



## Art With a Message: 'Buy This House'

To Stand Out in a Slow Market

Sellers Hang Rented Paintings;

Bickering Over a Wyeth Nude

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For years, the Seattle Art Museum has let its most generous supporters rent original artworks from its auxiliary gallery, charging \$40 to \$600 a month so patrons could create temporary exhibitions in their homes. But now the museum has a burgeoning new market for its highbrow rentals -- home sellers in search of an artistic edge.

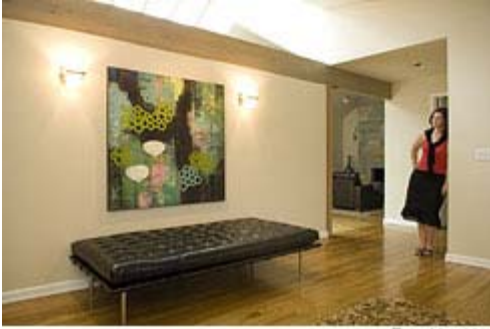
Museum officials say they've seen a spike in their art-rental business thanks in part to home stagers, who redecorate houses in hopes of boosting their sales prices and increasing the odds of selling. One Seattle artist popular with this set: abstract expressionist Drake Deknatel, whose paintings have been used in some 200 homes, according to gallery records and one of the city's largest staging companies. "It's amazing how it's taken off," says SAM Gallery director Barbara Shaiman.

### CALDER ON THE INSTALLMENT PLAN

[Here's a look](#) at some art-rental programs around the country and a sample work.

As home sales slow in many areas and more houses linger on the market, some sellers are going to greater lengths to catch the buyer's eye -- by installing splatter paintings by emerging artists, 7-foot-tall metal sculptures, even works by Calder and Dali. It's a pronounced shift in the strategy of staging, which traditionally held that the fastest way to sell homes, and get the highest price, was to give them a toned-down, hotel-style makeover. Now, rather than merely boxing up family knick-knacks, adding a new couch or repainting the bedroom in jewel tones, stagers are experimenting with a riskier approach.

The new practice is boosting business for art institutions. At the SAM Gallery, revenue has more than doubled in four years, to \$1 million, says Ms. Shaiman. Sales have doubled since 2001 over at the Larsen Gallery in Scottsdale, Ariz., in part because of bigger orders for contemporary art from homeowners and sellers of the area's new, loft-like buildings. At New York City's Agora Gallery, director Angela Di Bello says she fields at least five calls and emails a day from inquiring real-estate agents, up from "none" a few years before. "I've been in this business 25 years, and I've never seen anything like it," she says.



The foyer of this \$1.9 million Seattle home has a new addition: a painting by Junko Yamamoto.

Last week, securities lawyer Eric Klein and his wife, Susan, put their home in Encino, Calif., on the market for \$1.5 million after dressing it up with a dozen pieces of rented art. Outside, the two-story, four-bedroom house looks much as it did when the couple bought it 12 years ago for \$630,000, with the same blue-gray wood shingles and yard full of lemon and apple trees. But inside, the place looks like a gallery. There's a cherry-red canvas with black, green and blue geometric shapes by neo-Surrealist Patrick Slattery in the living room, and a brick collage

sculpture by Sandy Bleifer hung on the wall of the curved staircase. Rather than enlist the advice of a stager or designer, the Kleins visited the Art Rental and Sales Gallery of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and selected works that suited their own taste. Total cost to rent: \$750 a month. "The art just brightens up the rooms immensely," Mr. Klein says. "And it's cheaper than renovating."

### **Falling in Love**

The strategy isn't foolproof, certainly. In February, Santa Fe resident Wendy Jacobs went on a broker-sponsored homes tour, where she saw a \$1.9 million mansion that had been decked out with art and furnishings. But rather than make an offer on the house, the retired public affairs executive called Aleta Pippin, one of the artists featured, and bought her painting, "Path to Freedom," for \$1,200. The house is still on the market, brokers say. "It was the art I fell in love with," says Ms. Jacobs.

Loaner art is fairly easy to come by. A handful of museums and a host of galleries and leasing services nationwide rent art for temporary use, with monthly fees from \$25 to \$8,000 per work and rentals allowed, in some cases, for up to two years. The Artists Gallery at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has a revolving inventory of 3,000 works by lesser-known regional artists that it rents in two- or three-month increments for \$60 to \$800. Renters don't have to be museum members, and half of the fee for the first few months can be applied to purchase of the piece.

Even works by established artists -- including Salvador Dali, Robert Indiana, Larry Rivers and Lorna Simpson -- can be rented from places such as Scottsdale's Larsen Gallery. Typically, rental rates are 2% of the artwork's retail price.



"Lilies" by Patricia Clements is available for rent from the Agora Gallery in New York.

Art-world insiders aren't surprised that real-estate types have seized upon fine art's power to persuade, though evidence of its impact on sales is largely anecdotal. "People want to be engaged, and when they see great art in a home, they're seeing something new and inspiring," says Marena Grant Morrissey, executive director of the Orlando Museum of Art, whose auxiliary gallery leases works from its print collection to local corporations but not to individuals.

The art-house strategy is one of the ways sellers are pressing for competitive advantage as residential sales slow. At the end of June, unsold U.S. homes numbered 3.7 million, a 42% increase compared with a year earlier, according to the National Association of Realtors. Sales of new homes are expected to drop this year by 12%, to 1.1 million, in part because of rising interest rates. And some high-end markets have a glut of available properties -- some on the market for more than a year.

For years, upscale condominium developers have added a blue-chip work or two to class up common areas. What's new is that the middle market has joined in by favoring one-of-a-kind works over mass-produced posters. The strategy works, according to Showhomes, a Nashville company that has furnished 23,000 residences over the years, mostly model homes. Two years ago, the company hung 5-foot-tall red and blue streetscapes in a pair of homes in Mobile, Ala.; one had sat on the market for two years, the other for three. Less than a month after the paintings were installed, the first home's owners accepted an offer for 93% of its list price, and the second sold for about 98% of its list price. Says Larry Lyles, co-owner of Showhomes: "I'm convinced the canvases did a lot of the work."

Still, reactions to art-staging vary widely. Last weekend, potential home buyers Janet Micka and Bill Cirino stopped by an open house in Seattle's Northgate neighborhood that included works by local artists. Ms. Micka thought the \$500,000 Craftsman-style house looked more inviting than it had when she saw its bare walls on an earlier visit. While Mr. Cirino liked the art, he said it didn't distract from the creaky wooden gutters and dimly lit dining room. "It doesn't make a dime of a difference," he says. "When I see a big picture on the wall, I tend to want to see what's behind it."

## Style Matters

Richard Pohl is a believer, however. The Salem, Mass., psychiatrist and his wife, Sally Jablon, expect to move into a \$700,000 townhouse today in nearby Marblehead. They actually passed on the place a few months back, but upon revisiting recently, they say, they were more impressed. Why the change of heart? Five oil paintings of trees by local artist Debra Freeman-

Highberger had been hung by a stager from Da Vinci Designer Gallery, who continued the woodsy theme with twig wreaths, twine balls and an espresso-colored dining table. The effect, Dr. Pohl says, was transformative. "The artwork made it all feel like a home, as opposed to a space. And suddenly," he says, "things that worried us before, like the Home Depot sinks, worried us less."

Despite such testimonials, not everyone in the art world -- or even the real-estate business -- is a fan of loaner art. Curators caution against placing paintings in homes where humidity and temperature may fluctuate wildly. And brokers say damage might not be covered by homeowners' insurance, which typically covers only loss or theft of rented art.

Choosing the right work can be tricky. Seattle stager Jan Sewell, who uses about 100 pieces a month in clients' houses, prefers contemporary abstracts with a lot of color. Other effective choices include landscapes and paintings with primary-color palettes, pared-down modern sculptures and detailed botanicals. Stagers steer clear of works with nudity or religious themes. Presentation matters, too: A canvas that's too large or small for a space will detract from the look of a room.

Even well-known artists can present a problem. When surgeon Keith Saxon hired a stager to prepare his \$890,000 Tudor home in Bethesda, Md., for an open house in November, he was initially upset when the stager stashed away his prized Andrew Wyeth. "I said, 'This is a Wyeth. You want this around,'" Mr. Saxon recalls telling her. But the stager persuaded him to keep the painting -- a watercolor of a naked woman's torso -- hidden under his bed until the house sold this spring. "They finally convinced me," he said. "It got the house sold."