



THE SHY ARTIST'S
GUIDE TO WHAT
GALLERIES WANT



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The Shy Artist's Guide to What Gallery Owners Want

Back in the days when I owned an art gallery, the question often came up as to how galleries choose work. Every gallery has their own way of choosing artists. It really depends on the personality not only of the gallery, but of the gallery owner. So, here is a glimpse into my thought process and the types of things I would think about when reviewing artwork and possibly meeting the artist.

1. Do I like the work? Would I feel comfortable talking about this work to a customer?

Let's face it, we all have different taste. What appeals to you might not appeal to me. That doesn't mean the work is bad, it just means it is not to my personal taste. So, would I be able to speak enthusiastically to a customer about the work? Would I enjoy having this work hanging on my gallery walls? If so, then the work passes the first test. If not, then there needs to be some other really strong reasons for me to represent this artist.

Always keep in mind that a rejection does not mean there is anything wrong with the art.

While it's not absolutely necessary for me to like the work in order to sell it, it sure makes it easier. Imagine yourself trying to say something good about something

you dislike. It can be rather difficult. And, as a gallery owner, I need things to be as easy as possible so I can focus my efforts on selling your work.

2. Does it fit with the theme of my gallery?

I used to receive dozens of portfolios from artists. Many of them came with a form letter that started something like, “Dear Gallery Owner, Please have a look at my artwork.” The photos would be plein aire, or portraits, or political. I didn’t sell plein aire, portraits, or political artwork. My gallery specialized in whimsical and humorous artwork.

Now, there were occasions where I did accept artwork that was not whimsical or humorous. I sometimes made exceptions based on other reasons such as the work is highly sellable, or I really liked the artist personally. But, these occasions were rare.

With all the internet access available, it is relatively easy to research galleries. At least have a quick look at their website before sending off a form letter. There may even be artist information already there telling you exactly what they are looking for.

One more tidbit to add here... Just because a gallery specializes in a particular type of art, does not mean they are not looking for other types. They may be in the process of expanding. Or they determine that their current theme or style just isn’t selling right now and need to find the next trend. If you like the gallery, by all means, send them a portfolio (or whatever they require). Start off by

saying that your work may not be what they are looking for and ask if they might be able to recommend another gallery that would be more appropriate. At least this shows that you have done some homework and that you aren't just sending off a form letter.

3. Do I think it is work my customers will want to buy?

As a gallery owner, I made certain decisions about the type of work I wanted to sell. In my business plan I included information about exactly the type of clientele I would be catering to. All my marketing efforts were aimed at getting these customers in the door. If your artwork doesn't fit this profile then it is unlikely that the right type of customer will enter my store and buy your art.

I also looked at price points. I may like the work and it may fit the theme, but if the price is prohibitively high, it is probably not going to sell in my gallery. And, why should I use up valuable wall space on something that isn't going to help the bottom line?

4. Do I like the artist?

I have seen a lot of work that fit all or most of the first three criteria but the artist was too much trouble to deal with. I have also taken work that I did not like that much because the artist was a joy to work with.

Here are a couple of examples of the former: I had one artist whose work got a lot of attention, but no sales. I later found out that he was sending customers to the

gallery, then taking the work out and selling it privately. He would also take all of his work out of the gallery when he would go do a weekend art show. And then he complained that I wasn't selling any of his work!

Another artist made beautiful ceramics. I knew of her work from an art show in town. It fit with the gallery theme. But, when it came time for her to bring in her artwork, she brought in all her leftover stuff that she hadn't been able to sell over the last few years. Obviously, the work was not sellable and it ended up taking up valuable gallery space until she moved a few months later.

Now, here's an example of an artist I really liked: During the city's monthly ArtWalk, I used to get many regular customers. One lady in particular was very ingratiating. Her husband would come and play guitar and they really helped to make the evenings more enjoyable. I later found out that she was an artist. After a cursory glance at her portfolio, I accepted her work. She ended up being more than helpful with many different aspects of the business. She helped out with some promotional ideas. She sat the gallery so I could go run errands. And, she was even with me the day I received the phone call from the doctor telling me that I had cancer.

Remember, once you are represented by a gallery, it becomes a relationship. You need to nurture that relationship.

5. Does the art have a story?

Once upon a time, there was an artist. She was looking for a gallery to represent her work. She met with the owner of a gallery she really wanted to be in. “We don’t accept watercolor florals,” said the owner. “As you can see, we specialize in paintings of golf courses,” he continued. “I can paint golf courses,” she replied.

“Oh, great! So, what’s your handicap?”

“My what?”

... More golf questions ...

“Actually, I don’t play golf,” she finally admitted.

“Then how can you paint something you know nothing about?” asked the exasperated owner.

If you, as the artist, don’t have a connection to your subject, then how can you expect the customer to connect with your art? There has to be a reason why you do what you do. That reason is your story and that story is what is going to sell your work. And, the more interesting the story, the easier it is for me to sell your work.

6. Is the body of work consistent?

If you paint watercolor fantasy dragons, and plein air landscapes, and acrylic portraits, and make raku teapots, then it is really hard to market you. As an artist, it is good to have such a wide skill set, but try putting together a story that encompasses all of those diverse elements. I suppose it could be done, but I wouldn’t want to try it.

When I first started selling my work as an artist, I made a decision to change my theme every year. I thought it

would keep my work fresh and interesting. So, one year I did fish, the next year was music, the year after that was dragons, and then cats. What I heard every year was, “Oh, you must be a new artist at this show. I have never seen your work before.” After hearing this a few dozen times, I knew I was doing something wrong. I’m sure I lost some sales because customers were expecting to find work similar to what they had seen the year before. And, it cost me money because my marketing materials (business cards, brochures, etc.) had to change every year to fit the theme.

A gallery needs to know that your next piece of art is going to be somewhat similar to your last piece of art. This way they know what to expect so they can more easily market to their customers.

7. Does the artist live in the area?

My gallery was in a resort town that started out (and still is) an artist community. Many people who came in the gallery were on vacation. They expected to see artwork from local artists. I only represented artists from a limited geographical local area. I personally knew all of my artists, several of them for many years prior to even opening my gallery.

It is much easier to keep in contact with a local artist. If I need you to bring in some fresh work and take out some of the work that isn’t moving, then I can just give you a call. It’s much easier to drive over and take care of business than it is to have to ship everything. Again, it gets back to the concept of a relationship. A long distance

relationship is much more difficult to maintain. Further, as artists, we tend to be visually oriented. So, having the actual work in front of us gives us a better chance at judging what is going to best appeal to our customers.

Of course, having only local artists represented depends entirely on the gallery. Some galleries only want out of area artists. Again, do your research and see who a gallery represents and where they are from.

Additionally, a local artist who has a good quality mailing list can be very valuable. There were a couple of artists who had very successful solo shows because of their mailing lists.

Bonus tips:

These are things I didn't like or things I didn't need to know...

1. A long boring bio

In the years that I owned my gallery, I never once had anyone ask to read an artist's bio. Yes, once your work is in the gallery, I need your bio so I can talk about your background with customers. But, while you are still looking for representation, please don't make me wade through a dozen pages of stuff I don't care about. What I really need is a reason why I should represent you. So, try to answer the questions listed above, most importantly why does your work fit in my gallery and will I be able to work with you.

2. A long list of shows you've been in

Same as the long boring bio, only this is even more boring. I am certainly happy to see you have been doing other shows. It looks like you are a serious artist. So, my question would be, are you actually selling at these other shows? For example, being in a museum show certainly adds to your credibility, but a gallery is in business to make money, not to be a museum. Your work may be museum quality, but if I can't sell it, why would I want it on my walls?

3. A long list of every award you've ever received

Yes, I know you're proud of that honorable mention you received for the first piece of artwork you did in high school, but is it really relevant? If absolutely necessary, I'd rather see just a few of the more recent and/or important awards.

4. Photos of every piece of artwork you have ever created

I want to see the best of the best presented in a cohesive manner. I need an easily marketable portfolio of work that is consistent.

This is probably the most abused requirement. When I received a portfolio in the mail, it was easy to turn the pages and ignore the long bio, the long list of shows, and the long list of awards. But, as an artist, it's hard to skip the photos. I looked at every one I received. And, there were many artists

who sent in portfolios containing dozens of photos. A couple even sent in big, thick books. Gallery owners just don't have the time to be looking through so much stuff.

So, keep it simple. Include your best work. And, if you feel you must present work in different styles or media, please group each style together.

5. Your dog, cat, or gerbil's name

Until you become one of my artists, I really don't need to know the details of your private life. However, if some bit of personal information is pertinent to your artwork, then include it in your artist statement or bio.

I had an artist who was invited to be in one of my special exhibits. She painted animal art loosely based on her pets. She had an information sheet about every piece of her artwork where she told the entire history of each pet. Each information sheet was several paragraphs long. Very little had any relevance to the artwork itself. And it did nothing to help me sell the work.

I had another artist who did beautiful woodworking. By day, he was an air traffic controller. In the evenings, he would unwind by creating intricate turned wood pieces. I didn't know this about him before he was in my gallery. Once I agreed to represent him, I read his bio and learned more about him and his work. I was able

to use this information to tell customers how he transformed his stress from work into art.

6. Coming in during peak weekend hours asking me to look at your portfolio

It is difficult, for me at least, to say no to an artist who is standing right in front of me. It happened on several occasions where an artist would come in and ask me if I would look at their portfolio. One particular time, it was a Saturday afternoon during the peak summer tourist season. There were several customers already in the gallery. In between helping customers, I glanced at her photos. At one point, I went over to help customers with some small bronze sculptures. As I was telling the story of the sculptures, I noticed that one of them was missing. It was taken while I was distracted by this artist. There was nothing I could do. But, there is something you can do: If the gallery is busy with customers, come back later. Or make an appointment.

7. Not following instructions

A couple of days before one of my special exhibits, I started to receive all the shipped artwork. (For special exhibits, I would accept out of area artists.) When these artists were accepted, I would send out detailed shipping instructions. Needless to say, not everyone followed them. It was a very hot day and all the ceiling fans were going full blast. I opened one of the boxes and

created a storm of packing peanuts. It was a mess. Obviously, this artist did not read the instructions.

There are reasons for instructions. If I ask you not to send slides, it's because I don't have a slide projector. If I ask you not to talk to me on a Saturday, it's because I am too busy dealing with customers. If I tell you I can't accept jewelry, it's because my business license won't permit me to sell jewelry. Whatever the reason, try to adhere to the instructions. It will give me more reasons to want to represent you as an artist.

8. Selling your work for different prices at different venues

Not a good idea. Customers are very savvy. They are perfectly capable of doing research on the internet. If a customer buys one of your prints at a gallery for \$250 and then finds the same print on your website for \$125, not only will you have an unhappy customer, but you will also have an unhappy gallery owner. The customer will go back to the gallery and demand a refund. In the eyes of the customer, the gallery took advantage of them.

While galleries have overhead that you do not, remember, there is still a cost of doing business. You may not have a brick and mortar store to support, but you probably do shows, and you need to pay for upkeep of your website (You do have a website, don't you?), and all that artwork is taking up space somewhere in your house. So, if a gallery

sells your work, they should be paid. And, if you sell your work, shouldn't you be paid as well?

As a gallery owner, I am here to sell art. All of my decisions are made with that goal in mind. If you, as the artist, can make it easier for me to sell your art, then I would be happy to represent you.

About the author:



Loretta Alvarado is the former owner of How Original! Art Gallery. She has been doing arts & crafts shows for over 20 years. She now owns TheShyArtist.com, an online resource of instructional guides and videos for artists who need help overcoming shyness so they can make more sales.