

# PLUS

# SUPERMART

Education, gallery outreach and higher incomes drive growing interest in art collecting



David Chew  
david.chew@newstoday.com.sg

FIVE years ago, Andrew Choo bought his first painting, a work by Singapore artist Ng Joon Kiat. Since then, he has amassed a collection of about a dozen original artworks by Ng and other artists.

The 36-year old civil servant became interested in Asian art while working as a systems analyst on an archiving system for the Singapore Art Museum in 1996.

"We had to clean up all the write-ups for the art," he said. "And while dealing with the works and the curators, my interest in art was piqued."

While admitting that he spends a substantial amount on paintings, Choo said that building an art collection has become increasingly affordable over the years.

"I collect art to display it in my home," he said. "After having gotten to know some of the artists, I also see it as a way of supporting their inspiration."

#### AFFAIRS OF THE ART

Choo is not alone.

Whether they are young couples looking to furnish their homes or art lovers who develop a passion for a particular work, a growing number of Singaporeans are seeing the benefits of owning art.

In the past, there were several factors working against the development of an art-buying culture in Singapore. For one, the relatively small number of galleries here limited the number and range of artworks available and made for high prices.

Today, all that is changing.

Although, galleries here were reluctant to reveal hard data, figures and anecdotal evidence from gallery operators that TODAY spoke to suggest that art-buying among Singaporeans, especially young people, is on the increase.

Local gallery Utterly Art, for example, reported a 63 per cent jump in profits between 2003 and 2004, while Art Seasons said its sales had risen by 50 per cent in the

past year alone.

Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI) recently held an exhibition of Filipino artist Bencab's work and all 49 paintings (pictured in the art gallery above) were sold by opening night.

"There used to be a lack of awareness and art appreciation," said Art Seasons manager Jose Tay. "Now there are a lot of activities and exhibitions going on every year, and that has increased the awareness and appreciation."

Tay added there is now so much diversity in the market that there is bound to be a painting to suit anyone's taste and budget.

"Art is for everyone," said art consultant Emaline Sze. "The continued challenge is for those involved in the arts to help change the perception that art is only for the well-heeled and well-educated."

#### ART NOW, PAY LATER

Although Singapore's growing affluence helps, Art-2 Gallery co-director Seah Tzi-Yan credited education and artist-led outreach efforts as key reasons for the trend towards investing in art.

At the moment, there are almost 200 visual arts companies and societies in Singapore, which includes photographic societies, art galleries, art auctioneers and other visual arts-related business.

In a span of just over a decade, such companies and societies have quadrupled the number of visual art exhibitions held here every year, from 150 in 1993 to 563 in 2004. The number of exhibition days has also risen drastically from 1,441 in 1993 to 13,990 in 2004.

Said art consultant Sze: "I believe that given the continued efforts of the public and private sectors, with further education and continuous exposure to good art, those who are already buying and collecting, as well as new audiences, can further develop a deeper level of understanding and appreciation of art."

Outreach initiatives such as those of the artist-run Telok Kurau Studios, P-10 and Plastique Kinetic Works — which include talks on art appreciation and starting an art collection — are helpful, but increases in incomes have also played an important part.

The average monthly earnings of Singaporeans jumped from \$2,086 to \$3,329 between 1994 and 2004, although the inflation rate has not gone beyond 1.7 per cent.

"Thankfully for us, people have more disposable income," Seah said. "And are also putting art higher on their

wish lists than they did before."

Regardless of their earnings, art buyers can be divided into three segments, noted gallery owners.

There is the serious collector who wants to start a collection and understands art, there is the collector who sees art as an investment and then there is the type of buyer who simply collects what he likes.

The last group of buyers tends to be younger and they are also the ones who are getting the most encouragement to delve deeper into the arts scene.

The National Arts Council recently announced the launch of

an initiative with local banks such as UOB, DBS and OCBC and The Arts House to offer interest-free instalment plans that can be used towards the purchase of art.

The banks have reported strong interest from customers.

Such initiatives have helped buyers like 43-year-old theatre practitioner Glen Goei start collecting art at a time when they might not otherwise have been able to do so.

"Although using instalment plans to buy art isn't new at galleries, (the existence of such schemes) isn't very well known among the non-art buying public," he said.

#### DOLLARS AND ART SENSE

But lest anyone think artwork is only affordable when paid for in instalments, Art-2's Seah said this was not the case "as prices for artwork range widely now".

"Many young couples, for example, buy artwork that costs about \$1,000 to \$2,000, and they just pay up front for that." she said

These days, works by both local and foreign artists are being sold for as little as a couple of hundred dollars, depending on the size of the work and the types of

materials used among other factors, said gallery owners.

STPI's Bencab exhibition had artwork with prices ranging from a reasonable \$500 to \$60,000. Some of the buyers who bought the more expensive works made use of the interest-free instalment plans, according to STPI.

Art Seasons' Tay said most young buyers have a budget of up to \$5,000.

But the money issue is not the only thing on the minds of gallery owners, artists and industry watchers.

There is also the all-important matter of art appreciation.

As LaSalle-SIA's dean of fine arts Milenko Prvacki said with a laugh: "No point having money and no taste, right?"

Although artist Tang Ling Nah acknowledged that the art market is growing here, she said that the majority of Singaporeans have yet to see art buying as a part of their lives.

"Sometimes only a certain group of people buy art, or worse they go for non-authentic or affordable art i.e. art that is copied in massive quantities in factories," she said.

"Because their concern is not who made the art and whether it was made

What's your view on collecting art in Singapore? Email us at plus@newstoday.com.sg

## BEINGARTSMART

### TIPS FROM PWE KENG HOCK, MANAGING PARTNER OF UTTERLY ART GALLERY

- 1 Collect what appeals to you. You have to live with your purchase, so you might as well love it.
- 2 Understand why you are collecting a particular work of art.
  - If it is for decoration, it must match the colour, space and character of the surroundings.

- If it is to look sophisticated, then find out about trends in art buying and shifting tastes.
- If it is an investment, then attend auctions to find out which artists' works are likely to increase in demand.
- If the work speaks to you and you must have it — that is the best reason of all.
- 3 Assess the quality of the work:
  - Is the work an original creation that expresses the spirit and cre-

- ativity of the artist?
- Is the work compositionally and technically sound?
- What is its conservation status?
- What is the pedigree and status of the artist?
- 4 Make sure your purchase fits your budget and is commensurate with the work's quality.
- 5 Gradually cultivate your knowledge by going to exhibitions, reading about art, attending talks and speaking to experts.

## TALKINGART

Pwee Keng Hock of Utterly Art Gallery is one of four speakers who will give talks at the Telok Kurau Studios starting Feb 18 in conjunction with the gallery's *Journey 06* exhibition.

His talk, *Collecting Art For Newbies*, will be the last in the series on March 11. Call Sheryl at 6348 6133 for more information.



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