

ARTFUL LIVING

By Scott LaFontsee

Art Collecting: PART ONE

Scott and his wife Linda LaFontsee are the owners of Underground Studio and LaFontsee Galleries in Grand Rapids. For over twenty years, the Underground Studio and LaFontsee Galleries have had a major impact on the West Michigan art scene.

For our purpose, art referred to in this column will be handmade, original works. This does not include machine made prints or mass produced artwork for decorative purposes.

Collecting art is a lot easier than most people think. I'm talking about collecting art for personal pleasure – not as an investment. Can the art you collect increase in value? Absolutely, and many artists' works are consistently increasing in value. But the focus here is the living with art, not purchasing if for profit. The idea is how to help you step into the art world, identify quality artworks, and make good choices when purchasing art.

How do you get started? What makes a piece of art good? How do you identify a fair price? Along the way I hope to displace some of the mystique about the art world and how it works.

GETTING STARTED

Opportunities to see and learn about art are abundant and many are free. Universities, colleges and art galleries all have art on display to the public free of charge. Art museums and community art centers also have art on display and events with admission charges. Many communities have organized art walks where galleries are open evenings, making it easy to visit many places in a single night. The Grand Rapids Gallery Association's gallery tour, every third Friday of the month, even takes away parking problems by providing free transportation (trolley rides) from gallery to gallery. If you feel like you would be out of



LET'S PRACTICE

This is the base for the appreciation of art and the part most people want to rush by: taking the time to see – truly seeing the details, the intent, and the ideas the artist has developed. This is the alphabet of art. Practice with the works pictured here. What are the materials the artist used? Is there a subject? What about color? Is the color warm, cool, realistic or made up? Look at the art really close up and then slowly move the page away and view it from a distance. See the details? Also keep in mind, when viewing art in person, the size of the piece. Has the artist chosen to build up layers of materials or use color over color? If it's a painting, is the paint thick or thin? What's under the paint – canvas, wood, paper? Has the artist scraped away paint to show some layers below the surface? If some art really speaks to you, make a note of it and return to the work at another time and see if you feel the same way. These are some of the basic (yet critical) elements of art that contribute to its foundation.

TOP: James Karsina, *Along the Mohawk*, gouache on paper, 10" x 14"

LEFT: Carolyn Fehsenfeld, *Fall Forest III*, oil on paper, 21.25" x 29"

place – don't! Actually, gallery tours are an excellent time to visit a gallery if you're not sure about stepping out into the art scene. With many people in and out of the galleries on those evenings, you'll fit right in as one of the crowd. Established galleries are also the best resource for you if you're interested in collecting because they usually carry the best examples of the artworks available in the market and can offer opportunities for learning.

THE SCENE

Interacting with the art by attending exhibition openings and artists' receptions not only lets you take advantage of being part of the crowd, but also offers you the opportunities to talk to other collectors, gallery employees and the artists themselves. I was surprised this last week when I was talking to my friend Tom and he told me he never went to gallery openings until we had become friends. Why not? I asked.

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“I thought art openings were for the people in the know. I didn’t realize they were the best time to see artwork and not draw attention to myself. Now after attending many openings, I can see how easily I can go to an opening and not feel like all eyes are on me. This takes the pressure off.”

Gallery events, such as exhibition openings, artists receptions (which can often be the same thing) or our Art Talk Lectures are scheduled to accommodate people’s varied schedules. People may stop by after work, some may wish to go home, have dinner, and then attend. Many attendees stop by on the way to another event — the symphony, a play or on their way to dinner. The dress is casual and the scene is very friendly.

STOP AND LOOK

Artwork is everywhere. Many corporations and public buildings have art displayed. Take a moment to look. Stop by a gallery on your way home from work. Attend a free art lecture. Try not to make assumptions about the artwork you view. You can decide what you like and don’t like some other day. Keep your opinions out of this process. Resist the temptation of allowing your mind or the mind of others to control your responses. Allow the art to speak to your feelings and emotions. This is hard to do at first, but for now, simply get in touch with how you feel when looking at different types of art. Try not to dismiss artworks you don’t understand or make you uncomfortable. Keep an open mind. Remember you can change your mind about what you like or dislike anytime. Who knows, you may end up liking the same art in the future or maybe you’ll surprise yourself. Compare it to music. Some music takes awhile for us to grow into. Art is like this as well. Keep looking and keep practicing!

In the next article we will look behind the world of artists. The how and why they create? Meanwhile, two quick thoughts to help the inquisitive minds and people that have already been looking at art: La Fontsee Galleries has a free Art Talk lecture series on the 2nd and 4th Tuesday of the month through April. Subjects vary. A free schedule is available by calling the gallery at 451-9820. Also there is a wonderful essay (a short read) in the paperback *Art Objects* a must for anyone interested in discovering more about art. After all, part of the art of living is living with art!



TOP: Christina Hahn, *East Bay #14*, oil and collage on panel, 36" x 12"

BOTTOM: Lynn Strough, *Venetian Red*, oil on canvas, 36" x 24"