

A FREE PUBLICATION

THE COLLECTOR'S GUIDE

Buying Original Art for the First Time.

A short, honest field guide.

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CONTENTS

What's inside.

- 01 Why original art matters p. 4
- 02 How to look at a painting p. 5
- 03 Five questions before you buy p. 7
- 04 Authenticity and what it really means p. 8
- 05 How prices are actually set p. 9
- 06 Where to hang it (and how) p. 10
- 07 Common mistakes first-time buyers make p. 11
- 08 A short glossary of terms p. 12

A note before you begin.

This guide was written for the person who has thought about buying original art and never quite known where to start. Maybe you've walked through galleries feeling underqualified to ask questions. Maybe you've clicked on Saatchi or 1stDibs and felt the prices were a riddle. Maybe a friend acquired a piece and you wondered what they knew that you didn't.

There's no secret. There are just a few principles, a handful of useful questions, and the willingness to trust your eye. By the time you finish this guide, you'll have all three.

Why original art matters.

There is a difference between a print and an original that is hard to articulate but impossible to unsee once you have stood in front of both.

A print is a perfect copy. The colors are uniform. The surface is flat. The image was made by a machine, in a quantity, to be hung anywhere. There is nothing wrong with prints — many of them are beautiful, well-designed objects.

An original is something else. The artist's hand was on the canvas. The paint sits in layers, with thickness and texture. The light catches differently from different angles. There are moments where the artist made a decision — to add this color, to leave that area thin, to scrape something away — and you can see those decisions if you look carefully. The painting is a record of attention.

When you buy an original, you are buying that record. You are also buying scarcity: the painting exists in exactly one place in the world, and now that place is your wall. No one else has it. No one ever can.

That is the difference. It is also why originals hold value over time, in ways prints do not.

How to look at a painting.

Most people, in front of a painting, ask themselves only one question: "Do I like it?" That is not a useless question, but it is incomplete.

Here is a more useful framework — three minutes, three steps:

Step 1 — Stand far back.

Far enough that you see the whole composition at once. What does the painting do as a shape? Where does your eye land first? Does it move around or stay still? You are reading the architecture of the work, not the details.

Step 2 — Walk close.

Now you are reading craft. How is the paint applied — thickly or thinly? Are there visible brushstrokes, or is the surface smooth? Are there layers underneath that show through? Are there places the artist clearly worked over, second-guessed, recovered? This is where you see the artist as a person.

Step 3 — Walk away. Then come back.

Spend a minute looking at something else. Then return. Does the painting still hold you? Or does it feel different now that you've broken the spell? Pieces that survive this test are pieces worth living with.

A small confession.

You will not be able to articulate everything you notice. That is fine. The eye knows things the language doesn't.

Five questions before you buy.

When you find a piece you love, ask the gallerist or artist these five questions. The answers tell you everything about the work — and everything about who you are buying from.

01. Is this an original, one-of-one piece — or part of an edition?

Original means there is only one. An edition means there are multiple, often numbered. Both are legitimate. But you should know which one you're buying, because the price should reflect it.

02. What is the medium, and how should it be cared for?

Oil paintings, acrylic, mixed media, watercolor — each requires different care. Direct sunlight, humidity, and temperature swings are universal enemies. A good gallery will give you written care instructions.

03. When was it painted, and what is the provenance?

Provenance is the work's history of ownership and exhibition. A piece that has been in shows or featured in press carries that history with it. Ask. Good galleries are proud to share.

04. Will I receive a Certificate of Authenticity?

Yes is the only acceptable answer. The certificate documents the title, dimensions, year, medium, artist, and is signed by both the artist and the gallery. Without one, you don't have a paper trail. Walk away.

05. What is your return policy?

A confident gallery offers at least 14 days, often 30. If a piece doesn't feel right in your space, you should be able to return it. If a gallery refuses returns, ask why.

Authenticity, and what it really means.

Authenticity is a serious word that has been diluted by overuse. In the art world, it means three specific things:

1. The piece was made by the artist whose name is on it.

Not a workshop, not a studio assistant, not an AI tool. The artist's hand on the canvas, from start to finish. (For some contemporary artists, studio assistants are part of the practice — that's fine, but you should know.)

2. The piece has not been altered, restored, or substantially repaired without disclosure.

A small touch-up by the artist is normal. Major restoration by a third party should be documented. A piece that has been "cleaned" in a way that changes its appearance has lost something.

3. The piece is documented.

Signed (front, back, or both). Recorded by the gallery. Photographed. Catalogued. Issued with a Certificate of Authenticity. You should have a paper trail.

A reasonable rule.

If you cannot tell who made the piece, when, and where, you cannot tell what it's worth. Buy from sources that can answer all three questions in writing.

How prices are actually set.

Original art pricing seems mysterious. It isn't. Here is the rough framework most galleries use:

Size matters — but not the way you think.

Most galleries price by square inch, with a base rate that depends on the artist's level. A larger piece is more expensive not because more paint is on it, but because larger pieces require more time, more material, and more risk to the artist.

Career stage matters more.

An emerging artist with two years of practice and one show might price a 24×24 piece at \$800–\$2,000. An established artist with twenty years of practice, museum exhibitions, and press might price the same size at \$15,000+. The work might be technically similar. The value is different.

Provenance and exhibition history.

A piece that has been in important shows, written about in press, or held in notable collections accrues value over time. The piece doesn't change. Its context does.

Subject and difficulty.

A figurative work that took six months to complete usually costs more than an abstract finished in a week — even if both pieces are the same size.

A tip on negotiation.

Most reputable galleries do not negotiate listed prices on individual pieces. They will discuss bundle pricing for multiple acquisitions, payment plans for larger works, and shipping arrangements. If you want a discount, ask about those — not the price tag.

Where to hang it. How to hang it.

Height: 57—60 inches.

Measure to the center of the painting. This is the museum standard, calibrated to the average adult sightline. Higher than 60" feels distant; lower than 57" feels uncomfortable. The exception is when hung above furniture — keep 6—10 inches between the top of the furniture and the bottom of the frame.

Light: indirect, controllable.

Direct sunlight will fade pigments and dry out canvas — never hang valuable work where sun lands on it for hours a day. Use ambient light or dedicated picture lighting. LED is best (low heat, no UV). Avoid halogen bulbs near canvas.

Humidity and temperature.

Aim for 40—60% relative humidity, and consistent temperatures (60—75°F). Avoid bathrooms, kitchens above stoves, exterior walls in humid climates, and anywhere subject to large daily temperature swings.

Hardware: invest once.

Use rated picture hooks (with weight rating clearly marked) anchored into studs whenever possible. For larger pieces (over 30 lbs), use two anchors spaced apart for stability. Drywall anchors fail; studs don't.

Cleaning: do almost nothing.

Dust gently with a dry, clean, soft brush every few months. Never use water, sprays, or commercial cleaners. If a piece needs more than dusting, contact a professional conservator — not yourself.

Common mistakes first-time buyers make.

Buying for "investment."

Original art does often appreciate, especially work by emerging artists who later become established. But buying solely for investment is gambling, and most galleries can spot a buyer with that motivation immediately. Buy for the love of the piece. The investment value, if it materializes, is the bonus.

Buying impulsively at fairs or pop-ups.

Fairs are designed for emotional pressure. The lights are good, the wine is free, the salesperson is charming. Take photos, write down details, and sleep on it. A real piece will still feel right tomorrow morning.

Letting the frame decide the piece.

Frames are easy to change. Don't reject a painting because of its frame, and don't buy a painting because of its frame. Look at the work itself.

Trying to match decor.

Original art is not decor. Pieces bought to match the couch end up resented in three years. Buy work that creates a moment in the room — not work that disappears into it.

Skipping the documentation.

No certificate of authenticity? No invoice? No artist signature? No provenance record? You're not buying art. You're buying decoration with a story.

A short glossary.

Words you'll hear, demystified.

Acrylic · A water-based paint that dries quickly. Bright colors, durable surface, modern look.

Canvas · Heavy woven fabric stretched over a wooden frame. Most common surface for paintings.

Certificate of Authenticity (COA) · A signed document confirming a piece's origin, artist, dimensions, and year. Should always be included with originals.

Commission · A custom artwork created to your specifications. Usually requires a brief, deposit, and timeline.

Edition · A limited series of identical works (typically prints), each numbered. "10/100" means the tenth piece out of one hundred.

Figurative · Art that depicts recognizable people, objects, or places — as opposed to abstract.

Gallery wrap · Canvas stretched around the wooden frame so the painting continues onto the sides. Ready to hang without an additional frame.

Mixed media · A piece using more than one medium — for example, acrylic, ink, and collage on the same canvas.

Oil paint · A traditional paint using oil as the binder. Long drying time, rich colors, layers well, classic look.

One-of-one · A unique original work — only one exists. The opposite of a print or edition.

Provenance · The documented history of an artwork's ownership and exhibition.

Resident artist · An artist formally associated with a gallery, with regular representation and exhibitions.

White-glove delivery · Professional art delivery and installation, including unpacking, hanging, and disposal of materials.

A FINAL NOTE

Welcome to the conversation.

You're now better prepared to buy original art than 95% of first-time collectors. The rest will come from looking — at as many paintings, in as many spaces, by as many artists as you can.

When you're ready, come visit. We'd love to walk you through our collection in person.

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