

So You Want to Be An Art Collector?

Why photography is the perfect place to start your own personal collection

WRITTEN BY MARLA WASSER

The invention of photography in 1839 is an incredibly important moment in history. It allowed individuals the ability to document life for the first time, as opposed to interpreting it. For centuries, the only way to learn and understand what the world looked like was through the subjective artistic interpretations of historical period paintings and sculptures. The transmission of reality into a permanent visual statement opened the door for artists to use photography as a new artistic catalyst, sharing and evoking powerful emotional moments, or just simply documenting a fleeting moment in time.

“A good photograph is one that communicates a fact, touches the heart, and leaves the viewer a changed person for having seen it. It is, in a word, effective.”

— IRVING PENN (1980), PHOTOGRAPHER

How does one look at the opportunity of collecting photography and understand what is “effective”? Perhaps it is the inspiration that the photographer evokes into the viewer’s experience as he attempts to breathe life into an image, whether it’s a historical documentation of time or a contemporary masterpiece. Today’s photographers, as a result of multiple printing processes and new media technology, are able to bring complexity and depth into their images. Canadian photographer Jeff Wall is known for adding allusions to art history or political events in his photography by using digital photo-manipulations, thus requiring more effort from the viewer to step in and learn about the artist’s message. Another example of a globally-focused Canadian photographer is Edward Burtynsky (read more about him on page 59) who uses a large-format view camera to successfully document and tell the story of our planet reshaped by human ambition. The success of Wall and Burtynsky’s varying photographic practices and diverse messages serve as inspiration to collectors, and mentor younger generations of photographers.

A collector’s feeling, inspired or affected when they view a photograph, is one of the most important starting places when you consider bringing it into your life and home. Our world is an image-saturated place thanks to the advent of digital cameras and the proliferation of picture-sharing websites and social media apps. The opportunity to have access to fantastic images as a tool to better understand your personal collecting preferences has never been easier. Not to be overlooked, and an important part of the educational process, are photography books, museum exhibitions, and global photo fairs. Let’s not forget: the most fun is deciding

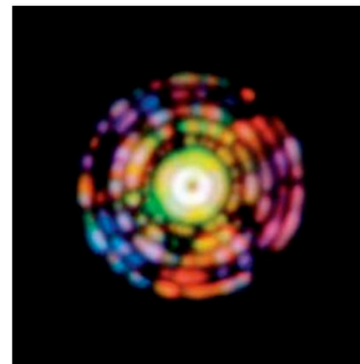


Left page:
Jessica Eaton
cfaal 115
From the series Cubes
for Albers and LeWitt, 2011

This page:
Alma Haser
Alexandra
From the series
Cosmic Surgery, 2013

Robert Laytner
Boat by a
Brash Brownie, Toronto, 1958

Lori Heppner
From the series
Status Symbols, 2011



what road of discovery you will go down. A vast array of choices, including vintage, contemporary, fashion, portraits, or landscapes are just a few of the numerous options to be inspired by. Collecting photography is a great point of entry for any art collector. It’s accessible, easily understood, and available for all budgets.

When MaryAnn Camilleri started the multi-faceted Magenta Foundation in 2005, her primary motivations were twofold: to create beautiful art books (given the lack of high-end art publishers in the market), and to create a vehicle to support emerging artists. Today, Camilleri is proud to share that in the 12 years since the Foundation started, Magenta has promoted Canadian photographers and painters, started a world-renowned emerging photographer’s competition, and has become deeply rooted in arts and education in high schools. Now in their 13th year, they are once again diversifying by working with Inuit artists and continuing the successful collaboration with the Editions Toronto Book fair. For Camilleri, her advice on how to find emerging photographers is to start with the new generation of upcoming talent.

Good artists take time to mature – but not as long as bonds do

“My passion for collecting the work of emerging artists stems from my days in university. I’ve always believed that if we encourage and support young artists, we will create a stronger country and a better type of artist,” she says. “For Magenta, investing is as important as maintaining the programs. For those who want to collect but don’t know where to start, the best thing I can recommend is to attend exhibitions and student shows at universities. Always buy what you love. If an artist piques your interest, Google them and watch their growth. If they are as good as you think they are, you will start seeing their names in other exhibitions. Good artists take time to mature – but not as long as bonds do.”

Stephen Bulger founded his namesake gallery in Toronto back in 1994, focusing on the exhibition and sale of international, contemporary, and historical photographs. Bulger’s expertise has developed from curating over 200 exhibitions, as well as forming a collection of over 15,000 photographic prints at his gallery. The growing interest in collecting photography as art is something that he can directly attest to.

“The market for photographs is subject to supply versus demand, and the widespread acceptance of photographs as important art objects and artefacts has created a larger pool of interested buyers,” says Bulger. “In terms of irreplaceable vintage photographs, the growing number of collectors continuously reduces the supply. The best way to start is to select a photographer or a subject of interest and buy the most beautiful photograph you can afford. Collecting multiple works, from individual photographers or about a specific theme, begins to form a collection.”

And while most artists and consultants will agree that your investment in art should be around pieces that you love, Bulger goes on to note that collectors, especially budding ones, should be attuned to the tangible quality of the work as well.

“I want to learn about something by viewing the photograph. I need to be intrigued with the content to the extent that it will sustain repeated viewings, but the object quality is also something I need to admire. I must be convinced that it is the best made object possible of that image. People often make the mistake of being swept away by the content without scrutinizing the quality of the print, but it is important that both are of the highest standard.”

Art has a way of speaking to people – it possesses an undeniable ability to evoke emotion. Photography is no different. What you may find intriguing in a photograph on your wall, your dinner guest may interpret completely differently. It’s true when they say that a picture is worth a thousand words. And for the budding (or advanced) collector, a photograph is a beautiful way of conveying a manner of emotions in one powerful snapshot. 📸

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