



The presence of art at home

Looking to bring more art into your home but feeling overwhelmed by the endless options? Find out how to choose and arrange art at home.

Words JESSICA BELLEF

The great artist Pablo Picasso once said, "The purpose of art is washing the dust of daily life off our souls." It's a beautiful sentiment that speaks to the inspiration and insight art can offer, whether you create a piece yourself or observe an artist's expression.

In 2020, when society was deeply lost in the pandemic, the Art Gallery of NSW teamed up with the Black Dog Institute to create "Culture Dose", an online art experience centred on wellbeing. Each episode of the webinar series focused on a selection of artworks curated around a theme, with insight given by gallery representatives and mental health research professionals. The goal was to offer viewers a meditative escape and time to observe, engage and contemplate through slow-looking techniques, reflection and sharing experiences with others. As quoted on the project's website, "During times of change and uncertainty, art can help us connect to our feelings, thoughts and imaginations. It can promote empathy and help us to show compassion to others and ourselves."

The presence of art in a home can infuse a world of meaning and bring a reassuring comfort and air of authenticity. Corina Koch is an in-demand Sydney-based interior stylist who creates spaces for magazines and chic brands, infusing rooms and sets with character and oodles of style. She carefully curates objects and colour palettes and understands the transformative power of art. "Art imparts personality into a room, almost like accessories would for an outfit," says Koch. "The colours and subject of an artwork can directly impact the mood."

Art teaches us about our inner life. When we select a piece to hang on our walls, we say something about who we are and what we value. Amber Creswell Bell, an art curator for commercial galleries and

the author of highly acclaimed art books (including a recent tome on Australian icon Ken Done) says, "I feel that art is a truly authentic way of expressing a deep sense of self." Creswell Bell is a bona fide art lover whose own home bulges with an ever-evolving personal collection. She mentions that when people visit, the art on display sparks conversations about who did the work, why the art curator chose it and what the piece represents. It's undeniable that art adds to the aesthetic appeal of a room, with colour, texture and depth. "But, emotively," Creswell Bell says, "it injects a narrative and intrigue into your space."

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Keen to bring more art into your home but overwhelmed by the endless options and self-imposed pressure to buy the "right" piece? Creswell Bell shares some liberating advice: "Don't worry about having the right space to hang a work or if it matches your sofa — those factors are irrelevant. You will change sofas; you will move house. The right artwork — 'right' because you love it — will always work, wherever it goes." With that thought in mind, let the following ideas on choosing and arranging art gently guide you.

Choosing art

Whether you are looking to invest in an original piece, or your hunt is directed toward a budget-friendly second-hand print, keep your eyes peeled at all times, as art can reveal itself in unlikely places! Visiting galleries, open studio days and art school

graduation shows will give you greater insight into an artist's motivations and inspirations. "It will help you to appreciate the work more fully, and it is always a joy to follow an artist and watch their work evolve," Creswell Bell says. Second-hand stores, homeware retailers and online auction houses are accessible sources of one-off pieces and print editions. The recent emergence of affordable online art platforms, such as Sunday Salons, connects budding art collectors with new talent in an easy-to-search format. Take note next time you visit a café or restaurant, as these spaces often support local artists by displaying and selling their works.

Ultimately, what you purchase should be based on what catches your eye and stirs something in you; it's a highly personal pursuit. "Buying art is a journey and a process of discovery," Creswell Bell explains. She feels the pull toward a piece in her bones. "Gosh, I see so much beautiful art and, as a curator, it is usually art that I have been drawn to first in order to show it. But the art that I purchase has had a physical effect on me ... usually, my heart will race, or I have a sense of panic that someone else might buy it. When this happens, I know that work needs to be mine."

Energising elements

Each piece will radiate its own energy, manifested through its particular blend of colour, light, form and scale. Regardless of the medium, individual artworks speak the distinctive language of the artist and subject matter, an external expression of a unique process. Take photography, for instance. A monochromatic, shadowy image will read as moody and dramatic, while landscape shots of the coast or bush often feel cleansing and grounding. Oversized paintings with broad, loose brush strokes will buzz with captured movement, and in comparison, a little still life painting in muted tones will sit quietly. Soft misty shades and



Photography Alexandra Gorn on Unsplash



curved, organic forms can have a soothing effect, and pieces with highly contrasting hues in bold tones and sharp lines imbue intense dynamism. Koch suggests matching the mood of the painting with the prevailing mood of the room. "Use softer tones in bedrooms or spaces you wish to induce calmness. Then, for high traffic living spaces, introduce a palette that's a little more energetic and stimulating."

The power of contrast

"It's very natural to feel the need to match your artwork to the style of the room, or even the furniture and accessories within it," says Koch. "And while there is nothing wrong with that, a juxtaposition between the style of art and the style of furniture or room can offer a new perspective with great impact." She gives the example of placing contemporary art in a room with period architectural details and antiques or adding ornately framed vintage art to a clean-lined modern space. You will find beauty in the contrast.

Arranging art

So, you've collected cherished pieces but are unsure where to position them in your home? Viewing art in a gallery setting is a very different experience from letting your eyes wander over the walls of someone's private domain. "Commercially, in the gallery context, works are essentially hung in a white room devoid of furniture and other trappings of life, as we are letting the work speak for itself," Creswell Bell explains. In our homes, art supports and enhances the layers and daily activity, adding to the distinct story of each space. This is amplified when the art is positioned in unexpected locations. "It can go in all nooks and crannies, hallways, mantelpieces, above furniture, in bookcases, kids' rooms. There is a multitude of spots to exploit!" says Creswell Bell. Think about adding artwork to kitchens, laundries and bathrooms as a way to inject character

into spaces that are predominantly about function and hard surfaces.

"The general rule of thumb is to hang artwork at eye height, but I'm all for going with what feels right," says Koch. "I've seen some quirky homes with art purposefully hung unconventionally, and it's just worked." Creswell Bell subscribes to this idea of following your instincts and having fun with it. In the gallery shows she curates, she will often hang works in ways that surprise and delight the gallery's visitors, and it's an approach she applies to her own home. "I love the trial and error of this process, and how hanging works in unexpected places can create a whole new atmosphere in the room," she says.

Test it out

Overly large framed paintings or prints will demand attention and become the focal point. "Playing with proportions can completely change the drama in a room," Koch explains. Be aware that an oversized artwork in a tight space can dominate and lead to a feeling of imbalance, while a small piece may get lost on a large expanse of wall. If you are hesitant to take the leap and affix an artwork, do a test run with a piece of paper cut to the size of the piece, temporarily attached to the wall with Blu-Tack. Take a step back and assess whether the position works. Leave the room and re-enter, noting how prominent the piece is. Do you want to see it as soon as you step into the space, or do you want to discover it as you plop into a chair? Reposition the paper until it sits right for you.

The salon hang

Consider a salon hang if you own a handful of smaller framed artworks. This type of arrangement involves clustering smaller frames en masse on the wall. "I love the way works displayed together can speak to each other and create their own dialogue," Creswell Bell says. The easiest way to create a flowing conversation

within the group is to stick with a thread of consistency, such as using frames in one colour or celebrating an artistic theme. Before attacking the walls with a hammer, play with the grouping on the floor until you are happy with the layout.

Alternative displays

Are you running out of display surfaces on the wall? "When you are working with smaller areas with limited hanging space, a sideboard is a great go-to for layering artworks with your favourite books and ceramics," Koch suggests. The flat tops of sideboards, fireplace mantels or hallway consoles provide the opportunity to rest framed works and lean them against a wall. Thicker frames that can stand upright unsupported are perfect to style among collections on a bookshelf. This type of frame, sometimes called a shadow box frame, is ideal for showcasing smaller objects. "I've seen everything from scarves, family recipes and handmade items framed into custom shadow box frames," Koch shares. "My recommendation for anyone looking to do this is to frame objects that you love and hold meaning for you." This highlights the idea that anything can be a potential art display, from an old postcard to a patch of handmade wrapping paper to a delicate leaf found on a walk. Whether it's a meaningful totem or simply a little piece you love the look of, it will add personality and life to your home.

Making art

If you are fishing for artwork but aren't getting any bites, consider rolling up your sleeves and making your own. Experiment with mediums and get lost in the making. You don't have to invest in expensive paints or canvases — acrylic paint is budget-friendly and widely available, and it's easy enough to rustle up a pencil and a sheet of paper. Perhaps your materials of choice are magazines and a pair of scissors, with the view to craft a layered collage. All you need is something that can make a mark. Flip through art books and find inspiration in the expressions that draw you in. Release any expectations you place on yourself, and ignore any doubts. If you find it hard to get started solo, team up with a friend or family member, brew the tea or chill a bottle of wine and make an afternoon of it. With your art supplies spread out over the kitchen table, the shared experience of creating will add intrinsic value to the outcome. References available on request.

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