

Inside Seattle

At her eponymous gallery, Catherine Person loves to introduce novice collectors to artists like Rachel Illingworth.

Art of your own

You don't have to be a big hitter to be a buyer. Just ask gallery owner Catherine Person

BY PAT TANUMIHARDJA | PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN CLARK

WITH HER PIXIE HAIRDO, designer outfits, and perfect posture honed by years of ballet lessons, Catherine Person has all the trappings of a haughty art gallery owner. But an impish grin hints at her down-to-earth demeanor. "I'm friendlier than most," laughs Person, who opened her eponymous Pioneer Square gallery in 2005.

Person understands that no one is born a fine-art connoisseur. She graduated from Olympia's Evergreen State College in the '70s with a degree in sociology and not one art history class

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under her belt. Then she launched an eclectic career that included sewing costumes for local theater productions and raising funds for arts events.

Eventually, Person started freelancing for Bumbershoot, Seattle's annual arts extravaganza, where she curated exhibitions and met dozens of craftspeople from around the country. "You should sell our art!" they told her.

A few years later, Person started doing just that as a full-on art consultant, selling works without a retail space. Beginners' luck paved the way—at first.

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Day one on the job, she sold 10 limited-edition prints to a single buyer. How easy, she thought. Months went by before she made another big sale, but Person persevered. She went on to represent a host of indie artists, whose pieces she sold to deep-pocketed corporate clients like Boeing and Safeco.

As she grew more successful, Person needed a proper space to showcase her clients' work, so she opened her gallery in a gorgeous space downtown, and filled it with abstract and figurative work by contemporary Northwest artists. Even her 1,100-square-foot apartment in Capitol Hill is crammed with more than 60 pieces by local artists.

Surprised by how few Seattleites collect art, Person thinks that many are interested but just don't know where to start. "It's all about education and experience," says Person, who has immersed herself in the life of the city for more than 30 years now. "Sure, I've spent a lot of time at it—but I started where everyone else does."

INFO Catherine Person Gallery (*closed Sun–Mon; 319 Third Ave. S.; catherineperson.com or 206/763-5565*)

You, too, can collect art

Whatever your artistic and aesthetic inclinations, Catherine Person says, just start collecting in a modest way. It'll all add up. Here are her basic tips for beginners.

Learn the language

Visit art museums and private galleries, and attend events like Pioneer Square's First Thursday Gallery Walk (Nov 6; free; pioneersquare.org or 206/667-0687). "You'll quickly start to get a feel for what you like or don't like and what you respond to," Person says.

Talk to the experts

Don't be afraid to chitchat with reputable dealers and ask questions. They're your best teachers.

Start small

Person sells artwork starting at \$200. She suggests asking a dealer to show you everything in your price range, however limited it is. You'll be surprised at how many choices you'll have. Some galleries also rent artwork, and many offer no-interest payment plans.

Think about balance and scale

"You don't want art that's too big or too small" for your space, advises Person. "Sometimes all you need is one work of art to unite the room. One large piece on a focal wall

can make a room look bigger, rather than six smaller ones."

Consider wall space and light

Numerous large windows pose two dilemmas: They leave little space for hanging art, and they flood rooms with sunlight. So buy sculpture (an often-overlooked medium) instead, and avoid hanging delicate watercolors and photographs in direct sun—or go for acrylics and oils, which are less likely to degrade.

Go local

Northwest artists are more accessible, often making appearances at galleries. And though Person believes that they can hold their own against artists in New York, Los Angeles, and Europe, they don't command the same prices for their work.

Buy what you love, above all

You're the one who has to live with the artwork, so get what speaks to you—whether it costs \$50 or \$5,000. ■