy shopping!

Where to buy art

COMMERCIAL GALLERIES: Mainly based in Dublin, the leading commercial galleries are Kerlin Gallery, Rubicon Gallery, Green on Red, Kevin Kavanagh, Mother's Tankstation, Cross, Hillsboro Fine Art, Stone, Taylor, Paul Kane and Peppercanister Gallery. **DEGREE AND DIPLOMA SHOWS:** Taking place in June each year, art colleges around Ireland hold their graduate degree shows. These are a good place to spot young talent, and if you've been going around the galleries, you can also start to see who is influencing (and imitating) who... **ART FAIRS:** At the RDS, with the ID&A Fair (in May), and a more mixed bag at Art Fair 2010 (in November). There are also major international fairs at The Armory in New York (March), Art Basel (June), Frieze London (October), Artforum Berlin (October) and many more. Hundreds of the world's leading galleries in one place – a feast for art lovers. **AT AUCTION:** Contemporary art turns up increasingly at auction, so keep an eye on the catalogues and listings of auction houses.