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Fear not when buying art - Just follow your instincts, experts advise.

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A Picasso paired with country-cottage decor? Doesn't sound like a match made in home-decorating heaven, but it may not be a complete nightmare either.

Choosing art for a home may seem like a task that requires an art education of some sort, but not so, say local experts. "Buy art that you love, that speaks to your soul because you're the one who has to live with it," says Clint Watson, who along with Jim Janes and Mark Smith owns the Greenhouse Gallery of Fine Art, 2218 Breezewood. "If you do that," adds Janes, "you're going to love that work 20 years from now. If you really buy for the right reasons, you're not going to ever throw it out." So what are the "right reasons"? Plain and simple, it comes down to trusting your instincts. "(Many people) think they don't know about art," Janes says. "You don't have to. Let intuition guide you." Once you've followed your instincts and been pleased with the results, it will become more natural to rely on those inner voices, he says. The pleasure principle is another motivating factor when pairing art with decor, author and decorator Stephanie Hoppen says in her book "Stephanie Hoppen's Decorating With Style" (Clarkson Potter, \$35). "The images on your walls should give you constant pleasure day in day out. Choose pictures to please yourself, not just because they are going to appreciate in value or because there's a rumor going round that something is fashionable," states Hoppen, whose new book, "New Decorating With Pictures: Collecting Art and Photography and Displaying It in Your Home," is due in October. That pleasure may be rooted in the way the piece stimulates your mind, inspires an emotional response or merely allows for what Greenhouse's Smith calls "mental health moments" when just gazing at an artwork provides an escape from everyday

stress. Connecting with a piece of art can occur at several levels, including identifying with the subject matter or simply admiring the technical attributes, Watson says. These connections can serve as the foundation for building not only a personal awareness of likes and dislikes, but an overall education of art styles as well. Visiting local galleries and museums can refine this process even more. "By broadening your exposure to art, you get to see what it is you truly like and dislike," Smith says. And as knowledge of art builds, don't discount gut reaction. "Intuition helps you gravitate to certain paintings," Watson says. "Knowledge doesn't change that, it just helps you understand why you like it." For the average person, buying art is not a weekly, monthly or even annual occurrence, so each purchase should be deliberate. Once you've found a piece that you cannot live without, how much consideration should you give to your home environment and how the art will fit in? Not that much, says Miami gallery owner Bernice Steinbaum. "Art transcends the furnishings," says Steinbaum. "The furnishings will vary over time, but art, if good, will remain." Steinbaum was inspired to create a show last year that paired 18 inflatable sofas with the work of 18 respected artists. The show, titled "A Painting for Over the Sofa" evolved, she says, from having people come into the gallery, show her the color of their sofa, and then try to match art to it. She, too, advises potential art buyers to "allow their eyes to be the judge" and to never buy "purely for decoration." Instincts and intuition aside, other, more tangible obstacles still may remain. Fear, distrust and budgets are three that the Greenhouse Gallery owners have faced. "The No. 1 concern, real or not, is that they (potential buyers) think price is a problem," Janes says. "They think they can't afford original art." One solution, he says, is to seek out the work of emerging artists as the prices typically are more affordable. Many galleries will showcase new artists in either solo or multiartist shows. And, the monthly First Friday experience, in which Southtown galleries open their doors wide the first Friday of each month, can allow art lovers at all levels to see a range of styles and prices. If you do happen to fall in love with a work that is out of your price range, Steinbaum suggests asking if the artist has less-costly prints for sale. The other two problems - fear and distrust - can be linked to the gallery setting itself. Novice art buyers often feel intimidated in galleries and don't feel comfortable asking questions. "Sometimes, because of the reputation of art galleries, people are afraid," Watson says. "They expect to get used-car salesman tactics when they walk in the door, or pressure sales. They are often surprised at how welcome they are." Smith advises developing a relationship with a gallery owner or an art consultant, and building a level of trust. Then "that person can help you identify what it is you like or want to collect, and then come up with a plan for following through." Just as appreciating art is subjective, so is buying art for that most personal space, your home. So next time you're mulling over an art purchase, keep it simple: Trust your gut.

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