

What to Know When Approaching Art Galleries

Most artists dream of seeing their work in a gallery. It's the equivalent of "making it" in the art world. That dream can be closer than you realize. The majority of galleries are actually quite approachable and open to new artists. Though there will always be a few austere establishments manned by snooty clerks, most are friendly places where people come to browse and chat with the gallery staff.

So don't let galleries intimidate you. The majority of galleries will be happy to take a look at your slides if you make an appointment or mail your slides to them. If they feel your artwork doesn't fit their gallery, most will steer you toward a more appropriate one.

A few guidelines

- **Never walk into a gallery without an appointment,**

expecting to show your work to the gallery director. When we ask gallery directors for pet peeves they always discuss the talented newcomer walking into the gallery with paintings in hand. Send a polished package of about 8 to 12 neatly labeled, mounted duplicate slides of your work submitted in plastic slide sheet format. (Refer to the listings for more specific information on each gallery's preferred submission method.) Do not send original slides, as you will need them to reproduce later. Send a SASE, but realize you may not get your packet returned.

Or at least call first to make an appointment. Ask what their expectation is for submitting work for exhibit and sale. Find out their commission structure and their requirements such as framing and acceptance of different types of print-work. Follow their instruction to the "T" and never never misrepresent something. If it's a color copy, you'd better say so! If it's a copy of someone else's work, say so. (There is such a thing as derivative work - and that's not always frowned upon depending on how it's dealt with within the work itself!) Nothing sours a director or curator to your work faster than to find out it's less or something other than you represented it to be.

- **Seek out galleries .**

Seek out galleries that show the type of work you create. Each gallery has a specific "slant" or mission. Make it a point to know as much as you can about a gallery before you approach the director or curator.

- **Visit as many galleries as you can.**

Browse for a while and see what type of work they sell. Do you like the work? Is it similar to yours in quality and style? What about the staff? Are they friendly and professional? Do they seem to know about the artists the gallery handles? Do they have convenient hours? If you are interested in galleries outside your city and you can't manage a personal visit before you submit, read the listing carefully to make sure you understand what type of work is shown in that gallery and get a feel for what the space is like. Ask a friend or relative who lives in that city to check out the gallery for you.

- **Attend openings.**

You'll have a chance to network and observe how the best galleries promote their artists. Sign each gallery's guest book or ask to be placed on galleries' mailing lists. That's also one good way to make sure the gallery sends out professional mailings to prospective collectors. Begin a discussion with the gallery owner or director. Leave your contact information before you leave.

- **Showing in multiple galleries.**

Most successful artists show in several galleries. Once you have achieved representation on a local level, you are ready to broaden your scope by querying galleries in other cities. You should add all to a listing that you can readily leave with the gallery. More is better!

Types of Galleries

As you search for the perfect gallery, it's important to understand the different types of spaces and how they operate. The route you choose depends on your needs, the type of work you do, your long term goals and the audience you're trying to reach.

Retail or commercial galleries.

The goal of the retail gallery is to sell and promote artists while turning a profit. Retail galleries take a commission of 40 to 50 percent of all sales.

Co-op galleries.

Co-ops exist to sell and promote artists' work, but they are run by artists. Members exhibit their own work in exchange for a fee, which covers the gallery's overhead. Some co-ops also take a small commission of 20 to 30 percent to cover expenses. Members share the responsibilities of gallery-sitting, sales, housekeeping and maintenance.

Rental galleries.

The gallery makes its profit primarily through renting space to artists and consequently may not take a commission on sales (or will take only a very small commission). Some rental spaces provide publicity for artists, while others do not. Showing in this type of gallery is risky. Rental galleries are sometimes thought of as "vanity galleries" and, consequently, they do not have the credibility other galleries enjoy.

Nonprofit galleries.

Nonprofit spaces will provide you with an opportunity to sell work and gain publicity but will not market your work aggressively, because their goals are not necessarily sales-oriented. Nonprofits normally take a small commission of 20 to 30 percent.

Museums.

Though major museums generally show work by established artists, many small museums are open to emerging artists.

Art consultancies.

Generally, art consultants act as liaisons between fine artists and buyers. Most take a commission on sales (as would a gallery). Some maintain small gallery spaces and show work to clients by appointment. They may decide to concentrate on galleries in surrounding states, becoming a "regional" artist. Some artists like to have an East Coast and a West Coast gallery. If you plan to sell work from your studio, or from a website or other galleries, be up front with your gallery. Work out a commission arrangement you can all live with, and everybody wins.

Additional Tips

- **Have a good idea of who your artwork "speaks" to.**

Do a little observation on who responds to your work and what it is that attracts them. Write it down and keep a journal.

- **Do some pricing research.**

Don't expect the gallery to tell you what your work is worth. They will not dictate or advise you on that. You must have the information about what your competitors are pricing similar work at and consider the differences or advantages (or disadvantages) of your own. There are pricing guides available at your local library or bookstore. That might not be a bad place to begin. However, pricing is regional and you will still have to know what is selling in your area and for how much. Wander some local art shows that are similar to the venue or level you want to place yourself into. If you sell high end oil portraits, don't do your research in the local church bizarre. Visit galleries that carry more than just the "top dogs" - you can't attain that level right away without some hard work! You will recognize work that is on the same level as your own. Pay attention to how they are selling it and to whom.

- **How well are you known?**

If you price your work too high and you are relatively unknown, you may eventually sell the piece at that price, but it may sit there until the director or curator needs the space and asks that you remove it - no matter how good it might be. If you are a pro - you won't need to question your prices, you'll have already found your price-points. If you are in question, test a few levels. One theory says "if it doesn't sell, raise the price". But that is a risky one to follow. If someone likes the work is not the point (unless you really don't need the money and don't really want to sell the piece). It's a question of what else they will need to sacrifice to be able to afford your piece. Items priced too cheaply will be perceived as not worth as much. Find a middle ground.

- **Blow your horn!**

Any gallery will appreciate marketing material (professionally presented) that will convince the buyer that your work is so much more special and different than the other piece next to it. That will make their job so much easier that they will actually end up presenting your pieces more frequently. Especially if they work on commission. Put together a polished presentation and blow your own horn shamelessly.

- **Approach the gallery with confidence.**

When you approach a gallery, do so with confidence in your work. Remember if you don't believe in your work's worth, neither will the next guy. It has historically been the artist who gets out there and confidently presents himself and his work that will be most noticed. Humility and a humble nature will go far in some things - this isn't one of them. You can be your best marketing tool if you are creative and confident.

- **Don't be afraid to list your accomplishments.**

In your material - with your art - list all of your artistic accomplishments. The more notice the piece has gotten - the more places it's been - the more valuable in the mind of the buyer.

- **Spread it around.**

Put your work and list of accomplishments online, in galleries, send press releases, letters of introduction (with sample prints of your work) - take it everywhere and anywhere. When you are standing in line at the store...when you are talking to your neighbor...at shows...at openings...everywhere you go, you should be leaving cards with people letting them know where you are showing and what you do. At least have a business card to give away to everyone you meet who might be remotely interested in your work. You never know when they will make the connection again and want something from you to keep for themselves. They might be remodeling soon - who knows?!

- **Collect information.**

When you make a connection to an audience or an individual, never walk away without their email address or mailing address - at least get a name! You can use that information later to send out announcements for shows and exhibits, let them know when you have a new work on the market or in any number of creative marketing ways.

At shows, have a sign-in for a drawing or to put on your email list for upcoming events. Emails change as do addresses. So keep your list clean and current as possible. If your mail comes back with a "too late to forward" usually there IS a forwarding address on a label attached to it. Record that.

If you have any great tips for artists, submit them to: optimaxart@aol.com.
In future updates of this document, we will add your tips and give you credit for the submission!

Help mentor your fellow and upcoming artists with your valuable knowledge!