

Art

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FRAME GAME



MATT LOWDEN





Interior designs by Arent&Pyke feature art works by McLean Edwards (main photo) and Christian Thompson (top left), while Thomas Hamel & Associates interior designs showcase works by Tim Storrier (bottom left) and Robert Longo (far right)



Australians are embracing the idea of collecting art for their homes, with surging sales and increased accessibility a perfectly framed pandemic positive

Tim Olsen doesn't mince words as he reflects on Australians' growing interest in buying art for their homes.

"It's all very well to have \$30,000 Italian furniture and sleek architectural lines but without art and books a home lacks soul, and I think people are more aware of that than ever," the leading gallery owner says.

"It seems a consciousness has emerged for art that has never been more prevalent."

Olsen says while appreciation of art has grown in the past decade, Olsen Gallery sales hit record levels in 2020 and 2021 as first-time buyers and established collectors responded to Covid-19 travel restrictions by switching their discretionary spending to art.

It's an observation shared by other Australian galleries and interior designers.

"Everyone is so much more aware of art now," says interior designer Thomas Hamel. "I think all the galleries

have had a boom during the past two years when we were all spending so much time in our homes," Hamel says.

"People were looking at their walls, and thinking 'Well, we're not going to buy that plane ticket so let's buy something special that we can appreciate forever'."

Sydney-based Michael Reid Galleries director Toby Meagher says the rising value of Australian homes has also driven interest in art.

"For most Australians their homes are their biggest asset. The housing market boom has given people confidence to dress the walls of their homes appropriately and Covid has had us spending more time in our homes than ever. It all plays in," Meagher says.

Greater accessibility has also bolstered sales. Small galleries are popping up across metropolitan and regional areas, art fairs are increasingly popular and online sales have

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(Clockwise from top left): Interior designs by Thomas Hamel & Associates feature art works by Bill Henson, Norman Seeff, Callum Innes and Petrina Hicks

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become more common, particularly during pandemic-related restrictions.

While Michael Reid Galleries has opened three new galleries in the past three years, Meagher says they've also seen growing confidence in buying online, in part thanks to the "extremely good digital presentation" accompanying physical shows.

During lockdown, both Sydney and Melbourne's annual contemporary art fairs transitioned to a virtual model, generating strong interest.

"Interestingly, in 2020 we sold more than \$1.5m and in 2021, when we expected digital fatigue may have set in, we nearly tripled our sales at more \$4m," says Sydney Contemporary director Barry Keldoulis, who is anticipating strong sales at September's Sydney Contemporary fair.

Melbourne Art Fair CEO Maree Di Pasquale says the city's February 2022 fair – Australia's first in-person art fair since 2019 – brought together 63 galleries and art centres, attracted 14,500 visitors and recorded \$10.5m in sales.

"The excitement within the exhibition halls during the VIP Preview and vernissage was palpable. We have finally realised, it seems, that art and culture is vital to our health and wellbeing and helps us better understand the world in which we live," Di Pasquale says.

Sydney-based design practice Arent&Pyke's Juliette Arent says she feels design blogs and websites have also helped demystify art for many people, with visual platforms such as Pinterest and Instagram further raising awareness.

"Art is more affordable, it's more accessible. People start with smaller pieces and they become more brave, more confident," she says.

Arent likes her clients to be very involved in the selection of art, describing it as "very personal".

"Art has so much more power than just being decorative," Arent says. "I usually involve art quite early ... so when we're doing a concept for an interior architecture project I will be putting art in there just to start the conversation and to take the project in a slightly more esoteric way so it's not just the functional; it's injecting something that is slightly magical and mystical."

Arent encourages clients to place art in rooms where they spend a lot of time, including kitchens.

"It's about breaking down something that traditionally feels just domestic or functional into something that feels more like it's a living space."

For Thomas Hamel, art in a kitchen is important because so much entertaining happens around the island bench.

"And a great piece or pieces in a small powder room will intrigue and really get noticed by guests," Hamel says.



When it comes to choosing art for the home, it seems paintings and indigenous works are particularly popular.

Hamel says most of his clients are already collectors.

"While their collection may have started out with mostly paintings and works on papers, we often steer clients to sculpture, photography and works by indigenous artists.

"Art is very personal and we encourage our clients to buy things when they are travelling or visiting a gallery show, if a piece really speaks to them," he says.

Olsen says while sales have "moderated enormously" since Covid-related travel restrictions ended, he's still seeing strong interest in blue-chip artists such as his father John Olsen and Fred Williams, as well as mid-career artist Nicholas Harding and young artist Eliza Gosse.

Melbourne Art Fair's Di Pasquale says she was thrilled to see "extraordinary support" for the work presented by indigenous-owned art centres at this year's fair, with four of the five centres boasting sell-out shows.

Meagher from Michael Reid Galleries says interest is particularly strong in large-scale contemporary photography and still-life paintings, while indigenous art from remote communities has seen a major resurgence, with artists from Yirrkala and Maningrida keenly followed.

According to Sydney Contemporary's Keldoulis, ceramics continue to be a very popular medium while fibre-based work – including tapestries, needlepoint and weaving – has recently burst onto the scene.

Keldoulis says painting and photography will always remain popular and traditional and urban indigenous art is attracting "much attention". His advice is to "buy what you love and what you want to live with".

"If you see an artwork and you can't stop thinking about it, that means you are probably meant to have it."

