

ARTISTIC INSPIRATION

Buying art in France can be easier than you think. DEBRA WOLF offers you a complete guide to purchasing a slice of French culture at an affordable price.

YOUR GUIDE TO BUYING ART IN FRANCE

For some of us, a stay in France without seeing art would be like *sole meunière* without the proper muscadet. Whether it is the quality of light in Honfleur, which inspired impressionists Eugène Boudin and Claude Monet, or the landscape of Gargilesse-Dampierre which attracted Théodore Rousseau and Anders Osterlind, France has been a mecca for artists through the centuries. It still remains at the forefront of the art world, not only rich in architectural vistas and museums, but with thriving artistic communities. So whether you're already a collector or an enthusiastic beginner, use these guidelines to expand your comfort zone so you won't hesitate to browse the local art scene, and purchase a very special kind of souvenir to take home with you.

Where to begin

The basics are easy. In a nutshell:

- Buy what you love
- Do your homework
- Know where to look
- Negotiate a fair price
- Consider practicalities
- Enjoy.

Buy what you love

If you're already a collector, you may want to find particular artworks or expand your reach during your stay in France. If you're just starting out and don't know where to begin, think about colours or images that appeal to you. Think about your surroundings and clothing, and the kind of objects that you find visually and tactilely pleasing. Then keep your eye open for paintings, prints, drawings, sculptures – in the styles you like.

The most important rule? *Buy what you love*. Unless you consider art purely as an investment, then allowing yourself to fall in love is the best beginning. But *do* remember that collecting art isn't just about your purchase; it's about living with the work and caring for it afterwards.

Do your homework

Doing your homework involves learning about the artist, the artwork itself, its market value, checking out the seller, and knowing what ongoing care and recordkeeping is required. All of this information helps reduce the intimidation factor, and increase your confidence when looking and purchasing.

If you wish to *approfondir*, then also read about the medium, the creative processes involved, and the artistic period or movement. Look at other works by the artist or his contemporaries - online, in print, or in person. Not only will this hone your knowledge, but it will train your eye, help you understand why the 'greats' are considered great, and help you recognise quality.

When visiting a gallery, be sure to ask for an artist's biography or CV if the work interests you. This enables you to evaluate his or her background, including education, exhibition history, notable collections, press, or awards. Regarding formal education, note that many fine artists are self-taught, or, have less than elitist credentials.

Doing your homework enhances your knowledge, and helps you ascertain if the work is fairly priced. Some of this is a matter of 'feeling' (*par le pif*), but also, common sense. While pricing is based on many factors, generally, the work of an emerging painter two years out of school shouldn't fetch the same price as that of a mid-career artist working in the same medium, geographic region, and with a significant exhibition history.

Where to look

If you are heading for Paris, check out www.associationdesgalleries.org and www.paris-art.com. In addition, www.artnet.com (English) is an extensive worldwide reference on artists and galleries, and www.art11.com (French) is a useful portal for all things dealing with contemporary art in France.

Exhibitions of all sorts are profusely advertised, often on posters in café windows and boutiques. In Paris, *Pariscope*, *L'Officiel*, or local gallery guides will give you names, addresses, exhibition dates, and other helpful information to locate galleries and artists of interest. Outside the capital, gallery guides may also be available, along with information from your local tourist office, and the internet.

Galleries

Galleries are your primary means of seeing and purchasing art, providing many advantages over other methods. They are easy to locate through guides, periodicals, and the internet. You may take your time, ask questions, and in major cities, staff will speak English.

When you're ready to purchase, proper documentation is provided, including receipts, certificates of authenticity (if appropriate), print materials (catalogues, press clippings, CVs), and recommendations for customs declaration and any tax-related details you might need - necessary if you're taking artwork from the EC into Canada or the US. Furthermore, galleries will be able to furnish transport options, their own or recommended companies.

Like other commercial establishments, art galleries come in a variety of flavours, filling specific market demands. Some are there to please the tourist's or decorator's eye, featuring a broad spectrum of styles, formats, mediums, and prices. Others specialise by type of art (for example abstraction or figurative works), by artistic period, by region, or by medium. In Paris, galleries are scattered throughout the city, but certain areas are known for their wonderful art offerings such as Saint-Germain, Beaubourg, the Marais, Bastille and Haussman.

Direct purchase

Buying from artists directly is less frequent in France than in some countries. You're more likely to be received by an artist at their studio if introduced through friends or other contacts.

While not a widespread activity, you may encounter *portes ouvertes* – open doors – loosely organised group exhibitions by artists who open their studios to the public for a few days, usually over the course of a weekend. Typically not represented by galleries, these professional artists will distribute flyers with maps of studio locations, hours, and the buying public is welcome during that time.

If you have the opportunity to visit an artist studio, remember that as with all things in France, *politesse* is essential. As a guest in a stranger's workplace (often in

or adjoining their home), you are also viewing the most intimate of possible production – their artwork. If you know that it's not for you, graciously say your thanks, and don't waste the artist's time.

It's worth mentioning that many fine artists, in any country, don't have gallery representation at particular points in time. While that makes their market value more difficult to determine, it also provides price advantages when you're purchasing. What might cost you €2,000 in a gallery should cost you considerably less buying without an intermediary. How to know if the work is worth what the artist is asking? Follow the other guidelines – buy what you love, but do your homework. Ask for a professional bio and any other materials the artist may have to give you.

When dealing directly with an artist, assistance with forms or overseas transport is less likely. *Do* get a legible receipt, including the name of the work, date, amount / currency, mode of payment, the artist's name, address, phone and email (if possible). As purchaser, your information should be clearly spelled out as well. This is important for passing customs, as well as authentication and valuation for other purposes once you've returned home.

If engaging an artist directly, keep in mind that language issues may arise, so consider your own skill level. Keep things simple in your discussion, or encourage a French friend to come along and help.

Private Dealers

Private dealers are less common in France than in the US. Former gallery owners (*ancien galeristes*) may move into dealing privately, but locating them is a matter of networking and referrals. In the art world as in other realms of French business and culture, trust and relationships are critical.

Fairs and Salons

International art fairs such as Paris FIAC (*Foire Internationale d'Art Contemporain*) are for professionals only (galleries, dealers, art press). Increasingly, selected international contemporary art venues are opening to the public, including both fairs and salons. This can be an interesting way to see a great deal of contemporary art in a single large setting, and to purchase as well. Generally taking place once a year for a few days, these varied events occur throughout the year.

Regional contemporary art fairs take place in major art centres. Consult a site like www.art11.com for listings. Look for *festivals et foires* as well as *salons* to locate what might interest you.

Auctions

Auctions are a long-standing option for purchasing art, as with other objects of value. An internet search can provide auction venues, and you can contact them directly for the information you need. Keep in mind that the auction process moves quickly, and language skills as well as comfort with auction procedures should be considered.

Ecoles des Beaux-Arts

Schools of fine arts mount exhibitions of student and graduate works from time to time. These are, however, more like museum exhibitions – for looking, not buying. But if you see wonderful work by young artists, make note and follow up by contacting them directly.

FRACs

FRAC is an acronym that stands for *Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain*. For each *région*, the Ministry of Culture allocates certain public monies for the purchase of

artworks by local artists. You will find references on artist resumé's reflecting "FRAC" in the section on public collections.

Each region has its FRAC – Haute-Normandie (in Rouen), Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur (in Marseille), and so on. While exhibitions and collections funded by FRAC are not places to purchase art, they are another means of locating artists who live and work in the region you're visiting. Officials may be surprised (and pleased) to have a foreign visitor show interest. Don't be afraid to make inquiries.

Negotiating price

The protocol for purchasing art in France is not so different from that in the UK, Canada, or the US. It is acceptable to negotiate, respectfully. A gallery typically covers its overhead with 40 per cent to 60 per cent of the price, but they may have some wiggle room. Negotiating can get you a 5 to 15 per cent accommodation, in other words, a discounted price (*un rabais*).

Negotiating directly with the artist may be a different matter. You're already paying less than you would through a gallery.

Regardless of where you purchase, it *is de rigueur* to request information about the artist, as well as to show the kind of interest that comes from asking about the work itself.

Consider practicalities – transport, paperwork, proper care

If you're buying artwork that is large, heavy, or fragile, proper shipping is essential. That includes packing, paperwork for customs and insurance, and tracking. Galleries can help facilitate all of this; otherwise, find reputable shippers and make sure you use receipts to properly insure the work. If the art is small, you may be able to travel with it, but keep in mind the practical aspects of wrapping it to avoid damage, especially if you're flying. Allow time to unwrap if necessary as you pass through security.

Also remember that some materials require special handling. Works on paper can be delicate, particularly if they have age; paintings, prints and drawings can be damaged by water or other spills; sculpture can be broken or scratched, and so on.

Once home, think about these aspects for ongoing maintenance as well. Be sure to properly frame paper works under UV-protected glass, on acid-free backings with archival hinges and mats, and thus protect your investment and memories for the long term.

Do keep a file on your art purchases if you've spent significant money or you think this may become a new-found passion. Documenting your collection means staying abreast of the artists' progress, as well as keeping necessary records for insurance purposes.

Enjoy the process

Many collectors start out with a single treasure, found unexpectedly. In no time, the thrill of the hunt – researching, viewing, negotiating – becomes as pleasurable as the acquisition itself. On your next *séjour*, don't be afraid to explore the art scene. Indulge your visual palate, and in so doing, perhaps find an exciting new pastime to enjoy, on holiday or at home.

BOX-OUTS

How to find gallery districts and locations:

- Internet sites
- Gallery guides (available by *quartier*)
- Publications (like *Pariscope* or *L'Officiel*)
- Small press and local newspapers
- Regional or local offices of tourism (*Office du Tourisme*, or *Syndicat d'Initiatives*)
- Word of mouth (*bouche à l'oreille*) – friends, your host, your hotel concière

Terminology – why it matters

Must you master a whole new vocabulary to buy art? If you're spending €100 on a painting that catches your fancy, art references may be of no importance at all. However, if you're spending €1,000 or €10,000, it's a different story.

If, for example, you've found an original print of a modern or contemporary master, you need to be sure you're paying a fair market price and receiving proper documentation. Knowing basic terminology as you learn about the artist, the period, and the value of the work put you at ease, and in a better position when negotiating your transaction. A little knowledge goes a long way, as they say, and *buying art need not be intimidating*.

Here are just a few definitions to get you started.

Art figuratif or **art réaliste** (figurative, representational, or realistic art): Simply put, this is art which looks like what it is. Among the most common scenes are *paysages* (landscape), *portraits* (portrait), and *nature morte* (still life).

Art non figuratif (Non-figurative art): This is a catch-all term for whatever is *not* representational.

L'art moderne, l'art post-moderne, l'art contemporain (modern, post-modern and contemporary): Chronologically speaking, *l'art moderne* begins with the 20th century, spanning 1904 through the 1960s or mid 1970s, to include 'pop art'. It encompasses a potpourri of styles, both representational and non-representational. The late '70s and 1980s are categorised as 'post-modern', and *l'art contemporain* comprises everything since.

The names of many modern masters may be familiar – monumental figures like Picasso, Matisse and Chagall. Contemporary luminaries include Hockney, Rauschenberg, Freud, Katz, Paladino and a host of others. Purchasing the works of both modern and contemporary greats remains possible through fine auction houses, galleries, and private dealers.

Are these artists out of reach for most of us? Not necessarily. Buying an original print is one of the ways in which affording a Picasso or Chagall is possible, wherever you may be looking. To learn more about original prints, visit www.britishprintmakers.com.

An interesting linguistic note: "artist" is used less frequently in French than it is in English. The specific terms - painter, sculptor, photographer, and others are used when possible, so you will see and hear individuals referred to as *peintre*, *sculpteur*, and *photographe* rather than *artiste*.

In Paris, most galleries will have someone who speaks English. If dealing directly with an artist, or you want to challenge yourself, here's a selection of useful phrases when you are gallery-hopping along Rue des Beaux-Arts or stopping by an artist's *atelier*.

Say it in French:

I'm just looking, thank you.

Je regarde simplement. Je vous remercie, Monsieur / Madame.

May I see this painting?

Pourriez-vous me montrer ce tableau / cette toile?

May I see these drawings / prints?

Pourriez-vous me montrer ces dessins-ci / ces estampes-ci?

May I see the artist's bio?

Pourriez-vous me donner la biographie de l'artiste?

If you are asking for the artist's bio to be sent to you via email, or you are asking in writing:

Pourriez-vous me transmettre / m'envoyer la biographie de l'artiste par Internet (email)?

Do you have a press kit for this artist / painter / sculptor?

Avez-vous un dossier de presse pour cet artiste / peintre / sculpteur?

To ask for the press kit to be sent by email or post:

Pourriez-vous me transmettre le dossier de presse par Internet (email) ou par la poste?

What is the medium for this piece of artwork?

Quels matériaux cet artiste utilise-t-il?

What is the price for this work / canvas?

Quel est le prix de cette oeuvre-ci? or Combien cette toile vaut-elle?

Can you help me arrange for transport?

Pourriez-vous participer au transport des oeuvres?

Do you have all the customs forms I need?

Avez-vous les documents pour passer la douane et la TVA (la taxe sur valeur ajoutée)?