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STAYING IN

Art museum as lending library

Rental programs help those unsure of the cost or commitment.

By Brenda Rees, Special to The Times

Rachel Speiser compares her art collecting habits with dating.

"I like to find [a piece of art] that works for me right now and if that turns into forever, that's great," the 23-year-old Angeleno says. "It's like the idea of 'Well, I'll date Mr. Right-Now and maybe one day he'll become Mr. Right.' I don't want a big commitment factor."

So when Speiser recently made the transition from life at home to an apartment on her own, she realized that IKEA furnishings and posters on the wall didn't reflect her growing maturity. But she couldn't walk into an art gallery and make an expensive purchase. "I was looking for a middle ground," she explains.

Speiser found that middle ground in the basement of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. She recently attended an exhibition of up-and-coming Southland artists whose work is available for purchase and rental. Yes, like checking out a book at a library, museum members can check out artwork, enjoy it, scrutinize it and then return it.

"This is great for someone like me who is unsure of my tastes, unsure of my particular likes and dislikes," Speiser says.

LACMA's 35-year-old rental program, which promotes emerging artists and photographers, has been delighting people hungry for good art but not ready for either the commitment or expense. It also appeals to folks who simply want to rotate artwork in their homes.

In addition to the six to seven gallery exhibitions of new artists held yearly at the museum, renters can drop by the program's downstairs offices to view the 450 pieces that hang in nearby hallways or are kept in drawers. The stockpile usually is replenished every five to six years.

Some of today's well-known artists have been featured in the past in LACMA's program: Peter Alexander, George Hermes, Alexis Smith, and photographers Judy Chicago and Edmund Teske.

"I've been renting from LACMA since 1995," says Qisu Shin, a lawyer from Manhattan Beach who went home with two whimsical pieces on her first visit. "The program is great for me because you get to live with the art for a while and see if you like it, if it works in the space. Over the years, I have seen how my tastes have developed."

Bibe Stockman, of the Laguna Art Museum in Laguna Beach, describes its rental program as "a public education service."

"We want to see people expand their horizons when it comes to art," says Stockman, who helps patrons select from the work of contemporary California artists and even visits homes to get an idea of the environment. "People are more daring when they know they are just renting a piece. If they like it, great; if not, they can come back and try something else."

And finally, bringing art into the home is a way to introduce kids to art, says Nancy Fraser of Brentwood, who has three children, ages 15, 17 and 22. "When I bring art back from the museum, they are eager to see what I have. They also can be very vocal critics," she says with a laugh.

"But all in all, this program has enabled me to fill our house with lovely things. It's a great artistic experiment."

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Art to go

Laguna Art Museum, Rental and Sales Gallery: 307 Cliff Drive, Laguna Beach, (949) 494-8971. Open Tuesdays-Saturdays, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Rental fees from \$37.50 to \$307.50 for a four-month period.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Art Rental & Sales Gallery: 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, (323) 857-6500. Open Tuesdays and Thursdays-Saturdays, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Rental fees from \$25 to \$135 (plus tax) per piece for a two-month period.