

STYLE

Is Good Taste Teachable?

By JACOBA URIST OCT. 4, 2017



The mixed media artist Bastienne Schmidt has an a studio-cum-home in Bridgehampton, N.Y. “We wanted no separation between our art and family existence,” she said, “one flows right into the other.” Eric Striffler for The New York Times

Taste presents an age-old quandary: It is notoriously hard to define. Discussions on the topic often fade into unhelpful aphorisms like “to each her own” or “live and let live.” After all, what is too much chintz to one person is comfortable and cozy to another. My favorite abstract painter may leave you cold or, in that proverbial art jab, look like the work of a toddler.

The subject becomes even more delicate as we discover that décor and art preferences aren’t entirely subjective. Sociologists tell us there’s a strong social component; notions of elegance have roots in class dynamics. Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but it can also reveal socioeconomic status. Our homes reflect, at least, as much about our peers as ourselves.

Still, as [Justice Potter Stewart](#) said of pornography, most of us know poor taste when we see it. Intuitively, something just feels off. And researchers have nixed the idea that the more you're exposed to an image, the more you like it, as might happen with a pop song. Bad art, it turns out, never really grows on you.

In a study published in 2013 in the [Journal of Aesthetics](#), for example, participants rated Thomas Kinkadee — whose mass-produced artwork graces many doctors' offices — worse with repeated views, while appraisals of an admired, English [Pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais](#) remained constant. People [didn't rate the artist](#), whose works hang in [Tate Britain](#) any higher the more they saw him. Thus, for all its slipperiness, there seems to be some accounting for taste. But how does one cultivate aesthetic judgment? Can you learn to spot beautiful things?

The art historian [Maxwell L. Anderson](#) fervently contends that you can. And, he says, it doesn't require formal training or growing up in a refined environment, although that certainly might lay the groundwork. "Judging quality in art or design," Dr. Anderson said, "is a skill that anybody can develop."



Maxwell L. Anderson, an art historian and the president of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, wrote "The Quality Instinct," which teaches readers how to see objets d'art through a museum director's eye. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Dr. Anderson, the president of the [Souls Grown Deep Foundation](#), is the past director of several leading American museums, including the Whitney, and his book, "[The Quality Instinct](#)," teaches readers how to see objets d'art through a museum director's eye. Anyone can divine Mark Rothko or Mark Bradford's greatness; consistently assessing exceptional work before an artist achieves public recognition is the most rigorous test. For five years, Dr. Anderson did just that, presiding over the United States' most influential survey of contemporary art: the Whitney Biennial. His experience, he said, can be applied to everyday life.

Good design enraptures Dr. Anderson, from his [Sorrento cup and saucer](#), readily available on the internet, to [Sarah Sze](#)'s virtuosic sculptures, which have graced the US Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Both, he explained, display forceful imagination and technical skill. "So many glammed-up espresso cups are too thin-walled and thus chip or break easily, are hot to the touch, and don't stack," Dr. Anderson said.

"Americans in particular love hobbies," he said. "And they can use those same visual impulses to develop an eye for art and design." For instance, those who take joy in cooking have, most likely, already refined an instinct for quality culinary wares. They may not realize it: their beloved Le Creuset conforms to the same principles of superior craftsmanship as any of Dr. Anderson's cherished possessions, such as the midcentury tackle box that belonged to his father. A cyclist already brings such rigor to bikes; the philatelist to stamps. The trick is exercising this brain reflex to new stimuli. Yet what about hiring an interior designer or art adviser? Can you outsource the pursuit of taste and still have a home that reflects an internal quality compass? "As with a ski instructor, you should eventually break free as a student," Dr. Anderson said, "even if you take a tumble on the slopes once in a while." He cautions, though, that mistakes will be made. An object's high price tag is no guarantee of quality.

"If you haven't developed a good reflex," he added, "you may make choices that are only indexed to cost, but often don't have much to do with the work itself." Learning to see the quality instinct in other people's space is also key to developing better judgment. Houses with strong aesthetics may come in every shape and size, but they too hold several teachable lessons. Chief among them: Thou shalt not copy. Parroting a magazine or someone else's home seldom achieves a result worth much retrospection.

As the mixed media artist [Bastienne Schmidt](#) puts it, authenticity is crucial. Live who you are, she says; don't conform to anybody's design prescription.

To that end, Ms. Schmidt and her husband, the photographer [Philippe Cheng](#), have an enchantingly modern Bridgehampton studio-cum-home, a prototype of which they drew for their architect, on a napkin, in 1998 — and where they raised their sons, Max, 18 and Julian, 15.



The mixed media artist Bastienne Schmidt and her husband, the photographer Philippe Cheng, at their home. Eric Striffler for The New York Times

“We wanted no separation between our art and family existence,” she explained, “one flows right into the other.” They credit Bauhaus modernism and dual artist marriages, like Josef and Anni Albers, as inspiration. At the same time, Mr. Cheng admires the power of Instagram and the many skilled nonprofessional hobbyists who now post inspirational tableaus for their followers. “People have really started composing some beautiful photos,” he said. “I think it shows taste can absolutely evolve. But you have to be open to it.”



Left, an example of Ms. Schmidt's artwork, and right, a memento journal.
Eric Striffler for The New York Times

Perhaps one of the most compelling aspects of the couple's quality instinct is invisible: their patience. Tastemakers never rush to find accessories and fill walls. Today, the pair's art hangs throughout; their [Knoll and Paul McCobb](#) furniture is gracefully mismatched. But it wasn't always this way. The couple's creative lifestyle can be deceptive, as each room collapses years of self-restraint into a single moment. "These objects came into place very slowly," said Ms. Schmidt, describing their design journey. "We didn't have a lot of money when we moved in. We just had white walls, art, books, and a kid's table in the kitchen."

In the experience of [Noah Riley](#), an architect in Los Angeles, people too often equate quality with ideas of flawlessness. He's known for residences that are California cool — as though Richard Neutra's famous [Case Study](#) houses got a warm 21st century makeover. But too much of the same, Mr. Riley said, is boring. While every detail matters to him and his wife, Juliette Cohen, a writer, the couple isn't afraid to range widely in their West Hollywood home.

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And the result reflects their individual tastes — complementary, Mr. Riley explained, but not fully aligned. Both he and Ms. Cohen brought objects into their space that convey their personal aesthetics, joint decision-making and history, in reminding them of their parents. Taken together, their approach is a studied blend of past and present, which manages to feel spare and full at once.

There is the charismatic brass [Gubi](#) light over their dining table (selected together); the little resin sculpture, “Couch Surfing and Insomnia,” by Rosha Yaghmai (near the sofa of course); a pair of Gary Simmons boxing gloves (titled “[Everforward](#)”) from Ms. Cohen's family's art collection; the vintage corkscrew found by his architect father at a New England flea market, that looks Mr. Riley said, “like it opened a couple of thousand bottles over the last century.”



Left, Juliette Cohen and Noah Riley in their home in Los Angeles. The home reflects their individual tastes — complementary, Mr. Riley says, but not fully aligned. Right, a pair of Gary Simmons boxing gloves from Ms. Cohen's family's art collection. *Laure Joliet for The New York Times*

The couple also illustrate that a collection of only store-bought objects — no matter how thoughtfully selected — lacks something: good taste should be personalized. For example, one of Mr. Riley’s prized possessions is a wedding gift from his wife, a simple painting that she made of black numerals, on white paper that faces their bed. It is the longitude and latitude of their engagement location — reminiscent, to him, of an On Kawara painting.

Mr. Riley also built their plywood furniture throughout, “making small spaces feel and function like much bigger rooms,” he said. Ms. Cohen described the black and white patterned throw pillows in their kitchen, inspired by her first trip to the [Rose Bowl Flea Market](#) and how she stumbled upon the fabric vendors. “I became obsessed with the idea of making pillows for our house,” said Ms. Cohen, “never mind the fact that I had technically never used my sewing machine before.” The pillows were her first finished product with it.

Justin Norman is paradigmatic of the ideas in “The Quality Instinct,” that someone who has never spent any time around Whitney caliber art can teach himself to see like a museum director. At 19, Mr. Norman left the home of the family that adopted him at 8 after social workers removed him and his five siblings from their biological parents. He got work as a bartender but dreamed of opening a skate shop, because skateboarding was his obsession. When he was 22, Larry Ryalls, the father of a high school friend (and now business partner, Eric Ryalls), requested help listing some of his furniture collection on eBay. Mr. Norman said he was “instantly obsessed with the midcentury pieces,” especially the iconic Mad Men chairs he’d never encountered in real life. The molded plywood of an Eames chair, he said, reminded him of skateboards.



When an eBay buyer asked Mr. Norman to reupholster an [Adrian Pearsal](#) sofa, the pieces started falling into place; he began buying and refurbishing midcentury furniture for sale on the internet. Soon after, he resolved to refine his artistry, and he applied to work for a New York City restorer. In the fall of 2015, Mr. Norman commuted over three hours each way, to a Brooklyn showroom, learning all about [Papa Bear](#) and [Womb](#) restoration.

Today, he and Eric Ryalls own [CT Modern](#), in their hometown, Branford, Conn., with clients throughout the country. Mr. Norman counts his own rosewood Eames lounge as his most prized possession. “Right away, I can spot a fake now,” Mr. Norman said. “It has become instinctual.” While there can be subtle signs on a faux Eames, like small screws on the shell, he can usually appraise a chair correctly, he said, from a distance with a quick glance.

As a craftsman, he also warns the truly discerning: an authentic, new Eames lounge from a website, while lovely in its own right, is essentially a contemporary chair. The lounge of today won’t ever look or feel like one from the 50s or 60s. Something will always feel off. “That’s O.K. for some people. They don’t mind that it’s different quality,” he explained. “But a restored Eames will always have more visual character, even if a buyer can’t put their finger on exactly why that is.”

And then there’s what Mr. Norman calls the odyssey. With an original, there’s always a back story — a search and a journey, as he described it. Often, clients wait months for the particular chair and decade they desire. “People who have good taste really love the hunt,” he said. There’s an experiential component, he said, that’s absent when you buy “new midcentury designs,” alone at the computer or from a retail chain’s sales person. Restoring a chair with an artisan is an aesthetically distinct way to acquire a possession — especially from someone like Mr. Norman, who can teach you to see every quality detail that makes an object beautiful.

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