The 36-year-old civil servant became interested in visual art while working as a systems analyst on an accounting system for the Singapore Art Museum in 1998. “At the time, we cleaned up all the white space for the art,” he said. “Having to deal with the works and the curators, my interest in art was piqued.”

While admitting that he spends a substantial amount on painting, Chew said that building an art collection has become increasingly affordable over the years. “I collect art in display in my home,” he said. “When having to know some of the artists, I also see it as a way of supporting their inspiration.”

**APPAIRS OF THE ART**

Chew is not alone.

Whether they are young couples looking to furnish their homes or art lovers who develop a passion for a particular work, a growing number of Singaporeans are reaping the benefits of owning art.

In the past, there were several factors working against the development of an art-buying culture in Singapore. For one, the relatively small number of galleries have limited the number and range of artworks available and made for high prices. Today, all that is changing.

Although galleries here were reluctant to reveal hard data, figures and anecdotal evidence from gallery operators that TODAY spoke to suggest that art buying among Singaporeans, especially young people, is on the increase.

Local gallery Uality Art, for example, reported a 63 per cent jump in profits between 2001 and 2004, while Art Seasons said its sales had risen by 50 per cent in the past year alone.

**Education, gallery outreach and higher incomes drive growing interest in art collecting**

Outreach initiatives such as those of the artist-run Telok Kurau Studios, P3D and Photographics: Kinetic Works - which include talks on art appreciation and starting an art collection - are helping, but increases in income have also played an important part. The average monthly earnings of Singaporeans jumped from S$2,000 to S$3,329 between 1994 and 2004, although the inflation rate has not increased by more than 1 per cent.

“Thankfully for us, people have more disposable income,” said Seah. “We also put art higher on their list than they did before.”

Regardless of their earnings, art buyers can be divided into three segments, noted gallery owners.

There is the serious collector who wants to start a collection and understands art, then there is the type who wants an investment and then there is the type who simply collects what he likes. The last group of buyers tends to be younger and also the ones who are getting the most encouragement to delve deeper into the arts scene. The National Arts Council recently announced the launch of an initiative with local banks such as UOB, DBS and OCBC and The Arts House to offer interest-free installment plans that can be used towards the purchase of art. The banks have reported strong interest from customers. Such initiatives have helped buyers like 43-year-old theatre practitioner Glen Goei start collecting art at a time when they might not otherwise have been able to do so.