



Choosing Art for a French Country Chic Home

The goal is creating a pastoral picture to match your décor

By Jennifer Tzeses

Designed by Phillip Thomas, this converted barn features photos of heritage chickens blown up to scale for a contemporary French country twist. Photo: Aydin Arjomand

At its core, French country décor is a mix of rustic charm, European elegance and a warm, weathered feel. It's the amalgamation of time-worn patinas, welcoming hues, feminine curves, upholstered furniture and traditional patterns such as plaids and toiles. The look feels lived in and effortlessly collected over time. Whether you're outfitting a home in the hills of Provence, France, or a city apartment, accenting this kind of space with art is all about evoking a pastoral picture.

While there are various periods and schools that would suit this style, "none are more popular or historically significant than that of the Impressionists: Monet, Cézanne, Renoir to name a few," said Scott Niichel, co-deputy head of Sotheby's

Impressionist & Modern Art Department. “These titans and their contemporaries are perennial favorites in museum exhibitions and permanent collections, at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris or at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, for example—as well as on the art market,” Mr. Niichel said. And their popularity never wanes. In fact, a new artist record for a Monet painting was set at Sotheby’s New York this past May, when the masterwork *Meules* sold for \$110.7 million.



A rustic-chic home designed by Phillip Thomas. *Photo: Aydin Arjomand*

“For many of us, our image of the French countryside continues to be defined by the work of Impressionists and their artistic heirs, who took their brushes, pigments and palettes out of the studio and into the fields, woods and gardens beyond Paris,” said Anthony Barzilay Freund, editorial director and director of fine art of the New York-based 1stdibs. “There, they captured scenes filled with light and color and vibrancy.”

These artists were part of the En plein air (in the open-air) movement at the end of 19th century/beginning of the early 20th century, when French Impressionist painters began leaving the walls of their studios to render everyday life in the fields and on the farms to better represent the changing quality of light, nature and color.

Think Manet's picnics, Van Gogh's views of Arles, Cézanne's craggy mountains and Monet's poppies, haystacks, sunrises and water lilies, Mr. Barzilay Freund said. Camille Pissarro is another master whose paintings and drawings depict the magic of the French countryside.



"Le Verger" by H. Claude Pissarro, post-Impressionist style pastel on paper. *Courtesy of 1stdibs*

“His technique and aversion to grandeur or artifice, which was passed down to his own family of artists (children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren) several generations later, imbues the paintings with an immediacy and charm that transports the viewer directly into the French countryside,” Mr. Barzilay Freund said. Many works of Pissarro's offspring can be found on [1stdibs](https://www.1stdibs.com) through London dealer Stern-Pissarro, which is co-owned by Camille's great-granddaughter, Lélia.

Not every Impressionist painting runs a price as steep as a masterwork. “Take the artist Armand Guillaumin, for example, who painted alongside Cézanne, Pissarro and Van Gogh, influencing each of these painters and exhibiting in six major Impressionist exhibitions in the 1870s and 1880s. His landscapes tend to sell for a fraction of those by his peers, with works typically offered at major auction houses for less than \$50,000,” Mr. Niichel said, noting that other more affordable favorites include Gustave Loiseau, whose country scenes are often reminiscent of Monet, as well as Henry Moret, whose vivid coastal scenes achieved great popularity during the artist’s lifetime.

French artist, Roger Mühl, a 20th-century painter known for his light-filled landscapes of the South of France, which take their cue from the Impressionist style, is an example of a more “contemporary” artist whose pieces go for a price range of \$5,000 to \$15,000 at auction, said Kathy Wong, Bonhams Specialist of California and Western Paintings and Sculpture.

Beyond the Landscape



The little prince. H. Guérault (French 19th/20th Century) *Courtesy of Bonhams*

While visions of pastoral fields and farmlands come to mind, art that evokes a French country feel can also include animal themes, decorative florals or those that incorporate birds, still-life paintings of flowers or bunches of fruit in a bowl as well as botanical prints, drawings and watercolors—the origin of which goes back centuries.

“It was a way of capturing botanicals and horticultural knowledge used by physicians, pharmacists, botanical scientists and gardeners for identification, analysis and classification,” said Rocco Rich, Bonhams Specialist of 19th Century European Paintings. “They evoke a natural and rural feeling—perhaps a little more casual than antique oil paintings—with an antique touch that’s classic, versatile and timeless.”

They are typically found at auction in the way of drawings, watercolors and, most frequently, engravings that have been hand colored. “These are usually sold in groups of four, six or eight and are very popular for decorating,” Mr. Rich said.



Girl in harvest field. Daniel Ridgway Knight (American 1839-1924). *Courtesy of Bonhams*

The aesthetic is also not limited to color on canvas. French country style is often rendered in fabrics, tapestries, silk panels and wallpaper says Elizabeth Stuart, principal of Elizabeth Stuart Design in Charleston, South Carolina.

For example, Ms. Stuart loves to upholster headboards with vintage floral or striped fabrics or those from Bennison, a company specializing in hand-printed fabrics based on 18th- and 19th-century English and French textiles, which serves as a type of artform in and of itself.

“You can also take a typical antique object, such as a beautiful old wooden ladder and hang it as art. The rustic wood becomes architecturally French and modern,” Ms. Stuart said.

Phillip Thomas, founder and principal of Phillip Thomas Inc. in New York City, recently converted a mid-century barn into an event space for a client took photos of heritage chickens and blew them up to scale to create a dramatic effect with an homage to the French country aesthetic.

“I love to take this look to the next level by putting a contemporary spin on it,” Mr. Thomas said.

Presentation Makes Perfect

The way you display your treasures can have a tremendous impact on your interiors and the art itself. While the most classic way to display French country-inspired art is in a gilded frame, Mr. Niichel is increasingly seeing black, white or stained wood frames.



"Une Rue à l'Hermitage, Pontoise" by Camille Pissarro, Impressionist pastel circa 1873-74. *Courtesy of 1stdibs*

“They hang well independently or within broader collections of portraits, still lifes and townscapes, and sometimes salon style in thoughtful groupings of smaller oils, works on paper or prints,” he said.

While less common in a French country interior, many of Niichel’s favorite collections blur the boundaries between the traditional and Impressionist and the modern and contemporary. “It takes some courage and a good eye to get the balance just right, but framing can go a long way in helping a Monet look great beside a Rothko, or a Guillaumin beside a de Kooning,” Mr. Niichel said.

Lighting is key. “Collectors take the dramatic effect of lighting for granted,” Ms. Wong said. “The quality of LED lighting has come a long way, and there are so many innovations; you don’t have to rely on a single-track system anymore. You can have individually placed spotlights,” she noted. “Strategic lighting can lend the pieces a museum quality look and make a huge difference whether you decide to do a salon hang or a vignette mixed in within furniture and decorative art.”

Benoist F. Drut, owner of Maison Gerard Gallery in New York, believes nothing should look too perfect. “A home should feel lived in, not like a store display,” he noted. “While I do have floor-to-ceiling bookshelves with special niches to display some treasured pieces, I probably have just as many pictures arranged along the floor and stacked on chairs as I do on the walls, and just about every surface, even my bathtub surround, is covered in my collections of ceramics and objects.”

Buying and Bidding

Auctions and galleries are some of the best ways to acquire this type of artwork, Mr. Thomas said.

The benefit of going to an auction or gallery is quality. “The works you’re seeing have been properly vetted, authenticated and valued by experts,” Ms. Wong said. “Whereas at a flea market, you have no guarantee of authenticity or that you’re paying an appropriate price,” she explained.

The other benefit to going the auction or gallery route is that “the works are properly displayed, so it’s easier to envision what they’ll look like in your home,” Ms. Wong noted.

Mr. Drut mostly buys from private estate sales or through word of mouth, but also finds amazing treasures from Paris markets such as Marché aux Puces de Saint-Ouen, and Marché aux Puces de la Porte de Vanves.

L'île de Groix. Henry Moret. Courtesy of Sotheby's

