



FINDING ART TO FIT YOUR BUDGET: BE PATIENT AND PASSIONATE

By Jane Miller

Photo by Richard Kelly

A stroll on Shadyside's Ellsworth Avenue will find a touch of classical Europe in Galerie Werner, an art gallery featuring antique European paintings.

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It’s a quiet respite for visitors to century-ago scenes of pastoral hillsides, castles and seascapes.

Gallery owner Melanie Werner regards herself as an “art editor,” finding the right homes for paintings. “I’m editing for my clients what I perceive as a good investment, and to present what I see as viable options with artists that have room for growth,” she says.

Most of the paintings in Werner’s Shadyside and Sewickley galleries are priced in the range of \$5,000 to \$10,000, and some are significantly higher. Pittsburgh seems like an unlikely home for such a gallery, but Western Pennsylvania is home to Werner, who was born and raised in Hermitage.

“Pittsburgh is conservative,” she acknowledges. “In New York, people make a selection and stand at the counter and write the check. It’s three minutes in New York. It’s often three years in Pittsburgh. I can’t get aggravated, because I’m from this region. It’s a slow place to do business. It’s not bad. As a dealer, I have to have that in my mind.”

Werner advises collectors to “be patient and passionate. You will find something that suits your budget.” For novice collectors, she suggests original works on paper, typically lower in price, and with qualities not found in paintings. “The artist is more spontaneous in a drawing. Once an artist puts paintbrush to the canvas it is much more contrived,” she says.

Purchasing art is about defining priorities; deciding how much money will be allocated, and whether the purchaser shops at a gallery, festival, or other venue. “There are families where finances are not a question, but art is not a priority. Others will forgo jewelry and cars and other household furnishings to have a good piece of art,” Werner says.

As a child Werner always loved looking at art. “I never did like painting myself, but I spent hours just looking at paintings in books,” she says. She earned her college degree in consumer marketing at Westminster College and initially worked for a national chain of hair styling salons and in healthcare.

Fifteen years ago Werner and her husband, an attorney, visited Europe for the first time and fell in love with the beauty of the land. They now have a permanent address in Paris and make

art pilgrimages there about four times a year. While living in Paris Werner thought about the business possibilities of bringing 19th century art to America. She took long series of classes in art history with field visits to museums.

“Museum visits with professors are where you learn. I would go with a small group to the Louvre at night, and we would discuss the paintings,” she says. “It’s a formal education, but not a college one.”

Werner knew her business would face challenges. “Europeans are always leery of women and foreigners. Now they recognize and they know that I buy and am not killing time. Now they call me and say, ‘Melanie, we have five paintings.’”

Werner offers visitors an opportunity to “test” how a painting looks over a mantle or behind a couch. “I work with decorators all the time. They’ll say, ‘Melanie, we have a tight corner in a bathroom. What do you have?’”

Requests for modern art and tapestries, as well as local art, have added to her inventory. A recent Sewickley show featured the 20th century art of Donald Deskey, the architect who designed the interiors of Radio City Music Hall. Douglas Devlin, the architect of Werner’s home, purchased a painting “before he knew of the history. It’s amazing when you see people connect with a painting that truly fits them,” Werner says.

Werner has nearly 400 purchased works in her inventory, and the two galleries rotate shows of approximately 30 paintings at a time. “Every art work is like a child. We must know the history behind the painting, so when we’re talking with the client, we know about the piece,” she says.

Many of her paintings come from private households in France and Belgium. Most of the works are mid 19th century, although they range from the late 18th century to the mid 20th century. Antique European paintings include landscapes, portraits, and seascapes, and styles include Old Masters, Impressionism and turn-of-the-century Modernism.

Gallery assistant Melissa Tsai, who has an art degree from Taylor University in Indiana, assists with the documentation. “We try to flush out all of the possible sources. People want to know as much as possible,” she says. Even gallery visitors sometimes help out by knowing the style of a Scottish cap, a breed of a dog, or an antique magazine.

Some of the works need restoration, both art and the frames, which is often completed in Paris. The artist's biography is important in considering the future value of a painting, Werner says. She purchases good quality works painted by "typically lesser known artists who have a very strong biography, meaning they were professional or working artists. They were not doing this as a hobby. The artists may not be household names, but part of my job is finding good, solid, salable artists that have potential for growth in terms of investments," Werner says.

One client, for example, asked if the value of a painting by Jean Peské would increase. "I said, 'I can't guarantee that. Merrill Lynch can't guarantee you'll make money, but based on the trends we see, I see this as a solid investment.' Voila, this artist is highly sought out now, and I wish I had the painting back in my collection," she says with a combination of a sigh and a laugh.

Stories behind the art are important, such as a tranquil seascape painted on Normandy Beach two years after the D-Day invasion, or the sketch of a woman putting on nylons painted around 1940, with the artist capturing her delight at what was then a luxury. "So often, your first glance is 'that's a pretty picture,' but there's a whole lot more going on. Usually there is a nuance to the painting that makes them special," Werner says.

Although the gallery is local, business dealings occur on the East Coast with auction houses in New York City and art fairs in Baltimore and Annapolis. "Right now I'm writing a proposal to get a painting into the Metropolitan Museum of Art. When people say, 'I don't like it,' I can say, that's okay, because I think the Met is going to buy it."

Werner selects pieces based on a cross between her knowledge about art techniques and gut feelings. "Ultimately, you want to find things that are salable. At the end of the day I am in business. But sometimes I get something because I have a certain feeling about it," she says.

But matching up the right painting with the right family, no matter how long it takes, is what makes her job worthwhile. "When clients say, 'We love the painting, it's just right, or every time I see the painting it makes me smile,' I feel good about this work." 📌