

Assistance with the art of living

By Alison Gregor

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When Kathryn Gleason bought her three-bedroom condominium at 650 Sixth Avenue in New York, the amenities were rather conventional for an upscale flat: quartz countertops, a Waterworks bathtub, access to a roof terrace.

But one was a bit unusual and even more important to her: the ability to build an art collection.

An art consultation with a gallerist is included when someone buys an apartment at 650 Sixth Avenue, a project that converted a landmark Beaux-Arts building into 67 condos in the Chelsea arts district of Manhattan. Jack Shainman, a prominent gallerist located nearby, worked with the property marketers to create an art gallery within 650 Sixth Avenue featuring rotating exhibits of fine art for sale.

Ms Gleason fell in love with one of the artworks being sold by the Jack Shainman Gallery: Jonathan Seliger's "Between Cups", two 3-foot cups of acrylic and modelling paste stacked atop one another. Unfortunately, she later discovered the piece was too large for her flat, and now plans to exchange it for another at the gallery.

"It's a great piece, but I'm now slightly uncomfortable about the size," says Ms Gleason, a former senior partner at an international law firm whose primary residence is in Washington, DC. "This is a New York City space, after all, and I'm thinking, 'Do I want a couch or do I want an installation?' For an art collector, it's a tough call, but my husband gets to weigh in too."

Ms Gleason – who has a collection of early 20th century art in Washington – aspires to be a serious collector of contemporary art. She says she was thrilled to discover 650 Sixth Avenue, where all-white, boxy interiors illuminated with track lighting have been designed to mimic an art gallery, and flats are being marketed as "gallery living". Three-bedroom apartments were listed for between \$3.5m and \$5.6m in early August.

"Contemporary art is intimidating; it's fast-moving; it's not initially understandable," Ms Gleason says. "Unless you spend time walking the neighbourhood galleries, you really just can't access it. I love the fact that there's a curatorial service offered here, though I intend to do most of the work myself."

As a perk to boost sales in a real estate market that has slowed significantly in the past year, several condo developments in New York City are hiring curators to buy art for building lobbies and to consult with homebuyers regarding their art choices in residences.

At SoHo Mews in the arty Soho section of Manhattan, the Art Production Fund, a non-profit organisation dedicated to expanding awareness through contemporary art, will run a gallery and be available for private consultation for a fee. Art advisers typically charge upwards of \$250 a hour or add on a 10 to 20 per cent surcharge to the price of an artwork.

Not far away, in Manhattan's pricey Tribeca neighbourhood, the 34 Leonard Street condo residences will be served by Carol Simon Dorsky, an art adviser who will provide a free two-hour consultation to each owner. Also in Tribeca, buyers at Artisan Lofts will be able to work with art consultant, curator and dealer Beth McNeill, founder of McNeill Art Group, who charges no fee.

And in the Harlem section of Manhattan, Carlton Brown, a co-managing member of the development group FSLM LLC, says he believes buyers at the Kalahari Harlem will want to pay for the art expertise of Cheryl Riley, artist and art consultant, and Sydney Kai Inis, art adviser and curator, both of whom are curating the common spaces of the condo complex.

In the attempt to attract prosperous, knowledgeable buyers in a condo market where the word "luxury" and the amenities it connotes have become commonplace, property developers are attempting to distinguish their product by taking advantage of the exhaustive New York City art world, where art is an elite status symbol.

The strategy is working at SoHo Mews, where almost 40 of 68 flats had sold as of early August – with asking prices ranging from \$2.55m to \$11.55m – and developers anticipate occupying the building in November, says Albert Laboz, the principal of the development company, United American Land LLC. In fact, the first buyers at SoHo Mews have been so sophisticated in their knowledge of the art world that none have needed assistance from the art consultant.

"We have a few major art collectors who purchased in the building, and they move in the same circles as the art curator and other art world 'stars', if you will," says Mr Laboz. "They haven't needed the art curatorial services. But we envision that some of the purchasers going forward will take advantage of these services."

Besides the art consulting services of the Art Production Fund, which has placed art at Rockefeller Center, SoHo Mews will also offer residents a monthly newsletter about the art world's happenings and free membership and special invitations to events at the New Museum of Contemporary Art.

At 34 Leonard Street, where flats start at about \$1.95m, Ms Dorsky will not only provide a free two-hour art consultation to each apartment buyer, but also helped the property developer, R Squared, LLC, lay out the 16 flats with the display of artwork in mind.

"When we were designing the units, whether it was the entry foyer's width or setbacks on the lighting, we were very conscious of making sure that the apartments were going to be a great space to show art," says Mitchell Rechler, a principal in R Squared.

Like several other property developers, Mr Rechler, a third-generation art collector, chose an art consultant with whom he has had personal experience. Ms Dorsky has assisted him in expanding his collection from photography to video art, and 34 Leonard Street's lobby will display a video piece from Jennifer Steinkamp's *Dervish* series.

Mr Rechler says he has been planning 34 Leonard Street for several years, and from the beginning, planned to offer art advisory services to condo purchasers.

"If I was buying an apartment as a person who loves art, I would want to get an art consultant involved," he says.

Ms McNeill says that Elliott Ingerman, a partner in Tribeca Associates, the developer of the 38-unit Artisan Lofts, hired her about a year ago to help him find art for his home. Although Mr Ingerman was looking specifically for representative art, Ms McNeill asked him to try out an abstract monochromatic blue oil painting.

"In a week, he called me and said not only was he really appreciative that I had done that, but that the painting was now his favourite piece of art," she says.

Ms McNeill will begin working with residents at Artisan Lofts, where flats range in price from \$2.9m to \$11m, by walking through their space with them and choosing the walls on which to create focal points. At the same time, she will investigate what types of artwork the resident likes.

After determining her client's specific genre interests, Ms McNeill will expose him or her to various artists. Depending on how busy the client is, that means either viewing images digitally, arranging private visits to artists' studios or having Ms McNeill bring from four to 20 pieces of art to a client's home to be temporarily installed.

"The latter is a really great process, because it allows the client to see the works in their home and make a decision based on the art being in their environment," she says.

However, because none of the condo developments offering art consultations have yet to be completed, it remains to be seen how many buyers, if any, will take advantage of art consultation services.

Like Ms Gleason, Charles and Jane-Mary Stewart, a lawyer and surgeon, respectively, bought a condo in 650 Sixth Avenue with a bedroom and home office, and also purchased a piece of art: a giant oil painting by the Israeli painter Nir Hod called "US", depicting diamond-encrusted dog tags.

They also bought a whimsical oil painting of a huge cow head on a fuchsia background by Irish artist Paul Bell from a gallery in Northern Ireland.

The focus on art is what drew the Stewarts, who live on a small farm outside Belfast in Northern Ireland, to 650 Sixth Avenue. Yet in spite of buying the painting through the Jack Shainman Gallery, the couple say they will not use any curatorial services offered.

"I think we'd quite like to do our own thing," says Ms Stewart. Mr Stewart agrees that they have grand plans for assembling their own New York art collection. "Our aim is to cross-fertilise the art from the two countries," he says.

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