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Your First Picasso

With the art market rebounding, here's how to spend \$5,000 and get a great work (and a good investment). Brooks Barnes on modern prints, color photos and who's hot now.

ROSS BUNTROCK is a 34-year-old lawyer who wants to be an art collector—but he only wants to spend a few thousand dollars. Mr. Buntrock worries that budget will limit his options to collectible figurines and paintings of dogs. Even if he finds something he likes, he fears it won't hold its value. "It's totally overwhelming to sort through everything," he says.

Entering the art market has never been more confusing, particularly for would-be collectors who don't want to spend huge sums. With the economy and art prices on the upswing, a new generation of dealers is competing to woo buyers. Nearly a dozen major new art fairs specializing in cheaper art have popped up everywhere from Miami to Chicago in the last 16 months, generating over \$10 million in sales of works priced under \$5,000. Dozens of galleries have opened in the last year alone. Even major auction houses are ramping up efforts to court the four-digit crowd. Christie's International recently tripled the size of its monthly "house sales" featuring paintings and antique furniture priced as low as \$1,000.

Plus
Art of the deal: Getting the best price at auctions, galleries and online.

W4

But just because the price tag has only one comma doesn't mean the experience is less intimidating. Even inexpensive art means dealing with gallery owners who throw around jargon you haven't heard since Art History 101 ("a malleability that permits the creation of configurations," to quote one catalog). And it's just as hard to predict what will have enduring value—or even pay off. Sure, dealers will tell you to buy what you love, but

they're not writing the checks. "Nobody wants to buy art that won't hold its value and may be impossible to resell, or both," says Andrea Rich, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

With the neophyte collector in mind—and also more-experienced buyers who want to add cheaper works—Weekend Journal went in search of strategies for finding less-expensive art with the best chance of increasing in value. To weed out the art world's penny stocks, we focused on the \$5,000 range, considered by dealers and collectors the starting point for fine art with investment potential. (And yes, it is possible to buy a Picasso for the price of a plasma TV. We'll tell you what to look for.) (Please Turn to Page W3)

ART & COLLECTING

Your First Picasso

Jenny Gage, *Unchained #2, 1999*, listed at \$5,000

Nereus Wielding His Club, Circa 1st Century, listed at \$5,000

Continued From Page B7
We also talked to museum curators, art advisers, gallery owners and auction specialists to find out how they size up art at that level. Finally, we asked some of the world's premier art collectors what they're buying at the low end.

Their advice was surprisingly consistent: There are four areas of the market where \$5,000 can get you something serious right now. For example, 20th-century prints, once dismissed as ubiquitous signed knockoffs, are gaining credibility—hey, the century's over now—and prices are rising. These also offer you a chance to get a famous name, which experts say is an important factor in a print's lasting value. Sotheby's recently listed a 21-by-36-inch Andy Warhol print from 1964 called "Jackie II," from an edition of 200, for \$2,500. Similar Warhol prints have been appreciating by about 50% a year.

Of course, the art market is famously fickle, and inexpensive works are just as vulnerable to price downturns. That's particularly true for flashes-in-the-pan like sculptors made out of glass, metal and framed field grass, so we asked our experts generally to stay away from the most experimental stuff. Four years ago, at the Whitney Biennial, a closely watched New York museum exhibition of contemporary art, Ilisa Banerjee drew big buzz for a sculptural installation made from incense sticks, Vaseline and quilting pins. Her work sold in the \$20,000 range.

Since then, Ms. Banerjee has been teaching art classes in Vermont, and two major auction houses say her work is hard to sell. "Oh yeah, huh," says Darlene Latz of New York, who buys and sells art for wealthy clients. Ms. Banerjee says she has a piece in a coming Brooklyn Museum of Art exhibition, and says she is now trying to create work that's "not so intellectual that it's unexciting."

This year's Biennial, now running at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, is showing works by 106 artists, and already collectors are swooning. In the days after the Whitney released its list of artists in the show, nearly two dozen people called to offer \$2,000 to buy drawings by a little-known Spanish artist named Ernest Calvo, says his dealer, Adrian Rosenberg. The real shock: Some had never even seen his work before.

For art in the \$5,000-and-under category, the first question most insiders would ask is, "What's wrong with it?" When it's a work by a well-known name, there could indeed be flaws. A piece could be tiny or damaged ("soft handling creases and a few small stains," reads the description for a \$1,000 Robert Rauschenberg print in a recent auction catalog). Or

maybe the art-world jury is still out on whether the artist mattered (which explains why a sketch on paper by famous graffiti-style artist Keith Haring might still be had for about \$1,000). And then there's the quality of the design. Those who focus on cheaper art are typically younger and hungrier than their more established counterparts. They may be more willing to school and deal and cut prices, but their financing (sometimes supplied by Mom and Dad) can be just as soft. A gallery that goes bust can drag down a promising artist.

All that said, you might find yourself willing to overlook a lot, once you have that cool \$4,500 Pop-art-era Roy Lichtenstein print in your living room—and you can remind your friends that it's not only cheaper than their soon-to-be-obsolete plasma TV, it stands a good chance of actually increasing in value. Here's a look at the four low-price areas museum curators, collectors, dealers and auction experts think are worth investigating:

20th-Century Prints

Prints never seemed too special in the days when Warhol and Rauschenberg were churning out a new edition every other year, and for some artists, "limited edition" could mean 2,000. Now modern prints are getting a second look, chiefly because rockstar sales for paintings by modern and contemporary artists (dead and alive) have priced many people out of the higher-end market. Last year, print sales at the big New York auctioneers totaled \$11 million, a 20% increase over 2002.

In some cases, works are appreciating in just a few months. Last October, New York art adviser Susan Coplan Harowitz paid \$2,500 for a 2002 print by Japanese artist Takashi Murakami, known for his large installations of cartoon-like characters and his colorful versions of Louis Vuitton handbags. By March, dealers were selling the same print of mushrooms covered with cartoon faces for \$3,000. "It's like wallpaper," says Ms. Harowitz.

You don't have to live in New York and Los Angeles to join the party. Regional auctioneers such as Ivey-Selick in St. Louis and Skinner in Boston conduct regular print sales, and quality examples can be found on art Web sites such as Eystorm and even eBay. However, most major collectors focus on buying art they haven't seen in person. "You want to kick the tires," says Dave WIL-

Roy Lichtenstein, *Six Life With Pictures and Flowers, 1974*, listed at \$4,000

kins, former chairman of mutual-fund giant Alliance Capital, who owns one of the largest collections of prints in private hands—some 5,000 in all.

As for scoring that Picasso, at this price level you're most likely to get a print from the late '60s or early '70s. That's a long way from the Blue Period, but it's an area getting new interest, say experts, who suggest looking for prints containing an image of the artist himself. Try to avoid works that are overly ornate; it keeps value down. Finally, try to get one with the artist's signature, though some unsigned Picasso prints can be valuable for their ownership history.

FRAMING YOUR QUESTIONS Before buying a print, ask to take a close look at its condition (and if you're buying online or long distance, be sure to find out if it can be returned). Stains, tears and creasing can cut value by as much as 50%, notes Christopher Galliard, a print specialist at Sotheby's. Dealers sometimes try to hide damage with fancy frames, so ask to inspect the print's edges. Also ask how a particular print meshes with the artist's overall body of work. Some artists make prints to develop ideas for more significant works—and those are more likely to go up in price.

Color Photographs

Though black-and-white prints by Ansel Adams and Mon Ray gained museum acceptance decades ago, curators have traditionally turned up their noses at color photographs as flashy and frivolous. That attitude, and overexposure in the late '90s, has kept prices for most color photographs in the low four digits.

But timing is everything in the art market. Prices are heating up in part because of technical advances in the

darkroom that allow for richer hues. They are also being fueled by the sudden popularity of a new lotus in the genre—Gregory Crewdson, a Yale art-school professor who shoots slightly macabre staged images of suburban life. Five grand won't get you anywhere close to Mr. Crewdson, whose photographs have scored 60% at auction to as much as \$40,000 in the last two years. But you can still get in early on some of his students. Justice Garland, for one, who makes photographs of adolescent girls against moody backgrounds, has seen her prices double to about \$1,000 in recent months.

Serious collectors of contemporary paintings and sculptures are drifting toward the field. Real-estate developer Marty Margolis, whose Miami penthouse is stocked with Lichtenstein, Rothko and de Koonings, started buying inexpensive contemporary photography in 1981. "It's one of the only areas left where seminal works are still affordable," he says.

FRAMING YOUR QUESTIONS Always check for a signature, most likely scribbled on the margin in pencil, says Joshua Boddeman, a senior photography expert at auctioneers Phillips, de Pury & Co. Ask if the photographer printed the image personally—some hand-off the dirty work to an assistant. Finally, emperors-in-wait: Because photographers produce up to 20 copies of the same image, there's a good chance another gallery will have the same work you want to buy, possibly at a lower price.

Latin American Art

This area is getting a boost from museums across the country that are eager to court a growing Hispanic population.