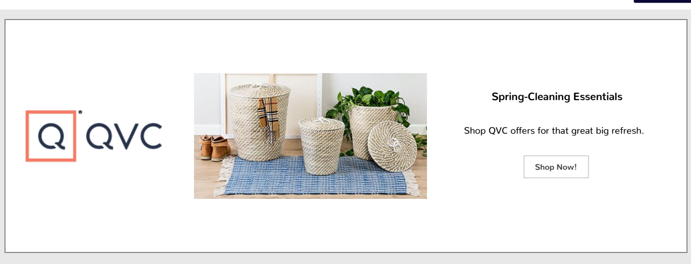

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Designers on How Art Will Dominate the Industry in 2022—And Beyond

Thirteen of the country's top designers discuss the resurgence in art, its impact on design, and what will be trending in 2022.

BY LAUREN WICKS PUBLISHED: DEC 17, 2021

Christopher Stark

While the initial months of the coronavirus pandemic were terrifying for artists across all mediums as galleries, museums, theaters, and other creative spaces were among the first to close across the world, people began investing in their homes with money that would have been used for vacations, new wardrobes, and other experiences like concerts and exhibitions. And when much of 2021 didn't look hopeful for our chances of jet-setting with ease and piling up our social calendars again, that investment in our homes grew deeper. Houston-based designer Mark Cravotta says that in the high-end market, there's more money available right now and with art being a finite resource, purchasing art feels special relative to other elements of our interiors that consumers have been shopping for over the last year and a half that are less unique and telling of our personalities.

Boston-based designer Katie Rosenfeld says that social media and more overall time spent with screens since March 2020 were paramount to the recent art boom, especially for millennials, as emerging digital platforms have made art much more accessible for all ages. But the screen fatigue is real, and both the extra time scrolling on Instagram as well as the desire to escape it for real life experiences and beauty have paved a way for more people to invest in art for their homes.

"I think the events of the past couple years resulted in a lot of people spending time online and on social media, and frankly, they're ready to see something different," says Sean Anderson, a Memphis-based designer. "That has opened the field to such an abundance of new talent, and I only hope more people find creative platforms to share their talents on."

A dreamy vignette from a Vestavia Hills, Alabama project designed by Sean Anderson.
Haris Kenjar

A 2021 sales report from Sotheby's shows that millennials did in fact lead the way in purchasing luxury items this year with nearly half of the auction house's 2021 bidders being first-timers. The house reported record numbers for modern and contemporary art sales and sold $100 million in NFTs. Watches, Wine & Spirits, Design, Books, and the Luxury Accessories and Collectibles categories also achieved record annual auction totals this year. Sotheby's Chief Executive Charles Stewart told WSJ that younger buyers are "playing at a higher level than we've ever seen before," and that though the market was strong across the board, the main focus of collectors was art. Meanwhile, Yelp saw searches for art installation increase by 181% this year, and bicoastal designer Jeremiah Brent says that the data points "towards larger pieces that are the focal point of a room and require professional installation."

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Additionally, pandemic boom towns like Austin, Nashville, and Palm Beach are also emerging as art epicenters as more people from New York and California have decided to call Florida, Texas, and Tennessee home in the last two years, bringing their affinities for the arts (and multi-million dollar businesses) with them. This shift not only allows for the snowbirds and newly minted Southerners (not to mention longtime residents of these cities) to have more opportunities for enjoying art, but it has created more avenues for artist exposure, arts education, and overall accessibility in areas that previously had smaller movements (Richmond, Virginia and Salt Lake City are among other smaller big cities that have seen benefits of this). And now as New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco have reopened and are full of life once again, this will only create more interest and expose more talent across the art world.

Art's Role in Interior Design

An art-filled hallway in an East Village apartment designed by Philip Gorrivan.
Joshua McHugh

"If a room is a symphony, art is the sonata: no symphony or project is complete without it," says New York-based designer Philip Gorrivan. "Art is integral to all of my interiors and often my favorite part of the design process."

Art plays a pivotal role in decoration, whether a designer is working for high-end clients who are often also collectors or for first-time homebuyers with strong pulses on the art and design worlds but smaller budgets. Atlanta-based designer Melanie Millner says that art is often the starting off point for her projects as it inspires the aesthetic and feel of a home while reflecting the owner's personality and spirit while Gorrivan says special pieces can drive the design of an entire home.

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"Capturing that feeling is critical to designing a meaningful interior," she says. "Incorporating art should not just be about coordinating fabrics and furnishings around it, but more importantly, the interior should echo the understanding of why the art was originally selected and how it draws emotion when you are in the presence of it."

Nashville-based designer Roger Higgins says that though most people consider art to be a luxury, it is truly essential for a well-designed home and he sees a growing interest in it accessibility grows beyond intimidating galleries or consulting groups. L.A.-based designer Sean Leffers shares the sentiment saying that the most important aspect of art in his projects is how it relates to the lives of his clients.

A study filled with art and artifacts by Sean Leffers.
Christopher Stark

"If you have the time to invest in building a collection that begins from within you, it can represent your interests in history, culture, and aesthetics; hopes and dreams for the future; and be an entry point for contemporary conversations that you want to be a part of," says Leffers.

Mark Cravotta says one of the first tasks he sets for clients is "to calibrate on the importance and prominence of art in the project." The inclusion and planning for art's use in the home is central to the overall composition of his designs for each home. Roger Higgins asks each client to show several pieces they love to guide the design in the right direction, while other designers most often find art to be the cherry on top and final piece of a beautiful design puzzle.

"[Art] acts as the finishing touch and adds that element of personality you don't get through fabrics or furniture," says Erica Burns, a designer based in Bethesda, Maryland. "It sets the tone for the space, whether that's bold or quiet, serious or whimsical, and we love to play with art to create interesting juxtapositions in design."

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We asked several creatives from the Artist Collective group, which has locations in Atlanta, Charleston, Nashville, and Washington, D.C. about their roles in working with designers and clients seeking a home or room refresh. Michele James of Atlanta and Shannon Wood of Charleston both shared that commissions are on the rise and that people are taking more time to find pieces that really speak to them. Wood also notes that she's noticing designers requesting more pieces for their clients' second homes. Lanie Mann of Washington, D.C. says art budgets seem to be expanding as people no longer can tolerate living with blank walls and it has been exciting for artists to have opportunities to create more unique pieces.

"We are seeing more requests for art throughout the entire home from the living and dining rooms to unexpected spaces like the kitchen," says artist Lisa Zager. "Also, designers are bringing art into their schemes early on, often coming into the Nashville Artist Collective studio with inspiration boards and color palettes so that we can help curate specific pieces for the home."

How (and Where) Designers Source Art

An entry designed by Erica Burns.
Stacy Zarin Goldberg

With the rise of social media and a strange year and a half of spending nearly all our days at home, an incredible variety of ways to source art online has emerged, which only adds to its accessibility for aspiring collectors and for seasoned veterans seeking the next great artist outside of their usual circles. This also means designers are working harder than ever to stay on top of what's happening in the art world as well as to find a range of sources that offer artworks across all budgets.

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Several of the designers we spoke with said that developing strong relationships with favorite galleries and artists—local and international—was their most important method for keeping their pulses on the art world. Charlotte-based designer Layton Campbell says he subscribes to several art publications while Sean Leffers takes weekly trips to galleries and exhibitions (he's the vice chair of ICA San Diego), and Katie Rosenfeld keeps an Instagram folder of artists she's discovered that resonate with her. However, these designers also find it important to avoid getting caught up in what's trending and to always source timeless pieces that are worthy of their clients' collections.

"Sourcing art is such a personal experience, and we find that it's not always much about what is happening in the art world as knowing what is out there in order to bring the right pieces to our clients that they will connect with and be moved by," says Michael Del Piero, a designer based in Chicago.

An artistic living room in a home designed by Michael Del Piero located in Chicago's Southport neighborhood.
Courtesy of Michael Del Piero

Similar to the results of a recent survey by 1stDibs, about half of the designers we sourced from work with consultants either on a regular or occasional basis to source extra-special pieces for projects. Sean Anderson keeps an inventory of art to pull from for his projects. Many of the pieces are antique finds or commissions from artists he enjoys working with and supporting, but he also has a strong network of colleagues who work primarily in the art world to ensure his most discerning collector clients are getting the caliber of works they expect.

Designers' Favorite Ways to Source Art

A vignette designed by Mark Cravotta for San Antonio's Cypress Lounge.
Courtesy of Cravotta Interiors

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Our designers shared a wide variety of digital platforms, galleries around the country, and an array of art consultants that they rely on for sourcing the best pieces which speaks to the growing availability of resources for all levels of collectors. Some favorite digital sources mentioned were: Artnet, Artsy, Tappan, 1stDibs, Etsy, and yes, Instagram, too.

"The thing about art is that there is so much talent out there that hasn't been found or seen or recognized," says Katie Rosenfeld. "Social media has 'made' the careers of people like William McClure or Josh Young, for example."

Cravotta enjoys working with art consultants Jody Klotz and Shari Brownfield while Campbell often works with Heather Gaudio Fine Art and Ann Bourgeois of Charlotte Art Consultants. Some favorite galleries and events to shop from include: Pryor Fine Art, Gregg Irby, and Alan Avery Art Company in Atlanta; Anne Neilson Fine Art and Elder Gallery of Contemporary Art in Charlotte; Obsolete Inc. in Los Angeles; Maybaum Gallery in San Francisco; and Blue Print Gallery in Dallas.

Several designers also shared that they attend art fairs when they can, make art a priority on their travels, and they can often be found at Art Basel and other major art events around the country to stay up-to-date. L.A. based designer Brigette Romanek's favorite sources come from a variety of platforms, noting Bloom and Plume, Hauser and Wirth, Various Small Fires, as well as browsing curator Thelma Golden's Instagram page offer her a well-rounded, diverse group to source from.

"If we are purchasing contemporary work, we generally buy on the primary market directly from the gallery," says Sean Leffers. "Often we will buy work directly from preview PDFs that we receive from galleries we have a close relationship with. Purchasing work on the primary contemporary market can be very competitive if the artist is in high demand and the best way to get access is to invest time in building relationships with galleries, treat the work and people with respect, support artists and institutions that you think highly of regardless of economic benefits to yourself, and being a nice person."

2022 Art Trends

A jewel box hallway designed by Roger Higgins for a project at Yellowstone Club home in Montana.
Haris Kenjar

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While most of the designers that grace the pages of VERANDA eschew trends, they understand that trending pieces, movements, and designers or artists have their place. This is especially true in the art world, as the industry is rapidly changing with infiltration by the metaverse and as societal change has drawn more attention to female and minority artists. Cravotta says he's seeing more blue-chip contemporary art from Takashi Murakami and Yayoi Kusama. He's also noticing a lot of deserved attention on mid-century female artists while Leffers has noticed a growing desire to connect with perspectives of BIPOC artists, especially those whose work sparks conversations about social issues such as the environment, equality, and global peace. Roger Higgins says he's seen an increased demand in both contemporary art and the old masters, noticing a love of large-scale landscapes, whether they are classic or contemporary.

Several designers mentioned that they anticipate 3D and sculptural art to continue trending, which was also noted by the recent 1stDibs survey. The company's findings show that the most popular art styles in 2022 are expected to be abstract (54%), followed by contemporary (48%) and modern (42%) while 48% of designers indicating they anticipate an increase in use of sculpture. Del Piero says her team has been drawn to highly textural works with some sort of dimension to them, often toeing the line between a traditional two-dimensional painting and a three-dimensional sculpture.

A charming vignette in a living room designed by Katie Rosenfeld for a Spring Lake, New Jersey home.
Read McKendree

"I can see homeowners really beginning to curate the art within their home like a gallery with seasonal rearrangements or rotations of meaningful pieces to keep things fresh," says Jeremiah Brent. "I'm anticipating a new wave of intentionality when it comes to supporting local artists. Art can take many forms within our home - my design firm often looks to Yelp for local artisans to execute custom finishes or handcrafted furniture that reflects the same artisanal detail as the addition of a painting or sculpture." He also says "Japandi Design" has seen a 41% increase in search on Yelp, which he says can be achieved artistically through columns with a ceramic vase or sculpture

atop, the installation of artistic lighting, or canvases that are dynamically crafted with mixed materials.

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Philip Gorrivan says while Jim Lambie's work is his current obsession, he's also been drawn to contemporary photography of late from creatives like Vik Muniz, Michael Wolf, and Candida Hofer. While humorous pieces by artists like David Shrigley or Chris Johanson add a fun spin to interiors and keep a space from feeling stuffy, he says large-scale paintings from emerging artists (he's really loving Ena Swansea) are a great way to make a statement in your home and as a collector.

"I've noticed photography and painting portraiture become increasingly popular," says Brigette Romanek. "As we become more educated and open up to new ideas, people begin to appreciate photography as more of an art form versus something that just anyone with an iPhone can do. Malick Sidibé, a favorite photographer of mine, captured photos that evoke just as much feeling as a painting does, and when you hold up a picture on your camera roll, next to one of Malick's, you can definitely see a difference." Romanek also notes that she is loving how in-demand portraiture is right now and that African American works are being more recognized ever before today than in history.

"I think people, now more than ever, want pieces that speak to them personally, which is why we're seeing such an explosion among independent artists of all types," says Sean Anderson. "Commissions are becoming more accessible and the opportunity to include a piece that is fully personal is now within the reach of our smartphones. With that, I think artists are taking more chances and pushing their own boundaries to offer something that stands out. I think the art market will only continue to expand and become more accessible as time moves forward." Leffers notes a trend away from collecting as a status symbol and a renewed focus on collecting based on one's affinities and desire to support particular artists as we've all craved meaning and personal connection more than ever in the last few years.

While minimalism or a focus on investments outside the home once made sense for many people who spent the majority of their time in the office, traveling, or in their local communities, white-washed rooms and a lack of personality in our interiors didn't serve us well while we were sheltering in place and holding our breaths for the world to return to normal again. Del Piero says that now it is an imperative for us to be surrounded by beautiful things but also by objects and art that evoke emotion and thought, spark conversation, or remind us of our fondest memories and doesn't see this sentiment fading anytime soon.

A showstopping hallway designed by Melanie Miller of The Design Atelier.

Emily J. Followill

"Art has the ability to do all these things," she says. "Art transports its viewers to other places and times, fostering the exploration of thoughts and feelings, and in today's world, that is a welcome escape. That being said, we feel strongly that this interest [in art] will indeed continue to grow." And though the world has mostly reopened in some capacity, the residue of the pandemic still resides in our hybrid work schedules, appreciation for the home, and our need to be surrounded by things we love—all things that art can enhance from our guest room workspaces to curating a collection that sparks joy throughout our homes.

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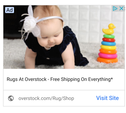

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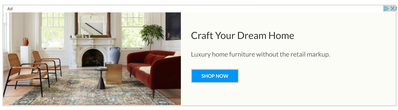

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