



William Cullum chose Beach Plum by Benjamin Moore to complement the gallery walls in his Greenwich Village apartment.

THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

Nothing elevates a room—any room—like the perfect gallery wall.

BY KATHRYN O'SHEA-EVANS

The year was 1667, and the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris had a problem: How to display the massive amount of art by École des Beaux-Arts graduates all at once? The answer lay in what was reportedly the first-ever salon wall—also known as a gallery wall—an overwhelmingly beautiful bit of controlled chaos, a riotous run-on sentence à la française of artworks, mostly pictures, hung from side to side, floor to ceiling.

Fast forward 356 years and gallery walls are more popular than ever, and just as excruciating to arrange today as in the 17th century. “Sometimes people get really caught up in, well, all the mats have to be the same, or all the frames have to be the same, or whatever the case may be,” says New York-based designer Corey Damen Jenkins. “There’s great fun and enjoyment in releasing oneself from those rules.”

In Jenkins’s private office, abstract pieces, architectural prints, a gilt Louis XVI mirror, and more hang against a gold flame-stitched wallcovering from Arte. “A gallery wall is a great solution when one has a large collection,” he says. Lathem Gordon, principal at Atlanta firm GordonDunning, similarly stockpiles all manner of finds. “I’m like a black T-shirt,” she says, “collecting everything but money and men.” One of the great things about a gallery wall, she says, is “its ability to elevate treasures and give cohesion to something that may otherwise feel scattered.” ▶



The grand piano is the focal point of this green music room in New York City designed by Robert Couturier, yet the gallery wall steals the spotlight.



A winning combination of Thibaut drapery, pastels, and a gallery wall in an Atlanta home by Lathem Gordon.

FROM TOP: DOUGLAS FRIEDMAN; EMILY FOLLOWILL

Still, it's vital to limit what you hang to "things that speak directly to your heart," says New York City decorator Miles Redd. "And look for a contrast of tension. If you have only paintings, it feels kind of one note. The great gallery walls are a really disparate mixture of things: It's the watercolor next to the abstract next to the piece of porcelain that really makes them sing." Jenkins advises selecting an anchor piece to serve as a focal point and laying your arrangement out on the floor—then sleeping on it (figuratively)—before you commit. "It's important that you step away for a while and come back to it to see if it still looks good," he says. And keep your most special pieces on their own. "You don't want a gallery wall full of paintings with a Rembrandt in the middle of it," says Richard Rabel, a New York designer and former senior vice president at Christie's specializing in Old Master paintings. "Viewers today are kind of like hummingbirds in that they go here and there, not really focusing on anything."

When it comes to framing, Redd finds the magic is also in the mix: "If you're going for an eclectic, collected vibe, it's good to mix up the frames—a little bit of wood next to a

little bit of chippy gold next to modern lacquer." Gordon intentionally includes a few highly functional frames from big-box stores alongside custom ones: "We vary how they're framed so that you can trade what you need to trade, like if you're going on a trip next year and know you're going to take a photograph that will go there."

The key height for your anchor piece, Rabel says, is typically 60 inches from the floor to the center of the artwork. Beyond that, according to Jenkins, there's no need to space each piece out equally to fill up an entire wall. "It's better to group them all together only two inches apart and make a statement," he says.

One of Redd's biggest challenges is sourcing a gallery wall's small but impactful pieces that he'll add to the mix in an odd way to take your eye down low or up high, such as the diminutive reverse-glass painting displayed between a Velázquez reproduction and a sconce in his own living room. "It's always the small pieces that are the hardest to find that really make a gallery wall," Redd says. "They're the exclamation point." It's just what every riotous run-on sentence needs. ■

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BY HELENA MADDEN

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