

digs

Art of Decorating

A consultant gives tips on how to adorn walls with original, eye-catching works

When it comes to decorating, one of the most challenging tasks is figuring out what to do with a bare wall.

Allison Marvin has made a

career out of helping people do just that. She is the founder of Sightline (Sightline.biz), an art consulting business started in 2004. Marvin works with clients across the country, helping them navigate the art world and offering guidance on buying works for their homes and offices. She also leads tours of art spaces and introduces beginning and seasoned collectors to galler-

ies and dealers.

Marvin is aware that not everyone is interested in being a serious art collector. Some folks simply want to fill their empty walls. For those with neither the time, the budget nor the inclination to start a collection, she still recommends buying something original, which, she says, isn't as difficult to find or as cost-prohibitive as you



Art consultant Allison Marvin says it's worthwhile to wait to find artwork you love.

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might think.

"Student work is going to be the least expensive," she advises. "Check with local universities to see if they have open studio days. You can get something original, and you're supporting a young artist, which is a nice thing."

Growing up in an artistic family (her mother was an art writer, her father a painter), Marvin, 37, says she always knew she wanted to work in the art world. After studying art in college, she attended law school and then practiced at a D.C. firm, gaining expertise in intellectual property, contracts and licensing. Four and a half years later, she left the firm to simultaneously start Sightline and her own law practice, focusing on art-related law. Today, she runs both businesses out of her Chevy Chase home, where she lives with her husband, a 1-year-old son, and a growing collection of national and international paintings and photographs.

Marvin recently spoke to us about collecting, hanging and framing art, and where to find it in the first place.

What advice would you give someone looking for art for his or her home?

I would encourage people to take their time. If that means allowing the time to budget and save the money to put towards a piece, then do it.

I also suggest they resist purchasing several smaller, lower-value pieces and wait for one larger piece when they can afford it, and when they find a piece that really sings to them. If a smaller piece is less expensive but it's not something that's grabbing you, exercise patience. Typically, you want to go with the big pieces that really stand out. It's hard to resist buying, but while you continue to look, you're learning about yourself.

Buying artwork shouldn't be about filling a certain space on a wall or about the price. When you find the right piece, it should provoke a guttural response.

How do you figure out your personal taste in art?

Go look at a lot of art. Go to museums. Walk through galleries. Pay attention to your reactions. Have a conversation with yourself about what you like and why, and what you don't like and why. It's all about finding artwork that challenges you, moves you or reflects your sensibilities.

What would you suggest to someone on a limited budget?

Ask yourself: What are visual things around you that appeal to you? What moves you? Do you have favorite books, magazines, objects?

Pick a predominant wall in your house and create a display of a personalized collection of objects and images, salon-style [different sizes and shapes hung in a grouped arrangement]. If you have favorite magazines and books, pull the pages out. Hang a postcard that someone sent you. Include programs or other takeaways from art shows you particularly liked. I would do that rather

than pay \$250 for a framed poster from a chain store.

Is there a general guideline for hanging art?

Most people make the mistake of hanging art too high. Art is supposed to be eye level, but it shouldn't be eye level to a guy who is 6-foot-3. If you hang artwork lower, you bring it into the room, make it much more part of the environment, and you can look at it better.

Rule of thumb: Artwork should hang so that its center is 60 inches from the ground. But I often hang my own art so that the center is a

bit lower, about 56 to 58 inches from the ground.

What do you need to know about choosing a frame?

Let the artwork be your guide and your only focus. The frame should respect and reflect the art, not fight it. A good framer will show you your options and tell you what he or she thinks looks best. Rule of thumb: Simple is better.

When selecting materials, it's best to use UV-protective glass, especially if the artwork is going to be exposed to sunlight; you want to avoid hanging art in a spot that

gets direct sun. For matting, use archival materials — like paper, tape and glue — so the artwork doesn't get damaged over the years. Custom framing can get expensive, but it's the best route for any artwork you invest in; it will look the best and preserve the work the best.

Where can people find nice frames in stores?

Ikea has good-looking, clean and contemporary white frames. And you can usually find simple, affordable frames at your local hardware store, like Strosnidars in Bethesda

[301-654-5688, Strosnidars.com]. You won't get the UV protection or archival materials, but you'll get something that's a decent temporary solution.

What is the most common mistake people make when buying art?

Mistakes happen when people don't educate themselves about where to look for quality art. There's a road map, and it's easy to follow: Talk to a few people in the know, like a gallery owner, a collector or a consultant, and you'll be off and running

TERRI SAPIENZA (THE WASHINGTON POST)

 **CHEAT SHEET**

Allison Marvin recommends some of her favorite art-related places in Washington and on the Web:

GALLERIES

■ **IRVINE CONTEMPORARY** (1412 14th St. NW; 202-332-8767, Irvinecontemporary.com). "This gallery often collaborates with its artists on cool projects, such as video releases, sound performances and street-art parties. And it produces catalogs with its shows to educate people about types of art that don't get written about much by the art critics, such as street art."

■ **CONNER CONTEMPORARY** (1358-60 Florida Ave. NE; 202-588-8750, Connercontemporary.com). "They choose graduating art students around the country to participate in group shows, so price points will be a little lower at these shows."

■ **TRANSFORMER GALLERY** (1404 P St. NW; 202-483-1102, Transformergallery.org). This is "the leading nonprofit art space in D.C.," Marvin says. It holds an annual auction with works from local artists. Starting bids are much lower than they would be in a gallery, she says.

■ "The 14th Street, Logan Circle area is the most concentrated area of good contemporary art galleries in the city." Places to look include **G FINE ART** (Gfineartdc.com), **HEMPHILL** (Hemphillfinearts.com) and **CURATOR'S OFFICE** (Curatorsoffice.com).

FRAME SHOPS

■ **FRAMESMITH D.C.** (1352 Q St. NW; 202-518-2500). "It's a small enterprise,

so things can take a little longer, but it's worth the wait," Marvin says. "It's a go-to frame shop for some of the galleries in the area."

■ **BETHESDA CUSTOM FRAMING** (7910 Old Georgetown Road, Bethesda; 301-654-1118). "It doesn't look like much from the outside, but they are really good and reasonably priced."

■ **ARCHIVAL ART SERVICES** (1515 14th St. NW, Suite 301; 202-462-1111, Archivalartservices.com). "The Cadillac version," Marvin says of this frame shop, which helps museums with exhibits. Services are top-notch, but so are the prices.

WEB RESOURCES

■ **FINE ART ADOPTION NETWORK** (Fineartadoption.net). No money is exchanged for art on this site. Users peruse artwork and contact artists directly. Based on the correspondence, the artist decides whether to send the work for free. "It's done to encourage collection and stewardship," Marvin says.

■ **ARTNET** (Artnet.com). Galleries from around the world put their inventory on this site, which is a major resource for people looking to collect art, Marvin says. In addition, the site's user-friendly auction system includes estimates of each work's value.

■ **THE PINK LINE PROJECT** (Pinklineproject.com). Click on any day of the calendar and get a listing of art events in the D.C. area. "It's a one-stop shop for all things art in the city," Marvin says.

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