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Art Advisors: Are They Worth It?

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By Robert Milburn

It was bound to happen: As the market has exploded in recent years, legions of scholars, former gallery owners, and others have gone into business as art advisors, offering their services to help folks build a smart art collection. Walk into any big art fair and you'll bump into dozens of these creatures, maybe hundreds. But should you hire one?

Good art advisors coach everyone from the greenhorn needing an education to the aficionado hunting down specific works to fill out their collection. Karen Boyer runs the art advisory [Elements in Play](#) and is a former hedge-fund executive who studied art history at the Sorbonne and turned it into a consulting business.

Boyer is currently hunting for works from artists such as Andy Warhol and Cy Twombly for clients wanting some serious art cred. "A lot of times, these works are hanging on someone else's wall in another country," she says.

For the art collecting newbies, the first order of business for an advisor is to help educate the client. In an initial 45-minute meeting, Boyer swipes through thousands of images on her iPad to get her clients' reactions, discovering, say, that they don't like brightly colored figurative paintings. She then takes them to galleries or art fairs, sometimes challenging their initial tastes.

The costs can be considerable. According to Wendy Cromwell, president of the [Association of Professional Art Advisors](#), advisors typically charge a sliding scale commission of 20% for art works under \$100,000 that you purchase under their guidance; that commission might go as low as 5% for works over \$1 million. Of course, the more often you return to an advisor, the more bargaining power you'll have. Those who want advice only should expect to pay \$100 to \$250 per hour, Cromwell says.

The payment arrangements can get complicated. Galleries often give art consultants 10% to 20% discounts on artwork, since they bring in customers, and some advisors keep a portion, or all, of the discount for themselves in addition to their fees. Boyer takes a 10% commission off the top for works over \$10,000, and passes the entire negotiated discount along to her clients. That way, she explains, her clients know how she is paid upfront, and everything is transparent.

So, how does the relationship play out? To get an idea, we tagged along with Boyer and her client Alex Friedman, managing director at investment firm Sugar Hill Capital Partners, on a



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Richard C. Morais, Penta's editor, was Forbes magazine's longest serving foreign correspondent, has won multiple Business Journalist Of The Year Awards, and is the author of two novels: The Hundred-Foot Journey and Buddhaland, Brooklyn. Robert Milburn is Penta's reporter, both online and for the quarterly magazine. He reviews everything from family office regulations to obscure jazz recordings.

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Courtesy of William J. O'Brien/Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York. Photo: Jason Wyche
William J. O'Brien's *Untitled*, purchased by a client of art advisor Karen Boyer at a New York gallery.

gallery tour of Chelsea in New York. "Karen is not only right on about the aesthetics of art, but she knows the business of art and targets the artists we like and can afford," Friedman says.

He employs Boyer to help him build out his company's art collection, making about four purchases per year in the \$5,000 to \$15,000 range. One area of interest is experimental photography, as in the darkroom-manipulated works of David Benjamin Sherry and the light-exposed images of Mariah Robertson. "We like color and culturally diverse art and artists," Friedman observes.

Friedman and Boyer have worked together for years and quickly fell into a rhythm on a 90-minute tour through nine galleries. Friedman did not hide his dislikes: The colorful swirls of Matthew Ritchie and their \$200,000 price tag at the [Andrea Rosen Gallery](#) did nothing for him. He whispered that the works "looked like they belonged in a Hyatt." Boyer rolled her eyes and pulled him out the door. Other galleries scored higher. At the [Yossi Milo Gallery](#), Friedman raved about the work of Marco Breuer, little grids of 50 to 60 photographs, folded, burned, and scraped in sunbursts of oranges and reds; he is considering buying one.

We looked at William J. O'Brien's colored pencil-and-ink work *Untitled*, already purchased by Friedman and hanging in a back room at Chelsea's [Marianne Boesky Gallery](#). The price of O'Brien's works recently rose to \$25,000 each, but, in a savvy bit of market timing, Friedman had put the work on hold for \$22,000 before the price increase. Boyer had negotiated a discount, too, but declined to disclose the final price.

Boyer's commission for the work was \$2,200. For an art lover too busy for lots of gallery crawling, it was money well spent.

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