



VAG OFFERS OPEN ART TRANSPLANT >>

When really rich people want to show off their homes, they don't depend on the furniture and fixtures to do the trick. They do it with art. When traditional indigenous tribal cultures want to brighten up the place, they don't swab the walls with Martha Stewart's Everyday Colors, or park a knockoff Eames chair next to the communal fire. They make art. Our prehistoric ancestors didn't spend their downtime creating designer housewares; they surrounded themselves with cave paintings. So why, despite—or more likely, because of—a glut of home-renovation TV programs and lifestyle magazines giddily celebrating interior design, do we generally overlook the revitalizing effect that original art can have on the spaces we occupy?

"Art can make it [one's home] alive. People can come here and look for something that can open their minds," says Miriam Aroeste. Aroeste is the gatekeeper to one of our city's best-kept interior-design

Guy Robinson

The small house in West Point Grey had been on the market for three months, with no nibbles. Then interior designer Tracey Mills stepped in with some strategically displayed, rented works of art from the Vancouver Art Gallery. The place sold within three weeks. Mills works for Dekora (604-876-4355, www.dekora.com/), a home-staging company. Dekora offers a range of design services that make your home more desirable, and consequently more marketable. Mills swears by the VAG's rental program. "You can choose a sophisticated look, or something more funky. Often, home buyers will purchase the artwork as well," she says by phone during appointments. "Another great thing about renting art is that you can change your walls to match the seasons." > GB

secrets. She's the manager of the Vancouver Art Gallery's art-rental program. If she has her way—and after a few chats with the vivacious

artist, I have no doubt that she will—it won't be a secret much longer. A sculptor and art consultant who originally hails from Mexico City, Aroeste joined the VAG two years ago. The service catered primarily to corporate clients looking to liven up their workplaces and impress clients by renting or renting-to-buy any number of the VAG's loan collection of more than 800 contemporary acrylic and oil paintings, watercolours, colour and black-and-white photographs,

and sculptures. Aroeste saw enormous potential for residential clients, who were relatively few and far between. She wanted to change that.

"Everything is so...beige," she says conspiratorially, sitting at her desk in an unglamorous office in the gallery's basement.

We're discussing the trend toward muted and neutral colours, which pacify so much contemporary design, and how model suites for one matchbox

condo after another feature monochromatic, modernist furniture. The walls down here are dark and dull. Aroeste's office is windowless.

Yet the place practically vibrates with life. Behind me, propped up against the wall, is a large acrylic painting of a vibrant, unfolding red flower. It was recruited from an annual art event that Aroeste curates in various galleries around town, on the theme of erotic sensuality. In fact, there are paintings everywhere, turning the room into an upbeat visual-tone poem. They hang on or lean against the wall, waiting for pickup or to be returned to their perches on a series of sliding presentation walls in an adjoining room.

I hear one of the walls rumble softly on its rolling track as a volunteer steers a corporate committee through the collection. The group has been charged with finding artwork to complete its recently renovated office space downtown.

"I love seeing the faces of people who come here for work. They come in uptight and hurried, but I calm them down. Then they start looking at the collection," Aroeste says. "They tell me it's a real break in their day."

As I go through the collection myself, a residential client drops off a rented painting. He liked it so much that he has commissioned the artist to paint something new for his home. However, if you become attached to a particular piece and don't want to part with it, you do have the option of buying. "When someone wants to buy a work, we deduct the first three months from the purchase price," Aroeste explains. Monthly rental prices range from \$8 to about \$150.

Residential clients come from a wide variety of income brackets and backgrounds. University students rent pieces to personalize their dorms. First-time home buyers, particularly condo owners, take advantage of the collection to familiarize themselves with what they like and don't like. Some people are "serial" renters because they enjoy being able to so easily transform the look and feel of their homes. Parents rent from the VAG to stimulate their kids' appreciation of art. Home-staging companies use the service to help sell residential properties faster.

There is something for every taste. A *Toast by the Sea*, by Andrea Padoxani (\$145), is a romantic, impressionistic landscape in warm Mediterranean colours. David Wilson's *Times Square North* (\$150) is a massive painting in jazzy hues that captures the urban rush of New York's most famous intersection before Rudy Giuliani sanitized and big-boxed it. Softer and more introspective, creamy yellows merge into evening blues and greens in Janice McLean's painting, *Day Meets Night* (\$65). I'm rather fond of a sculpture by Aroeste's father, *Mondlak Zalel*, an artist now in his 80s. My *Motorcycle* (\$65) is a very cool chopper forged out of melted pesos.

In order to rent from the VAG collection, you need to purchase an annual gallery membership. Fees are \$55 (individual), \$70 (family), and \$30 (student/senior). Memberships also include free admission to exhibits, tickets to two opening receptions, 10 percent off gift-shop purchases, and much more.

In the two years that Aroeste has been at the VAG, residential rentals have doubled. I can't help thinking of those primitive cave paintings: I imagine a team of archaeologists shovelling through the ruins of Yaletown thousands of years from now and stumbling across Mondlak's motorcycle. What would they conclude? ◆