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Home is where the art is

Collectors say anyone can display artwork

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By **Steven Uhles**
Staff Writer

The drive to decorate is a powerful human instinct. Be it animal totems scrawled in damp caves, celebrity snapshots torn from a magazine and pinned on a pre-teen's wall or the family photographs snaking up the stairway, everyone is an art collector.

But for many, the idea of collecting fine art seems suitable only to the ultra-wealthy.

Evelyn Browne sees things differently.

She and her husband, an Army physician, have transformed their unassuming Columbia County home into a testament to their eclectic tastes. Objects d'art, ranging from the fine to fanciful, adorn most walls and open surfaces. In the front room, two paintings by Augusta artist Nina Benedetto share space with drawings by Benny Andrews and an elaborate beaded skeleton by an anonymous New Orleans artist. The living room features more Andrews art, paintings by both Benny and his father, George, as well as a large three-dimensional piece by Minnesota sculptor Judy Onofrio. There's also a hand-carved carousel horse, Native American blankets and folk art. Giving the hand-painted wooden propeller on a folk art wind sculpture an affectionate spin, Mrs. Browne explained their approach to art collecting.

"For us, it's really about joy, the joy of discovery and living with things in this sort of dynamic tension," she said, giving the small plane's prop another twirl. "For instance, this was probably 10 bucks. I found it in a big pile of junk literally covered in black dirt. But I bought it and cleaned it and this is what emerged. Is it art? I think so."

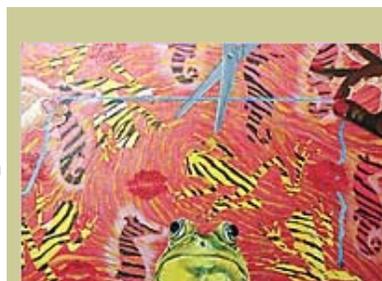
Mrs. Browne said that collecting art, like any other hobby, is about making choices. Where another family might spend money on a new car or designer clothes, they prefer to purchase art.

"My car is a 1996 model," she said. "It doesn't have to be, but I'd rather have this junk. It's just a matter of making choices about what's important to you."

Molly McDowell, owner of Mary Pauline Gallery on Broad Street, said that the Browne model of the middle class art collector represents the rule, not the exception.



Evelyn Browne says she enjoys the discovery that comes with collecting art. One of the pieces she owns is *Yard Art* (background) by Judy Onofrio.
CHRIS THELEN/STAFF



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"There's this idea that only rich people can collect art," she said. "That's just not true. Most people who buy art have an average income. Art should never be an elitist thing."

Marsha and Michael Shlaer began collecting art on their honeymoon. Their first purchase, a print of a Salvador Dali illustration, still hangs in their living room, keeping company with an Edward Rice painting the couple commissioned. While the Shlaers' collection does include pieces by a few relatively well-known artists, including celebrity photographers Annie Liebowitz and Robert Rauschenberg, the Dali print best represents their art-collecting ideals.

"Sometimes things just resonate," Mrs. Shlaer said. "You'll walk into a gallery and immediately gravitate to one thing. And often, they are very reasonably priced. That makes it easy to make a snap decision."

As an example, Mrs. Shlaer pointed to a painting in her foyer, a small building portrait rendered in electric hues. It was the colors that attracted her to it.

"There are a lot of talented people creating very interesting things and we enjoy seeing what they do and meeting them," said Dr. Shlaer, an oncologist. "We don't buy things because we expect them to appreciate in value. We buy things because we enjoy them, not so our daughter can have a valuable painting when she's 50."

For some, buying the art they enjoy can mean looking to an artist the collector might think is priced out of their league. Mrs. McDowell said there are usually alternatives to writing an uncomfortably large check.

"Our price range here goes from \$125 to \$95,000," she said. "But the thing is, I want people to collect. People are always coming in and saying they don't have \$1,000 to spend. Believe me, I understand. I don't have \$1,000 to spend either. I'd say 75 percent of the art purchased here is paid for on a payment plan. And if you can't afford a painting, there are always things like monoprints, which are just as interesting and beautiful."

Mrs. Browne said the most important thing to remember is that collecting art should be about more than finding something to hang on a wall and match the couch.

"We live in our house," she said. "It isn't a museum and it isn't a gallery. The question you need to ask is 'Do I like this enough to live with it?' If you can say that, then go for it."

COLLECTING ON A BUDGET

- Look locally. Just because an artist hasn't had a big gallery show doesn't mean he or she isn't talented. Remember, Van Gogh was once just a one-eared guy in a small French village looking for somebody - anybody - to buy his sunflower painting.
- Make an offer. Artists respond to people who appreciate what they are trying to do. Perhaps you have something to offer in trade. Picasso used to pay for meals with drawings done on restaurant napkins.
- Pay over time. While it doesn't have to cost an arm and a leg, art can represent a substantial investment. Car dealers don't expect you to pay for your new Chrysler all at once, and many galleries work with that same theory in mind.
- Be willing to compromise. So you can't afford that enormous painting. Perhaps something smaller by the same artist is available. If not, something in a different medium.

Waiting for a Kiss by Nina Benedetto is one of many works of art in the home of Evelyn Browne.

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Marsha and Michael Shlaer began collecting art on their honeymoon. Their collection includes *Iron Weed* by Beth Bogla .

MICHAEL HOLAHAN/STAFF

- Check the secondary market. Just because someone buys a piece of art doesn't mean they'll keep it forever. Local galleries may be able to put you in contact with someone looking to sell a piece by an artist you're interested in.

- Buy what you love. Important art means nothing if you can't stand to look at it.

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