

Recreating the “Wow” In Your Home

By Jenny Lang

You are excited about a piece of art you recently purchased for your home. It finally arrives—now what? You want to put it in the perfect place to have the same “wow” experience as you had in the gallery or at the show where you first saw it and fell in love with it. We talked with Monte Martin, founder and president of MMD Services in Dallas, Texas, to learn more about how to properly display art. Martin runs the company with his wife, Tamara, who serves as its CEO.

Founded in 1999, MMD Services specializes in fine art services that include design, fabrication, lighting, electrical, and more. The company has worked with galleries, museums, institutions, restaurants, hotels, and collectors to create beautiful art displays. In the Western art world, MMD Services has worked with the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and with the Cowboy Artists of America.

Martin recently shared with us some expert tips on how to recreate the “wow” moment with lighting, framing, displaying sculpture, and more.

What is the most common mistake people make when displaying art?

Hanging pieces of art too high to “fill” the wall space. When you do this, you force people to look up, which is unnatural. It also causes the pieces to look like they are floating on the wall because the art does not relate properly to the furniture in the space.

Is there a rule of thumb for how high a painting should be hung?

Museum standards used to be 60” from the floor to the center of the piece, but some museums have lowered that to 58”. This is derived from the average height of a person. We have a negative 10 degree downward in which we naturally look, and that puts the center of the art at 60”. So, when you walk from gallery to gallery in a museum and view artwork of various sizes, they all have a consistent center line view height.

What should collectors know and consider when it comes to lighting?

Most often lights are placed too close to the wall to effectively light the art. In fact, it usually does a disservice by creating harsh shadows on the piece from the frame. Art lighting is most effective at night because most spaces have a lot of natural light. When a piece is above your site line—for example, hanging over a fireplace mantel—it will have a glare from certain angles because of the bounce reflective light coming down and hitting your eyes. If the piece is at 60” on center, the bounce reflective light is hitting at your belly button, so you don’t have glare issues.

What do you consider when tastefully creating a grouping of paintings on one wall?

We call this “salon style” because it historically originated from French salons. You want to start

with more pictures than less and fill the wall. A good approach is to have different sizes and different shapes. That tends to work well because all the gaps are different, which adds to that “organized chaos” look. It ends up being an asymmetrical installation, so embrace the chaos of it all. Start with the center few pieces and move outward. You can go two ways with selecting pieces: having them all in matching frames and styles, or mixing and matching old frames with new frames and both color and black-and-white pieces.

Do you recommend certain wall colors that work best to highlight art?

I believe white walls, or a very light grey—almost white—is the best because it is visually neutral and doesn’t add to or subtract from the viewing experience. Historically,



Monte and Tamara Martin

some museums placed period pieces on rich red or green walls but, in my opinion, it takes away from the art and can even visually compete with it.

What are some creative ways to display sculpture?

For smaller sculptures that need a pedestal or shelf pedestal, I would say the best advice is to not make the pedestal too fancy because you do not want it to take away from viewing the sculpture. For small sculptures that can be displayed on a tabletop, I like to utilize a small base and plexi vitrine so it makes it more special. As with two-dimensional art, the better it is illuminated the more enjoyment you will get from the piece.

How important is framing and how does it play into art display?

If the framing is too fancy, you notice the framing not the artwork. An overly decorative frame can visually overpower the art and take away from its significance. When it comes to matting and framing, it is a sensitive balance between not enough and too much. I like to weigh on the side of less is more when it comes to framing. A great way to achieve this is to float mount the original artwork when appropriate, which also creates depth and interest to the framing.

What type of glass do you recommend when it's required with framing and why?

Most reputable picture framers today are going to use a high UV glass or plexiglass, which is 96 percent UV protection. There is also 99 percent UV glass and plexiglass and reflection free. These options are much higher and are only needed in certain situations.

Are there any tricks of the trade that might be of interest to collectors?

After you have hung the piece and have it level, stand back, look at




MMD Services installing the 2023 Cowboy Artists of America Annual Exhibition

it, and trust your eyes. Sometimes “level” by your level and what looks level are different, especially if the top, bottom, or sides of the art is close to the floor, ceiling, or edge of a wall. Your eye picks up the relationship between the edge of the piece and the architectural line, making it look unlevel. Also, use two hooks, not one. It will keep you from having to keep coming back to level the piece. Plus, it is a safety measure knowing that you have two picture hooks hanging it.

Do you have any other suggestions for our readers?

Beauty enhances our lives. And

living with beautiful art and objects enhances our lives. I tell all our clients that collecting is one of the only vices that does not have a negative side effect. It improves your home and work environments. Building a collection is a great thing to do with your significant other. And put some of your best pieces in your master bedroom because it will elevate the space where you begin and end your days. 

Jenny Lang is the creative and production director of Art of the West.