The Art of Selecting a Picture

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The Art of Selecting a Picture

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
The Art of Selecting a Picture

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"A room hung with pictures is a room living with thoughts"  
—Sir Joshua Reynolds

Selecting, framing, and hanging pictures to enhance your home not only is a challenge, it can be fun. Selecting a picture for a particular wall, framing it, and finally hanging it to the best advantage is a real art.

INTRODUCTION

Select pictures for their appeal and decorative quality—with the idea that pictures will give you and your family years of satisfaction—not merely to fill up bare wall spaces. Pictures should add interest, color and vitality to a room. Perhaps you need to change things if you have become unaware of or have ceased to look at or enjoy a picture you have in your home.

How can we interpret works of art? An artist works according to his own style, expressing his own imagination and individuality. He interprets what he sees and how he feels about a subject in such a way that a person who looks at his picture feels the same way he did. The artist means to convey a feeling, mood, idea or message to the viewer. His art reflects the time in which he lives. Thus, it is important to know something about the artist and his era.

Many modern artists, for example, make no attempt to copy the visual aspects of an object or nature exactly. They feel the photographer with his camera can make a copy more accurately. Some abstract pictures may resemble a natural form, whereas non-objective pictures are an organization of parts. Non-objective pictures rely mainly on their emotional appeal, whatever that emotion might be. The viewer may sense or feel the message of the artist, but he may not necessarily like the picture. The success of a picture, from the viewer's standpoint, will depend upon his own background and experience—how he thinks and how his background compares to that of the artist.

Thus, how we react to pictures is a very personal matter. Just as we may not enjoy the same friends, we may not enjoy or respond to the same pictures or to different works of art. There are all kinds of art and reasons for their appeal to certain individuals. Most of us enjoy pictures which have a close association to us. We know by the appeal that a picture has to us whether we would like to live with it. We may choose some pictures for their emotional impact rather than their beauty.

As we have new experiences and our personalities develop, we may change our minds about what we like. Therefore, our likes in pictures may change. We may select pictures for temporary use, such as those for children's rooms, whereas others we will appreciate a lifetime. A truly good picture gives enjoyment each time it is seen.

Almost every picture can say something to you personally, so approach a picture with an open mind. If a picture captures your imagination and it inspires you, then no doubt, you will enjoy living with it and can justify it being a part of your home.

SUBJECT MATTER OF PICTURES

The subject matter in pictures may help you gain the decorating effect you desire in a room. Some types of pictures appeal more to some people than others.

1. Religious stories were told by pictures before most people could read or write. Many great religious pictures were painted for churches by the old masters. Such pictures have universal appeal.
2. Traditional portraits of royalty, simple country folk and their family members reveal another day, age and character through the expression of eyes and lines of face and hands. The camera, however, has made exact likeness unnecessary for the artist. Portraits of family members, such as oils and pastel portraits of children, are included here.

3. Scenery, such as landscapes, marine or mountain scenes, is easily understood and appeals to everyone. Such pictures recall experiences with nature. Landscapes began as backgrounds for portraits or religious pictures. Figures were gradually eliminated and today most landscapes do not have figures.

4. Genre pictures are scenes of everyday happenings in the lives of the people they portray. They show people working and carrying out their daily routines.

5. Pictures of historical incidents of great significance to mankind and great moments in history stir the imagination.

6. Pictures of architecture, such as buildings and bridges and street scenes, suggest travel and far-away lands.

7. Animal and bird pictures hold appeal for many, especially children and nature lovers.

8. Flower and fruit pictures portray beauty in color and unusual arrangement.

9. Still lifes are a grouping of inanimate objects selected and arranged by the artist for their interesting design and color.

10. Maps of the world, countries, states or areas hold much appeal for students and those who have traveled.

11. Abstracts and non-objective pictures are enjoyed mainly for their design, such as color, texture, value, line or shape, which imparts an emotional impact. Op art, for example, is an optical illusion type of art, which through contraction and expansion, has movement. Psychedelic art is tied up with the frantic, hallucinating portrayal of things. Hard edge painting has definite crisp and straight edges on the shapes used. Light painting uses light instead of paint for the effect. There will always be artists (the avant garde) bursting with new forms of expression.

PICTURES FOR VARIOUS ROOMS

Subject matter for each room depends upon the age, sex, and interests of your family. Pictures not only should appeal to those who use the room but should enhance the decor of the room.

Informal rooms require simple pictures and framing. Abstract or non-objective pictures, for example, are often used in modern informal rooms with plain and little or no frame. Sometimes just a strip of wood tacked to the edges of the canvas is used in place of a frame. Formal rooms, on the other hand, require more ornate pictures and framing. Pictures from the French Impressionistic era, such as a Renoir, for example, call for elaborately carved frames, dull gilded, and are best hung in a formal room, such as French traditional.

1. Living room pictures need to have a general appeal for the enjoyment of family and friends. These may be landscapes, seascapes, still lifes, flowers, abstracts, etc. They are often the basis of conversation.

2. Dining room pictures can be gay and colorful. They might be landscapes, still lifes, flowers or flowering trees, fruits, or birds. Subject matter should be conducive to appetite.

3. Bedroom pictures are usually more personal and individual since they directly reflect the likes of those who live there. Most women and girls enjoy pictures that have feminine and light quality. Men usually enjoy bold, vigorous, forceful pictures full of action. Family photographs belong where they will be enjoyed by the ones to whom they mean the most. Also, religious pictures are best used in the bedroom where quiet and privacy prevail.

4. Children's rooms need pictures that are bright, colorful and simple. The interests of a child are a guide to pictures he will enjoy. Surround him with different pictures as he grows, develops, and as his interests broaden. Hang them at his eye level.

5. Guest rooms need to have pictures which are impersonal so they appeal to old and young, masculine and feminine guests.

6. Recreational rooms call for more forceful pictures full of action and interest. Genre and historical pictures, travel posters and maps, pictures of street scenes and far away lands, hunting and fishing scenes stir the imagination.
PICTURES FOR VARIOUS PLACES

The size and shape of a picture or a group of pictures should fit the shape of the wall space they will occupy—be it rectangular, vertical or square—so that the pictures and wall space relate and are in harmony. It is not necessary to fill every wall space with a picture or group of pictures. Only when a wall seems bleak and bare does it need some type of accessories, such as a picture. Too many accessories may clutter a room and make it appear smaller. Sometimes it is better not to use any pictures, especially if walls are strongly figured; however, if used, wide mats should offset the pictures from their background. In most rooms, one picture ought to dominate.

It usually is better not to hang pictures in hazardous areas, in a triangular arrangement or in a long diagonal line, both from the standpoint of good design and safety. Pictures hung on a stairway wall, for example, could distract a person, causing him to fall. Strive to lead the eye around the room to a center of interest rather than direct attention down on the floor or up into the ceiling.

In an average size room, usually three pictures are adequate. For example, one good sized picture (about 14 by 18 inches or 24 by 36 inches) may be hung on one wall in addition to two somewhat smaller pictures on the other walls or the large picture may be grouped with more pictures on the same wall.

A variety in size of pictures hung in a room usually is better than pictures all the same size. A room will look lower and longer when all pictures in a room are horizontal in shape and higher when all pictures are vertical in shape. Pictures should be hung to form a fairly straight line around the room. Sometimes it is easier to line up the top of pictures rather than their bottoms. Pictures should be hung at eye level so they can be easily viewed. One picture may be the center of interest and be the focal point in a room or in a grouping of pictures and objects. Pictures with figures should face each other or the center of interest.

Above a fireplace with a mantel a picture needs to be raised far enough off the mantel to show that it does not rest on it.

A group of small pictures properly hung in a unit may take the place of a large one. They often are more effective hung together than hung separately. A group of two, or more may be needed to adequately fill a wall space. They should be similar and harmonious in subject matter or be produced during the same era. Usually it is best not to combine black and white pictures with colored ones. Close-up views and far-off scenes are disturbing when seen together.

Pictures of different sizes and shapes when used in a grouping may be brought into harmony by using identical frames. Adjustments in size may be made in the width of the mats used in their framing. Pictures with and without mats may be used in the same group. For a large grouping, select one important "key" picture and build around it. The imaginary outline around the group of pictures is best if square, rectangular, or vertical in shape. The outline should conform to the shape of the wall space just as does a single picture.

Small oval pictures usually look best when hung together; however, they may be grouped with vertical and horizontal pictures. In an arrangement, smaller pictures are usually hung below smaller pictures. It is also possible to put all small pictures, such as photographs, into one large frame.
The space between pictures should be narrower than the width of individual pictures. In a grouping of six vertical pictures hung in a horizontal arrangement two groups of three pictures each might be used (as is done in the drawing above). The space between groups should be less than the space occupied by each group (see Point 2 below).

**CONSIDER THE USE OF SPACE AND FURNITURE WHEN SELECTING PICTURES**

1. Can pictures be seen by persons across the room or can they be viewed close up? Avoid hanging pictures which will be hidden by other objects. Plan for their arrangement.

2. Does the picture fill the shape of the wall space? For example, a vertical picture should be hung in a vertical space and a horizontal one in a horizontal space. Pictures, however, may be grouped to fill the space adequately. For instance, several horizontal pictures can be hung one above the other to fill a vertical space and several vertical pictures can be hung in a horizontal row to fill a horizontal space.

(See illustration at top of page)

3. Will pictures relate to the size, shape and color of nearby furnishings and form a unit with them? A picture should not be wider than a piece of furniture or the grouping of furniture over which it is hung. A large picture looks best hung over a large piece of furniture or a grouping of smaller furniture. A small picture seems best hung over a small piece of furniture; a medium size picture over a grouping of small furniture. The distance between the bottom of a group of pictures and a table beneath them should be less than the total width of the pictures.

Sometimes a very small picture is hung near a larger object which is similar in shape and in good proportion to it. The grouping should form a unit, look well together and be harmonious. A large picture can be used where space does not permit a furniture arrangement, such as in an entrance.

**CARE OF PICTURES**

Pictures need regular cleaning along with other furnishings. Dust all pictures at least once a week with a soft, lintless cloth. Never use an oily cloth on a picture. If the frame is carved and decorated, use a small soft brush, then wipe the frame lightly with a clean cloth.

Clean glass with a damp cloth wrung as dry as possible. Even a small amount of moisture on the glass can seep along the edges and ruin a picture or mat. Avoid soap as this leaves a slight film on glass and attracts dust and soot. Commercial glass cleaners are available but be sure to polish thoroughly so no film remains on the glass.

Reproductions framed without glass which have a coating of clear plastic or varnish can be cleaned with a damp cloth wrung very dry. Badly soiled pictures may be cleaned with a pad of absorbent cotton dipped in a solution of water and a very small amount of mild detergent. Work quickly and dry the picture with clean cotton as you proceed. Good care of pictures will give you years of lasting enjoyment.
HANGINGS OTHER THAN PICTURES

The following objects should be chosen with care, have real decorative quality and be limited in number.

1. **Decorative fabrics**, which may be purchased by the yard, should be very good examples of the technique used to make them. Their colors need to be in harmony with those in the room. A rod or pole at top or bottom will keep the hanging straight and taut. Thin fabrics should be lined.

2. **Decorative wall hangings** of creative stitchery such as open tapestries and weaving, embroidery work and applique are especially interesting.

3. **Plates** unusual in color and design are sometimes used in dining areas. Special plate hangers make their hanging easy and secure. Trivets, decorative trays, and wall plaques of metal, wood, and other materials can also be used.

4. **Craft objects** such as mosaics, decorative tiles, sand castings and objects embedded in plastic also make original and interesting wall decorations.

5. **Hobbies and collections** may be displayed in various ways such as in shadow boxes, on shelves, or be mounted and framed.

6. **Other articles** include decorative clocks, planters, antiques and other wall ornaments. Bulletin boards can be decorative as well as useful. Travel souvenirs such as fans and masks may also be displayed and hung effectively.

7. **Wallpaper panels** may be framed to give the effect of a picture and add interest to a wall. Architectural moulding may be used.

8. **Mirrors** are quite effectively used in small rooms to create the illusion of more space. Good mirrors have clear smooth glass, free of decoration. If decoration is needed, a decorative frame may be used. It is well to visualize what you will see in a mirror before you hang it.