

numbers and high sales despite the recession. Original art is very personal and subject to individual tastes so when people find a piece they connect to they just have to have it."

And she links a shift away from people buying the latest "must-have" to a world in which fitting in is no longer a priority. "Individuality defines who you are and, in an age where many people follow and feel anonymous in the crowd, art is a vital form of self-expression," she says. "Research we carried out showed that a third of 2,000 people surveyed believe there is no better way to express your personality or enhance the mood of a room than with original art."

Research by the AAF shows that it's particularly true of women - 72% of females believe that art is an expression of themselves (rather than a status symbol). Women have become increasingly confident engaging with and buying art; in 2005 research showed that the majority felt intimidated by the whole scene; now over half say they would feel happy buying from a fair or gallery. And women are more adventurous when it comes to choosing art, being more likely to go for abstract or conceptual styles than men.

So if you want to join the ranks of art owners, now is the perfect time. But it's

not the kind of thing to rush into. "Preparation is really key," says Wheeler. "Think about the place you want the piece to go; the size of the space, what light it gets, the other colours in the room. But be prepared to throw all of that out of the window when you see something you really love."

Add a little art to your life

As well as fairs, art is sold in high street galleries, online, at auctions... Medea Cohan-Petroliano, curator at the University of the Arts in London, also suggests heading down to your nearest art college for the BA shows in June and the MA shows in September. "Degree shows aren't scary and artists will be there to talk to and it's a good way to see emerging artists," she adds. "Independent shows are good if you can find them. They are often recent graduates and the money that's made goes to the artists."

Check social networking sites, listings magazines and art websites to find upcoming events, and get on the mailing list of any artists whose work you like at the fairs or galleries you visit. She suggests sites like murmurart.com as a good place to spot rising stars.

Don't be afraid to ask questions of anyone you're thinking of buying from. "There's an idea that the art world is

very elitist and intimidating," says Wheeler, "but at events like the Affordable Art Fair you'll find that the dealers are very approachable, warm and friendly, and happy to answer any questions. You might want to know if the artist works in other media," she says, "or if you can pay in instalments."

When it comes to money, assuming you don't have £675m to spend (unlike the new owner of Giacometti's *Walking Man* sculpture that sold at auction in February) the good news is, if you're buying work by an unknown artist you

edition prints by big-name artists can sell for just a few hundred pounds.

Spotting a classic

But how do you know who to buy? With the obvious exceptions of the already famous, it can be hard to know who to back since there's no way to know who is going to be the next Damien Hirst. "One of the really important things for new collectors is to be confident enough to ask questions," says Cohan-Petroliano. "Where did the artist study? What are their future plans? It's good if they've got

"You're waiting for the 'bairs on the back of your neck' moment. Is the painting something you love?"

don't have to break the bank. The Affordable Art Fair has a £3,000 cap on prices, with many on sale from £50. "I'd never advise spending more than about £1,000 for work by someone who was just a year or so out of art school," says Cohan-Petroliano, adding that if the materials are expensive, for example gold leaf, you might expect to pay more. Even at major auction houses £1,000 is a typical amount to spend. If you have more money, the sky's the limit but, even if you don't, limited

something coming up, like an MA or a show, because it means they're committed and they're producing." This is especially important if you have hopes of seeing the work increase in value: "You want to know the artist is pursuing it as a career, not just a hobby," she says. But don't get too excited by that idea: the bad news is that you can't guarantee making money on your art. Unless you're extremely lucky, or a wealthy collector able to buy from artists who are already well-established, it's unlikely you'll end

GOODBYE WINE BAR, HELLO GALLERY

Shopping, eating, partying - and the pictures are good too. Six sociable ways to increase your art appreciation



EVENING MOOCH AND SUPPER

National Gallery, London On Friday nights, the National Gallery is open until 9pm. After checking out the paintings you can visit the National Dining Rooms. The award-winning eaterie is restaurateur Oliver Peyton's brainchild and the view is one of London's best (nationalgallery.org.uk).



SATURDAY NIGHT SORTED

Mess, The Saatchi Gallery, London The Mess is adjoined to the Saatchi Gallery on London's King's Road. With a menu involving daily specials like pumpkin tortellini, and a clientele of hip young things, it's a night out in itself. Open until 11.30pm Tues-Sat (saatchi-gallery.co.uk).



TALENT SPOT AND EAT CAKE

The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh The bookshop of this popular modern art gallery sells limited editions of works by emerging artists, including those who have been exhibited in the gallery (some are also available to buy online). The cafe is worth a post-splurge visit too (fruitmarket.co.uk).



VISIT THE GALLERY BY THE SEA

Tate St Ives While you're on your British staycation this summer you could do worse than treat yourself to a Cornish tea at the Tate cafe. Expect spectacular views over Porthmeor Beach and locally sourced ice cream, clotted cream and cider (tate.org.uk/stives).



SEE ART, DANCE, DRINK BEER

Victoria & Albert Museum, London The last Friday of every month sees the V&A's Friday Late event. The galleries are open until 10pm and live performances, DJs, debates, special guests, a bar and food are also part of the programme, plus 15% off in the V&A shops (vam.ac.uk).



A DOUBLE DOSE OF CULTURE

The Lowry, Salford There's such a great range of restaurants and bars in this fab quayside location that you'll have to remind yourself to pop into the galleries. Even better, the Lowry complex also houses a theatre, so after taking in the artworks you can take in a show (thelowry.com).