SELECTING PICTURES
for the Home

"A room hung with pictures is a room living with thoughts"—Sir Joshua Reynolds

"Good pictures, like good books and good friends, wear well. We never tire of them." Just as you enjoy different friends, you enjoy different types of pictures. We cannot all respond to the same pictures, just as we do not respond to the same type of friends. One picture may stimulate your imagination, another may inspire you, or add just the note of beauty needed to complete a decorating plan for a room.

Most of us enjoy pictures that have a close association for us—as a picture that reminds us of childhood experiences, or a lake that brings back pleasant memories. All of us respond to pictures that remind us of pleasant experiences, that inspire us, or tend to satisfy our basic need for new experiences, as do travel pictures. These help us to see strange people, far lands, famous places, or beautiful buildings even if we cannot leave home.

What Makes a Good Picture

Quality or character in a picture is a direct result of the artist's ability to express an idea so it will carry over to the person looking at the picture. An artist does this through composition—the planned arrangement of all parts. The plan may stand out prominently, like a framework, or it may be hidden and not readily seen at first glance. It may be triangular, circular, horizontal, vertical.

Whatever the plan, if a good one, it will direct your eyes toward the main part of the picture. Good composition results through the use of lines, shapes, colors, and differences in lights and darks.

You can gain a new appreciation for a picture by discovering how it was made. By applying the principles of design when you study a picture, you discover new beauty.

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Balance—Study a picture to see how the artist has obtained balance. Several small parts will be balanced with one large or heavy one, and small areas of dark with larger areas of light. One part of the picture will be more dominant than the other parts.

Dark and light—As you look at a picture, partly close your eyes and notice the dark and light areas. In good composition these will make an interesting pattern throughout the picture. Always watch for these fine relationships of light and dark masses in all pictures.

Line and rhythm—Through the use of line the artist creates rhythm to bring about grace and movement as seen in dancing figures, or in the waves at the seashore.

Emphasis—This is brought about by directing the eye to the most important point or spot in the picture.

Effect of various lines—Upward curves give a buoyant, gay, and cheerful effect; downward curves give a feeling of sadness or distress. Vertical lines, like those of a church spire, express purpose and aspiration by reaching toward the sky. Horizontal lines give a feeling of rest, quiet, and peace.

Unity or harmony—These qualities result from repeating similar lines, such as circles or waves, or through the use of effective color.

Color—Color appears to the eye immediately and can be a source of great joy in pictures. Look for various qualities of color in a picture. Try partially closing your eyes to better see these qualities. Some colors are bright and others are gray, some are light and others dark.

Colors in a picture may be very subtle or very strong and powerful. Warm, intense colors as reds, oranges, and yellows produce strength and power; cool, light colors as blues and greens give a feeling of peace, gentleness, subtlety. In some pictures the strong warm colors are used in the center of interest and the cool subtle colors in the background. In other pictures there is a gradual flow from one color to the other, or from a light tone to a dark one. This will produce rhythm in color and music pleasing.

Texture is shown through color, also. Rough or smooth, gleaming or dull, fine or coarse, all add color interest to a picture.

How Pictures Are Made

Oil paintings are done by painting on canvas, wood, etc., with brush and oils. There is a great range of choice in technique and subject matter in this medium.

Water colors are done by painting on paper with brush and water paints. They are less expensive than oils. Too, this technique gives a fresh direct brush stroke which is very different from the more careful work found in oil paintings.

Drawings are done by drawing with pencil, pastels, pen and ink, or charcoal on paper.

Etchings are ink impressions taken from plates of copper on which the artist has drawn the lines of his subject. These lines are eaten out through the use of a corrosive liquid.

Engravings are ink impressions taken from plates of copper or steel.

Lithographs are impressions made from a greased pencil drawing that has been transferred to porous stone.

Wood cuts are impressions taken from blocks of wood into which the artist has cut his subject. As many blocks are needed as there are colors in the picture.

General Types of Pictures

An original is the actual work of an artist.

A reproduction is a copy of the original. Today, we can often buy originals as artists often need to sell their work. However, reproductions of worthy pictures are much better than poor originals. Reproductions in color vary in quality.
Pictures Grouped by Subject Matter

Scenery—A landscape is easily understood. The reason for this is that it recalls your own experiences in nature. Romance and adventure are suggested by marine subjects, while landscapes usually give a serene restful feeling.

Portraits—True character is revealed through the expression of the eyes, the tilt of the head, and lines of the face and hands. Portraits may inspire worthwhile accomplishments.

Historical incidents—The imagination is stirred by pictures which record great moments in history. Many worthy paintings portray subjects of great significance to mankind.

Still-life—These pictures portray groups of objects arranged for their decorative quality and color.

Religious pictures—Pictures of Bible stories have an inspiring influence. Many great ones were painted for churches by the old masters.

Animals and birds—Pictures of animal and bird life appeal to those who have had experience with them, especially children who love and love pets.

Architecture—Some buildings have historical significance, others have architectural beauty. Pictures of street scenes and buildings often suggest travel and faraway lands.

Flowers—Flower pictures at their best do not record with photographic accuracy the flowers selected. Rather they are chosen for their color and arrangement.

Pictures for Various Rooms

Living room pictures should have a universal appeal and be so impersonal that friends may also enjoy them. They should be restful and not too unusual in composition, color, or subject matter. They may be the basis for good conversation. Figure compositions, still-life, marines, flower pictures, portraits, and landscapes are all appropriate.

Dining room pictures may be gay and colorful because this room is used for short periods of time. Flowers, some landscapes, still-life, blossoming trees, and birds are all suitable.

Guest room pictures need to have impersonal subjects. They should have general appeal for young and old as well as feminine and masculine guests.

Children’s rooms need colorful, simple pictures of good artistic quality. Here, a wise mother has an opportunity to start the development of good taste, and the enjoyment of really good pictures.

In bedrooms, girls may enjoy pictures reflecting a feminine quality. Fragile subjects and light colors are feminine in appeal.

Boys enjoy vigorous, bold, forceful pictures full of action.

Very personal pictures are for your own bedroom. Good photographs of family or friends may be framed and hung in your bedroom where you can enjoy them.

Informal rooms, large spacious ones, are suitable settings for valuable paintings. The stately elegance of the room requires like pictures which express a social feeling. Large portraits framed in rich and heavy frames are at home among fine furnishings.

Informal rooms require simple pictures which are consistent in subject matter, technique, and framing. Pictures of everyday people and happenings are best suited to informal rooms.

Combining Pictures

All the pictures in a room should be harmonious in scale, subject matter, texture, and color. Bold, vigorous pictures need similar companions which vary in size. One picture should dominate in size and beauty and should have the dominant position in the room—as over the mantel or the sofa. Sameness in pictures for one room is as undesirable as are great differences.

Oils and water colors can be successfully hung in the same room if the pictures have a spirit or quality that relate them to each other and to the
furnishings in the room. Avoid placing water colors, oils, pastels, etchings, and drawings in the same room as some of their qualities do not combine well. Etchings and drawings go very well together. Drawings and water colors can be used harmoniously, but black and white etchings and oil paintings are too far apart in tonal quality and feeling to be combined well on the same wall.

Arrangement of Pictures

COLOR OF PICTURES IN RELATION TO BACKGROUNDS

Pictures help to bring interest and color to the walls in a home. Colored pictures should repeat and emphasize the colors already in a room. The colors in the pictures may be a little brighter than those in rugs, chairs, and draperies. Bright colors should be used in small amounts, but dark and grayed colors may be used in larger areas. Avoid mixing on one wall, or in a group of pictures, colored pictures and those in black and white, or dark pictures and light pictures. They do not harmonize well and one is apt to spoil the effect of the other.

When walls are strongly figured it is better not to use any pictures.

PICTURES AND FURNITURE

Pictures look best in a room when hung in relation to the furniture grouping, or over one piece, and low enough to form a unit with the furniture. The pictures hung over the furniture must be related to it in scale and shape, as well as color.

PICTURES AND WALLS

The shape of a picture depends partly on the shape of the wall space on which it is to be hung and partly on the shape of the furniture. Wall space and furniture definitely vertical usually require pictures vertical in shape. Those wall spaces and pieces of furniture definitely horizontal generally need a horizontal picture. When all the pictures are of a horizontal shape, they help to make the room look lower and longer. Vertical pictures seem to make the room look higher. In most rooms it is best to have both shapes. Be careful not to hang too many pictures. Usually three pictures are enough for the average living room. However, a group of small pictures, hung properly in a unit, will take the place of a large one.

SHAPE AND SIZE OF PICTURES

A large picture looks best when hung over a large piece of furniture or over large groups of furniture. It should not be wider than one piece of furniture or a group of furniture. Pictures of
medium size seem best hung over small pieces of furniture or small pieces arranged in groups.

Very small pictures should be hung near a larger object such as a mirror which is in good proportion to the picture and of similar shape, a chest or window on or against the wall. Small pictures look well when several of them are grouped together by themselves, but they should be harmonious in subject material, size, shape, and color.

Oval pictures usually look best when hung by themselves or they may form the center of a group of oval pictures.

GROUPS OF PICTURES

Two, three, four or more pictures may be hung in one group. If they vary in size they may be placed horizontally with all the bases on one line. They should be related in subject and color, and also in frames. They may be arranged in an informal balance, but let them form a rhythm in line and color.

This horizontal grouping gives height to the low piece of furniture.

When a series of pictures are hung, let the space between be less than the width of the individual pictures.

The group below decorates a wall space between windows. Together the group is in harmony with the size and shape of the space and windows. A lone horizontal picture would have been very much out of place here.

It is usually better not to hang groups of pictures in a long diagonal line or on the stairway wall. Pictures hung on a stairway wall violate the principle of good design. They also create a safety hazard.

Strive for a horizontal arrangement to take the eye around the room rather than up.
Hanging Pictures

Pictures should be hung as flat as possible, so they will seem a part of the wall. The picture will usually hang flat if the screw eyes are placed near the top of the frame. It is better to hang pictures blind with no wire showing.

It is well to use two hooks, one on each end of the picture with a long wire passing across the back of the picture, if a picture must be hung from the molding. In this way, the triangle caused by one hook is avoided. A cord painted the same color as the wall may be used at either end of the picture if you are hanging it from a molding.

The miracle grip hanger is a convenient way to hang a picture without using nails in the wall. It is an adhesive portion which has a hook attached to it. Moisten it and rub it firmly onto the wall. Do not hang the picture for 24 hours after applying the hanger to the wall. The picture wire should be shortened so the hanger does not show.

Pictures should be hung low enough to be seen easily and enjoyed. Modern furniture is lower, so pictures need to be below eye level. Seldom should a picture be hung above eye level.

Pictures should seem to belong to a group rather than being alone.

Above a fireplace having a high mantle, the picture needs to be raised. It can be just far enough off the shelf to show that it does not rest on it.

Try to hang pictures in the proper lighting. Artificial light changes the colors. Blue light can be used to give daylight effects to a picture, making it as attractive at night as during the daytime.
Guides to Help You Select Pictures

► Does the picture have an appeal for you which will give long lasting pleasure?

► Do the colors in the picture harmonize with the colors found elsewhere in the room? A good picture can well be the source of a color scheme for any room.

► Is it large enough to be seen and enjoyed by those who use the room? Unless the picture is of good size, the viewer must be very close to see it. Likewise, a gigantic picture in a small room is out of place.

► Does the picture harmonize with the shape of the space where it will be hung? A single vertical picture should be hung in a vertical space; a horizontal picture better fills a horizontal space. However, this difficulty may be overcome by using pictures in groups. Several vertical pictures hung in a row can easily fill a horizontal space, and several horizontals hung one above the other can be used in a vertical space. When you select a good picture for a prominent place, as over the mantel or the sofa, make sure the picture will fill the space adequately.

► Is the composition good? Dominating lines and planes should direct your eyes into the picture and to the center of interest. Strong lines which lead the eyes to the corners of the picture are poor. They carry attention out of the picture.

► Is the emotional appeal of the picture suitable for all who use the room? A picture suitable for a child's room seldom holds an appeal for grownups and vice versa.

► Is the selection the best picture for the money which is to be spent? Or will you tire of it soon and take it down to be replaced with another one?

► Is the picture just a pretty one, or does it have true artistic beauty?

► Are your family photographs in personal rooms only?

SUGGESTIONS

Through a study of pictures you will become aware of the pictures with which you are surrounded. Careful study will help you to know which ones have real lasting quality, and will help you decide which ones to discard and replace with more suitable and enjoyable ones.

Choose pictures which make your surroundings happier and your ideals higher. Do not think of them merely as beautiful wall decorations.

Do not expect to like pictures which others say are good without help in discovering what is good about them. When selecting a picture, a good plan is to try several. Put one up in the room, live with it for a while, then take it down and put up another one. In this way, you can know which one will be right for that location, and which one you and your family will enjoy most.

This circular was prepared by Mrs. Myrtle Carter, Extension Home Furnishings Specialist, Oregon State University. It is revised from an earlier leaflet, HE 6-708, now out of print.