

DESIGNING

Art Smart

NOTHING SUGGESTS SOPHISTICATION LIKE A HOME DECORATED WITH ORIGINAL WORKS OF ART. BUT AS THIS SOUTH END COUPLE DISCOVERED, INTEGRATING TREASURED PIECES INTO EVERYDAY LIFE REQUIRES AN EXPERT EYE. **BY TINA SUTTON**

It's not every bathroom that greets visitors with edgy photographs by Kiki Smith, Nan Goldin, and Jim Dine. And it's not every home where the decor is built around the artwork, rather than the other way around.

But such is the case for South End residents Jody and Erik Saarmaa, both in their 40s, who've been carefully assembling an eclectic art collection throughout their eight-plus years of marriage. The couple — he an intellectual property attorney, she a vice president at Liquid Machines software security — became serious collectors after joining the Museum Council of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, a group for young philanthropic supporters of the institution.

“We started with prints because you could acquire things that are special, and sometimes unique, at affordable prices,” says Jody. Their collection now ranges from old masters like Durer to modernists Kara Walker and Chuck Close.

The couple has also collected prints by “new old masters” discovered at Childs Gallery on Newbury Street, a noted Boston art resource for more than 70 years. They came to rely on the gallery's recently named president, Richard Baiano, for advice on collecting, as well as displaying, their art. Baiano, along with partner Craig Tevolitz, created the design consulting firm Platemark Design to help clients integrate their art purchases with their home decor and lifestyle needs.

In the Saarmaas's elegant row house apartment, that meant arranging disparate prints, paintings, and sculptures throughout the enormous living/dining/kitchen area, an open space used for everything from reading and TV watching to lavish entertaining.

“It's basically a puzzle,” says Tevolitz. “You have so much wall space. Some things you need to see from a distance, some up close.” But first comes a fixed layout of furniture to optimize both the room flow and art vantage points.

“Except for a rug and antique secretary desk, we were ready to start all over,” says Jody. “I knew pieces I wanted, such as a long skinny dining room table and extra long

INTIMATE PORTRAIT To better showcase Jody and Erik Saarmaa's art collection, the designers suggested neutral walls and furnishings. Hanging on wires, the drawings over the couch can be moved up and down to accommodate new pieces and contrast nicely with the contemporary painting on the opposite wall (facing page).

Photographs by ERIC ROTH





5 Tips for Hanging Art

Take into consideration **ideal viewing distance** for each piece depending on scale, medium, and quality of the work.

Artwork groupings can be used to define spaces in a large room.

Pick a frame that goes with the artwork, not the room decor. It might eventually wind up on a different wall.

Track lighting offers the ultimate flexibility, with spots that can be doubled up on a single large painting or redirected to accommodate rehanging.

Fabric and wall colors should **complement, not compete** with the art. Benjamin Moore Beacon Gray, for example, works with all frames, whether gold, black, white, or silver.

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couch, but I really needed Craig's help in figuring out proportions, fabrics, and budgeting."

Tevolitz came up with several inspired choices, such as placing a large chaise sideways to offer unobstructed views of the art. He upholstered chairs with different fabrics front and back, visually sectioning the large room depending on where one sits. An oversized and indestructible resin coffee table accommodates small sculptures as well as casual dining, but can also be lit from below to create unexpected drama at night.

"Sculpture is sort of the third person in their marriage," jokes Tevolitz. "It comes alive and brings a lot of humanity to the space, especially if it's figurative."

Rather than go for the traditional "one large painting over the couch" look, Tevolitz had the idea of grouping smaller prints in a grid pattern hung on wires.

"Many people don't understand that the moldings of old buildings were meant to be functional," says Baiano, a trained architect. "You can hang so much art from the bottom picture rail without poking holes in the walls." Grouping art also offers flexibility, as works can easily be moved side to side, or up and down to accommodate new

purchases.

The Saarmaas love this arrangement, which allows them to comfortably sit and stare at one of their first and favorite pieces, a detailed late 19th century etching by Max Klinger.

"Ideal art placement is all about proximity," adds Tevolitz. "Most people hang things too high. The center of the piece should be at your eye level when standing."

And proper lighting is crucial. Though the elaborate ceiling medallion seemed to be begging for a chandelier, the Platemark team opted instead for thin rows of more versatile track spots.

Tevolitz adds there's no need for sterile white decor to show off artworks. He prefers a unified neutral color scheme, with a mix of subtle textures, patterns, and some offbeat accent tones to keep the room from looking contrived.

He calls this "deliberate imperfection," like mixing contemporary art with traditional furnishings, or vice versa. After all, a house is not a museum.

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