

How (and when) to buy art on the cheap in Philadelphia

by [Grace Dickinson](#), Updated: May 10, 2019- 9:17 AM



TIM BLACKWELL / FILE PHOTO

Every spring, thousands flood the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts for the school's annual [Student Exhibition](#). Many are looking for deals on paintings, sculptures, prints, and beyond. Others are scouting for the next Picasso. The three-week show, which [opens May 10](#), generates hundreds of thousands of dollars in sales. And while average sale prices hover around \$1,000, plenty of pieces go for under \$100.

“The price points are naturally lower, and you’re finding artists at a really exciting snapshot in time, where they’re still emerging and developing their voice,” said Clint Jukkala, PAFA’s dean of the School of Fine Arts. “Most graduates here are making art for the rest of their lives, and some will go on to become major names.”

The Student Exhibition, which runs until June 2, is prime for those buying art on a budget, but it’s one of many opportunities for fledgling collectors. Read on for a guide on where and how to acquire affordable art in Philadelphia.

What is “affordable art”?

The definition of affordable art is about as abstract as a Kandinsky painting, determined by disposable income and personal preferences.

“It’s like going out for dinner or buying running shoes — one person might consider \$100 to be reasonable, while another person places the cap at \$30,” said Jukkala. “Determine what you can afford and are willing to set aside on annual basis. For someone, that might be \$200, for someone else \$2,000, and someone else \$20,000.”

Many gallery owners agreed that, generally, art under \$500 falls into the affordable range, and that one can find pieces priced at half that or below in Philadelphia.

The least expensive mediums

“Sculpture is almost always the most expensive, then paintings second, and then other mediums,” said Elizabeth Spungen, executive director at [the Print Center](#).

If you’re being thrifty, look for works produced on paper, including photographs and prints. It’s easy to create multiples on paper, and while this lowers the overall price, artists often limit editions to maintain value and preserve novelty.

“Whether you’re talking about lithography or monotyping or screen printing, a lot of work goes into printmaking, but you’re producing it on paper, as opposed to stretching canvas or sourcing expensive bronze,” said Rachel Zimmerman, executive director of [InLiquid Art + Design](#). Other works on paper include drawings, collages, mixed digital media, and watercolors.

If your heart is set on acquiring an oil painting or a striking sculpture, just start small. “As a rule of thumb, the smaller it is, the less expensive it is,” Zimmerman said. “And if it isn’t framed yet, you’ll get an even better deal.”



MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / STAFF

The Print Center hosts both photography and printmaking exhibitions, with works typically averaging in price between \$150 to \$750.

Is it wrong to buy a reproduction?

Printed reproductions of paintings are naturally far cheaper than originals, but they can be a controversial proposition.

“I would never suggest to someone to buy a replica — essentially what you’re talking about is a poster,” said Spungen. “Owning something that an artist actually had their hand in has so much more life in it.”

Others argue that artists still see returns from reproductions, which also allow them to reach wider audiences. “If you want to support a certain artist, do it in any way that you can,” said Sara McCorrison, cofounder of [Paradigm Gallery + Studio](#). “What’s the problem with having a print if there’s no way you can afford an original?”

With reproductions, you’ll lose certain intricate details, like the rich depth that comes from layered paint. However, some modern printing techniques can match color and apply ink with such precision that it’s hard to distinguish a duplicate from an original without getting up close.



PHOTO COURTESY PARADIGM GALLERY + STUDIO

At Old City's Paradigm Gallery + Studio, find a wide range of contemporary pieces, including prints for \$50 or less.

Local galleries for shopping on a budget

You needn't bleed your bank account to buy great art. Blocks from Rittenhouse Square, the Print Center offers works for as low as \$25. Kensington's InLiquid Gallery often keeps a few \$50 prints on its walls. For small prints under \$30 and craftier works, check out Northern Liberties' [Art Star Gallery and Boutique](#). And you'll always find a selection of \$50-and-under prints at Queen Village's Paradigm Gallery + Studio, often alongside \$10,000-plus originals.

Farther south, at least half of every exhibition at Bella Vista's [Da Vinci Art Alliance](#), featuring all-local artists, is priced under \$500. South Street's [Eyes Gallery](#) is a mecca of affordable Latin American folk art, including ceramics and sculptures (\$12 to \$800) and oil paintings (\$40 to \$70).

The city's artist-run spaces are excellent options, too. Callowhill's Rollins Building houses six of them: [Vox Populi](#), [Automat Collective](#), [Practice](#), [Grizzly Grizzly](#), and [Marginal Utility](#). In Kensington, there are [Tiger Strikes Asteroid](#), [Little Berlin](#), and [FJORD](#), alongside [Crane Arts](#), home to both artists' studios and rotating exhibits. [Space1026](#), in the midst of a move, plans to open its new gallery (next to the Met) by fall. Keep an eye out this June for major clean-out sales at its current Chinatown spot.

Mark your calendar: Events for art on a budget

Philly has several annual budget-friendly art staples beyond PAFA's Student Exhibition. Art Star hosts [events](#) like the spring craft bazaar, happening May 11-12. A few weeks away is InLiquid's [Art for the Cash Poor](#) (June 1), where ceramics, jewelry, and fine art are all priced under \$199. InLiquid also hosts its [annual benefit](#) each winter, auctioning pieces at prices from \$10 to several thousand dollars.

In the fall, [Philadelphia Open Studio Tours](#) (POST) presents one of the best ways to meet artists. Hundreds open their studios, where visitors can view and inquire about buying work.

Every winter, Bella Vista's [Fleisher Art Memorial](#) holds both a student exhibition and a holiday market called Handmade, with works as low as \$25. (In fall 2020, the space will host its every-other-year fund-raiser, Dear Fleisher, a show of postcard-sized \$50 works.) And each December marks Space1026's signature Art Auction, featuring donated works by members and artists nationwide — all starting at an enticing \$5 bid.



PHOTO COURTESY INLIQUID ART + DESIGN

At InLiquid's annual Art for the Cash Pop, all works of art, including ceramics, jewelry, and paintings, are priced under \$199.

Buying from an artist vs. gallery

Artist hubs like Crane Arts and [BOK](#) host open studio days — and therein is one of art collecting's best-kept secrets.

“If you get to know an artist and build a connection, a lot of times, they’ll work with you,” said Zimmerman. “There also might be something that’s been sitting around for a while that they’d be willing to discount.”

Buying directly from an artist also cuts out (the cost of) the middleman. But if you were introduced to a piece through a gallery, you should go through the gallery; the symbiotic relationship between artist and gallery isn’t one you want to smudge.

“Most artists don’t have the time to be doing the promotion, packing, and shipping of their work,” McCorriston said. “When you buy from a gallery, you’re directly supporting a Philadelphia business and you’re directly supporting an artist, who’s being supported by the brick-and-mortar.”



PHOTO COURTESY INLIQUID ART + DESIGN

The annual InLiquid benefit auction often includes pieces that start at a bidding price of just \$10.

The art of negotiating

If you fall in love with a piece that's just out of your reach, don't be afraid to negotiate. There's often a little wiggle room, whether it's with the artist or a dealer.

"When we do a show," Zimmerman said, "we ask if the artist is open to discounts so we know what the threshold is in advance. Art isn't made to sit on a shelf — the goal is to get each piece into the home of someone who values it." Even if you get shut down, dealers will often contact artists for you to see if they have something else not currently on display that might better fit your budget. Sometimes smaller pieces are stowed away in a back room, among other unsold inventory. Many galleries offer layaway plans, too.

A rule for first-time collectors

Before even beginning to invest, you should first educate your eye. Go to as many events, art fairs, and galleries as possible to gain a sense of what you like — that will give you confidence when you make a purchase.

"What's most important is to buy what you love," said Jukkala. "It's not about speculating who's going to be the next superstar. It's about finding what you want to look at every day."



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