

collecting Tips for Novices

BY E. J. GUARINO

It has been my experience that most people enjoy art but are intimidated by the idea of collecting it. They assume that if someone is an art collector, he or she must be extremely wealthy. When they learn that I have a growing collection of more than 1,000 Native works of art, they are astonished to learn that I am a former high school teacher. In the course of more than 20 years of collecting, I have put into practice my belief that it is quite possible to collect good Native art for well under a thousand dollars per work.

When I first became interested in collecting, I had no guidance. However, over the years I have developed 12 strategies for collecting on a limited budget that have served me well. Being a savvy collector means being an educated one.

Develop an "Eye"

Before you can collect good art, you have to know what good art is. There are books and magazines dedicated to every area of collecting Native art. Some have a particular focus, while others present an overview. Many are lavishly illustrated. Magazines present articles by knowledgeable curators and collectors, as well as photographs.

Some of the best places to learn about Native art are museums and commercial galleries. If there is a collecting area that interests you, find out which museums exhibit those materials and visit them. Don't be intimidated by galleries. Most gallery employees are willing to talk about the art they have available. Visiting galleries is a great way to see works by established and emerging artists.

Use the Internet

Most of the dealers and galleries that advertise in magazines have Web sites. This is an excellent way to see a vast array of Native art and to get an idea of price range. Also, if you express interest in an artist's work, galleries will often send you photos of other work by the same artist that is not currently shown on their Web site.

Buy only from Established Galleries

Established galleries have built their reputation over many years, one customer at a time. As you become familiar with various galleries, you will become aware of what constitutes a fair price. Reputable galleries are willing to answer questions and supply information on authenticity and provenance.

Develop a Relationship with Galleries and Artists

As you continue to collect, you will probably find yourself buying from one or two galleries. Doing so can be extremely beneficial, especially if you always deal with the same person. If something comes into the gallery that he or she thinks you would like, you will probably be contacted before the piece is made available to the general public.

Sometimes it is also possible to develop a relationship with an artist you have met. This does not mean that you will be offered a lower price, but you can discuss with the artist the possibility of creating a piece that is within your price range. This is the way I acquired work by Sam Thomas and Lorna Hill, contemporary Iroquois beadwork artists.

Visit the Sources

Since a large part of my collection is Pueblo pottery, I visit the Southwest whenever possible. I also go to Canada for Inuit art and to upstate New York for contemporary Iroquois beadwork and baskets. I have attended powwows, auctions, cultural centers, festivals and the



ABOVE: Iroquois bandolier bag by Samuel Thomas (Cayuga) strawberries, strawberry flowers and hummingbirds design, green, red, white, gold/orange, and clear glass beads on red velvet, 24" L x 19" W. This piece was purchased directly from the artist who allowed me to put it on layaway. BELOW: "Arctic Evening" by Suvina Ashoona (Inuit), lithograph on Arches cover white paper, 19/50, Cape Dorset, 23"H x 30"W, Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection #29 (2003). Note: Suvina is an emerging Inuit artist whose work is becoming quite popular with collectors.



for Novices

Heard Museum Guild Indian Fair & Market. Doing so doesn't guarantee lower prices, but I have come upon bargains in such venues.

Take classes and Attend Seminars

Colleges and museums offer classes and seminars taught by people who are experts in a particular artistic area and afford a wonderful way to become more informed. For example, two seminars I attended in conjunction with *Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation*, an exhibit of contemporary Native art, changed the course of my collecting.

Find a Mentor

This can sometimes be difficult, but it is well worth the effort. Finding someone who is willing to share his or her expertise and offer guidance is a great boon to any collector.

Buy the Best You Can Possibly Afford

As with all art, there is a wide range in price and quality. Buy the best you can afford. It is better to buy one important piece rather than a number of minor ones.

Buy from the Heart

If you love it and you can afford it, buy it. This is not the same as impulse buying, which is almost always a mistake. Learn to trust your "inner voice." If an artwork doesn't "speak" to you, no matter how famous the artist who made it, pass it up.

Use Layaway

If it weren't for layaway, no one would own any art. A large part of my collection was acquired this way, allowing me to buy art that I could not otherwise have afforded. For example, it took me three years to pay for a circa-1930s Acoma olla, but at the end of that time I had a very valuable work that I had been unable to buy outright. Most galleries and dealers are willing to put pieces on layaway. You just have to ask.

Don't Sell

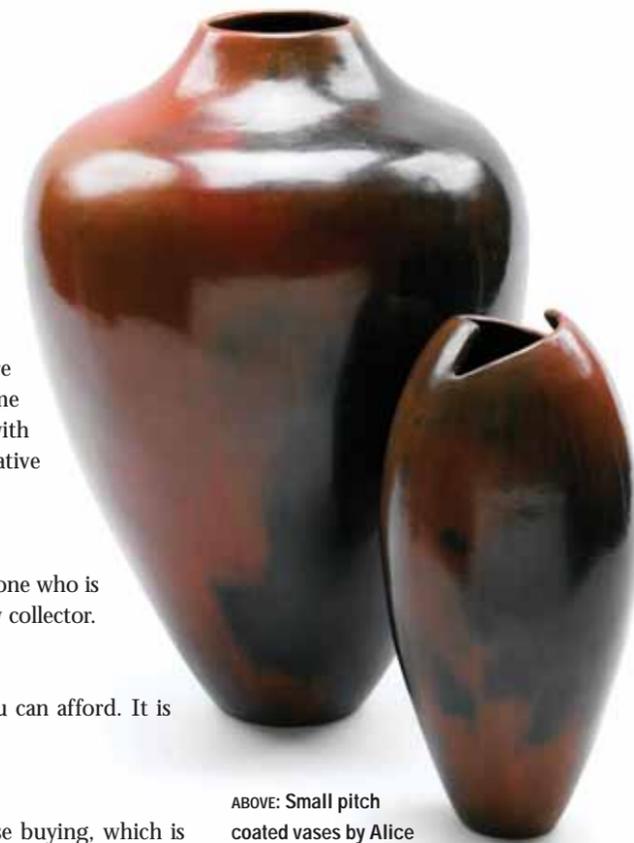
If the value of a piece you own skyrockets, you might be tempted to sell it. Don't! Unless you are desperate for money, hold on to the piece for as long as you can. It will only increase in value.

Donating works from your collection to a museum is also something to consider. Doing so will afford you a tax deduction, if the piece is accepted by the museum's curators and collections committee, and the pieces you donate will educate and enrich future generations.

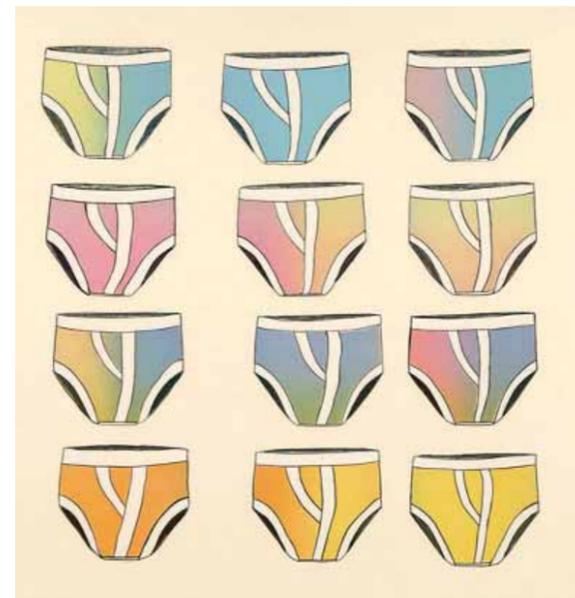
Collect Works by Emerging Artists

By "doing the homework"—reading, visiting museums and galleries—it is possible to discover artists who are just beginning to establish a reputation. Usually their work is quite affordable. For example, I recently began collecting graphics by Annie Pootoogook and Suvina Ashoona, emerging Inuit artists, and I plan to do so until their work becomes financially beyond my reach.

Edward J. Guarino is a lifelong resident of the Hudson River Valley, New York. His collection was featured in Forms of Exchange: Art of Native Peoples from the Edward J. Guarino Collection, April 28 to Sept. 3, 2006 at the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York, as well as in The Festive North, an exhibit of Inuit drawings in Ontario, Canada.



ABOVE: Small pitch coated vases by Alice Cling (Navajo); BELOW: "Brief Case" by Annie Pootoogook (Inuit), lithograph on BFK Rives cream paper; Printer: Niviaksie Quvianaqtuliaq, 36/50; 17"H x 17"W, Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection #1 (2005). Currently, Annie is one of the hottest emerging Inuit artists. Her work is sought after by collectors and she is one of the few Inuit artists to break into mainstream galleries.



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