

You've reached a level of success with your work and you're ready to start selling in earnest. But where's the best place to start? Five seasoned professionals show you the ropes.

art for sale

By Michael Chesley Johnson

Paintings are piling up in the closets, and you've given your family all the gifts their walls can handle. It's time to sell something. But where do you start?

You may not feel you're ready for a big-time New York gallery, or know what the art festival circuit's all about, and when someone speaks of "bricks-and-mortar" galleries, you may not be able to imagine any other kind. But between the four other artists I interviewed for this article and myself, we've got 100 years of art sales experience between us, and we're sharing our best advice for determining what venue is the best for you and how to make the most of the opportunity.

The Circuit: Art Festivals

Although New Mexico artist Robert Highsmith no longer participates in art festivals, at one time he did nearly 45 shows a year. Living in a motor home, he followed the sun as the seasons changed. "I'd see the same people show after show—all of us traveling in motor homes and using CB radios," he says. (His handle was Ramblin' Rembrandt.)

It's not necessary to do as many shows as Highsmith, or to drive quite as far to have a successful festival experience. It all depends on your ambition and fortitude. To get started, come up with a potential list of shows and go to a few. "Talk to people on the art festival circuit who do work that's similar to yours. Ask them what shows they like to do, how sales

have been, and see what kind of prices they charge. Their experiences may help you decide on an itinerary," says Highsmith.

The artist, who's won more than 100 awards at festivals, purposely participated in shows with big prizes. "A good show has a lot of money for awards and attracts a lot of competition. At a quality show, you may have a thousand people coming through. Getting an award may sell a painting for you," he says.

Entry fees for quality shows can be as high as \$100, and you'll need to apply months in advance to get in. Follow the submission guidelines carefully; many shows require slides or a portfolio of your work. Magazines such as *Sunshine Artist* and *Where the Shows Are!!!* are good resources for finding quality shows and deciding which ones are best suited to your style of work.

Most festivals, especially the outdoor ones, provide you only with a space. Once you're accepted into a show, you'll need a portable tent, such as an E-Z UP tent, with sides or rain sheeting to protect your work from the elements. You'll also need a hanging system, such as a Pro-Panel display panel (see "Art Festival Resources" on page 22 for details). In addition, you'll need a money box, a means for taking credit cards, and promotional material. Handouts are important, says Highsmith. "You may give someone a brochure on Saturday and he'll come back to buy a painting on Sunday," he says.



A Group Effort Maggie Latham stands outside Guild Hall Gallery, the co-op gallery where she shared expenses and the duties of running the business with other artists. Located in Key West, Florida, the gallery caters to tourists who long to take home a bit of paradise. Latham sold small original watercolor seascapes, *giclée* prints and greeting cards.



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MAGAZINES & BOOKS

Sunshine Artist

Palm House Publishing, 4075 L.B. McLeod Road, Suite E, Orlando, FL 32811
www.sunshineartist.com
800/597-2573

Where the Shows Are!!!

PO Box 453, Edgewater, FL 32132
www.artandcrafts.com
386/428-0173

Art Festival Guide: The Artist's Guide to Selling in Art Festivals, by Maria Arango
www.artfestivalguide.info

EQUIPMENT

E-Z UP Instant Shelters

1601 Iowa Avenue, Riverside, CA 92507
800/45-SHADE
www.ezup.com

Flourish Canopies and Display Products

3640 Highway 23, St. Paul, AR 72760
800/296-0049
www.flourish.com

ProPanels

MD Enterprises, 9017 Diplomacy Row, Dallas, TX 75247
800/525-4159
www.propanels.com

Next, figure out how many pieces to take to the show and how to price them. Highsmith says he would take 15 to 20 pieces—all original art—and made sure to vary the sizes and prices so most people could afford something. He also set his prices in line with other, similar work in the show and refused to haggle. “It’s never a good idea to barter,” he says. “It lessens your work.”

Highsmith made a lot of friends on the road. “Many people did shows within a 200-mile radius from their



A Fair to Remember Although he’s no longer active on the art festival circuit, Robert Highsmith, who painted *Near Yavapai Point* (watercolor on paper, 22x30), recalls the experience fondly.



Gallery Appeal Highsmith now sells paintings, such as *Old Saguaro* (watercolor on paper, 22x30), in galleries in New Mexico, where he currently lives and paints, and on the East Coast, where the work inspired by his time living in South Carolina still has a following.

homes, but I wasn’t tied to a house,” he says. “It was always nice to find someone who’d let me borrow his shower.”

Bricks and Mortar: Local Galleries and Other Exhibition Spaces

If the gypsy life isn’t for you, galleries might be a more suitable alternative for selling your work. Options include private commercial galleries, co-op galleries and alternative exhibition spaces. UK artist Maggie Latham, who participated in several co-ops while living in Florida, notes the pros and cons. “Privately owned galleries may require exclusivity, without the option of being able to show your art elsewhere,” she says. “Member-driven co-ops are good for emerging artists and those just learning the ropes. Art centers with gallery space offer a less-involved approach, but will take a commission.”

Private galleries are the traditional venue. You know when you’re ready for one, Canadian artist Dwight Baird says, “when you feel your work is professional and saleable.” It’s important, he adds, to find one that suits your type of work and

what’s in your portfolio?

A basic portfolio should contain:

A dozen high-quality prints of recent, representative work. Include a CD of your work if you can, but don’t skip the prints.

A clearly written artist’s statement with your contact information

A complete resume, listing (in order of importance):

- signature memberships, followed by regular memberships
- awards you’ve won
- solo shows you’ve been in, followed by group shows
- galleries representing you
- publications in which your work has been featured
- collections, residencies and education

A small number of photocopied clippings about you

Tips: Images should accurately depict what you do today. Galleries aren’t interested in your old work. The quality of images must be as good as what you’d submit to a competition. Your artist’s statement must be clearly written, with flawless grammar and sentence structure. Get help with photography and writing if you need it.

questions for privately owned galleries

If you do get into a traditional gallery, before you agree to show with them, ask these questions:

WHAT IS YOUR COMMISSION RATE? Galleries typically take 40 percent to 50 percent.

HOW DO YOU PROMOTE YOUR ARTISTS? Some galleries do co-op advertising with artists.

DO YOU GIVE DISCOUNTS? Some artists arrange to let their galleries give a discount on multiple purchases—so long as they’re multiples of their paintings and not someone else’s.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU REFRESH INVENTORY? Some galleries want new paintings or to replace artists who don’t sell, every six months.

Tips: Make sure you get a contract. Also make sure you agree on an inventory list with retail prices and what you’re owed if your paintings sell. Both you and the gallery should get copies.

questions for co-op galleries

Maggie Latham suggests you consider the following points when looking into co-ops:

HOW MANY MEMBERS ARE THERE? Artwork should be rotated so every member gets fair exposure.

WHAT OTHER MEDIA AND STYLES ARE THERE? Variety helps avoid competition.

DOES THE GALLERY HAVE A SET, CONSISTENT PRICING STRUCTURE? You don't want to undercut other members or vice versa.

WHAT UP-FRONT INVESTMENT IS REQUIRED? This includes your costs in framing, packaging and promotional material.

WHAT HIDDEN FEES ARE THERE? Many co-ops have a one-time "impact" fee for supplies.

HOW IS ADVERTISING HANDLED? Find out if there's a committee that makes decisions.

WHAT TIME COMMITMENT IS REQUIRED? Usually you'll need to do desk duty a certain number of times a week or month. Can you pay to have another member work your shift? Find out about all member responsibilities.

HOW IS ACCOUNTING HANDLED? Find out if the gallery takes a percentage for credit card and banking charges. See how sales tax is handled. Some galleries require the individual artist to deal with it. Find out how often funds from sales are distributed.

HOW OFTEN DOES THE GALLERY HAVE BUSINESS MEETINGS AND HOW ARE THEY RUN?



Print Perfect Latham uses Adobe Photoshop software to create digital files of paintings such as *Old Island Charm* (watercolor on paper, 14x11) and turns them into high-quality fine-art *giclée* prints.

one you can trust. He suggests contacting other artists in the gallery to find out what their experiences have been.

A good approach to finding a private gallery is to contact the ones that seem right for you and ask if they're taking new artists. If so, offer to leave a portfolio. (See "What's in Your Portfolio?" on page 23, for tips on what to include.) Make sure you get the manager's contact information and follow up in a few weeks with a phone call.

If the gallery wants you, make sure to ask questions, including what commission it charges. Get a contract. "Unless it's a very respected and profitable gallery," Baird says, "never sign an exclusive contract unless you feel they can guarantee sales on a regular basis." (See "Questions for Privately Owned Galleries" on page 23, for more questions to ask.)

Baird recommends against signing a long-term agreement, unless you have complete faith and trust, since such an agreement can be difficult to get out of, if things don't

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go well. Hopefully, your relationship will be a match made in heaven. But if not, he says, "Tell them you're not satisfied, pick up your paintings and walk away. Try to end all arrangements on an amicable basis."

Co-op galleries, in which members share administrative duties and expenses, are another option. Expenses can be high, since they may include things like rent and bank charges. But on the positive side, Latham notes, "There's no commission taken, and they're a wonderful way to interact with fellow artists and customers."

Latham recommends having a number of different kinds of items to sell before approaching a co-op. "Consider high-quality fine-art prints, unframed and framed originals and greeting cards." For tourist-driven areas, think of small pieces that a visitor can tuck in his suitcase. As with the privately owned galleries, you'll want to ask questions. (See "Questions for Co-Op Galleries," opposite, for Latham's suggestions for what to ask.)

Local art centers are another option. Latham notes that they may require a recommendation from another artist, or for you to be juried in, plus a membership fee. "This type



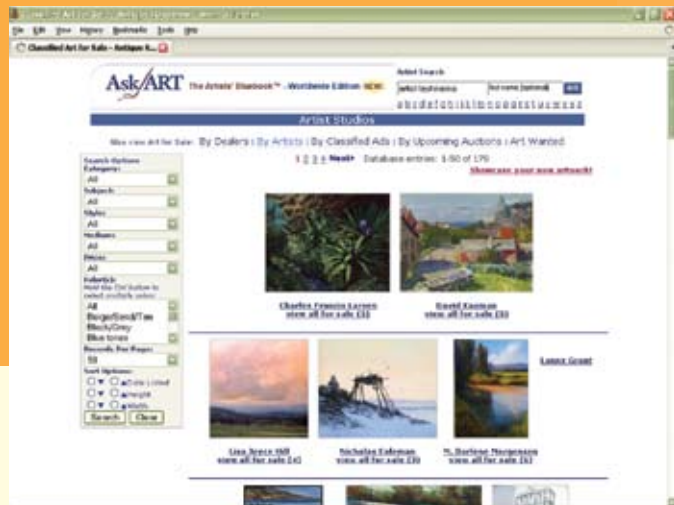
Making the Rounds Dwight Baird (in the bright blue shirt and dark jacket) mingles with customers on opening night of an exhibition of his work at the Alfred Langevin Cultural Gallery in the artist's hometown of Huntington, Canada, just outside of Montreal.



A Good Fit Baird, who painted *Sun at Three (Sol a Las Tres)* (acrylic on Masonite panel, 24x48), advises artists to seek out galleries that suit their styles of work and cautions against signing a long-term, exclusive contract unless they're absolutely convinced a gallery can deliver consistent sales.



Desk Duty Latham takes her turn behind the desk at her co-op gallery.



ART-EXCHANGE, INC.

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ASK/ART

\$16.50/month: no online purchases (other levels of participation available)
www.askart.com

ARTID

Free: no online purchases
\$9.95/month: online purchases
www.artid.com

BOUNDLESS GALLERY

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ORIGINAL ART ONLINE

\$5.95/month + no commission: no online purchases
www.originalartonline.com

STARVING ARTISTS GALLERY

Free: no online purchases
\$29.95/year: online purchases
www.starvingartistsgallery.com

ART GALLERY WORLDWIDE

\$48/year + 15 percent commission (no commission for first two years): online purchases
www.gallery-worldwide.com

ARTMAJEUR INTERNATIONAL

Free: online purchases
www.artmajeur.com

Internet Sales AskArt and Art-Exchange are examples of online virtual galleries. On AskArt, you can create a personalized gallery page with several pieces of your art. Interested buyers contact you directly to make purchases. Art-Exchange handles transactions for you and takes a commission.

of gallery is perfect for those who don't have time to participate in co-ops," she says.

Other venues include charity auctions, coffee shops and local restaurants. Any public place with wall space may be happy to display your work. But before you commit, make sure you're clear on who will handle sales and whether the work will be insured against theft and damage.

The New Reality: Selling Online

Selling work from the comfort of your own home via the Web has its appeal, but it's not easy. Original art can be a difficult sell online. Florida artist Jennifer Ardolino, who has tried a variety of approaches, agrees. "To boost traffic to my website, I once bid for placement on search engines, which cost me about \$1,000 and produced no sales," she says. "People would have to know your work before buying an original online." Only 5 percent of her sales come from the Web, and those are giclée prints rather than originals.

Like Baird and many other artists, Ardolino uses her online presence more for advertising than selling. "My main purpose for having a website is to have a reference tool for the people I meet at shows," she says. "They can look up my site, check out my schedule and view all my paintings and giclées for sale. Some will come back to another show and purchase art in person as opposed to buying online."

If you do try to sell art through **your website**, make sure the work is current. And price your work the same online as you do at the other places you sell your work. To make purchasing easier for your customers, integrate an online payment system with your website. With PayPal (www.paypal.com), you can

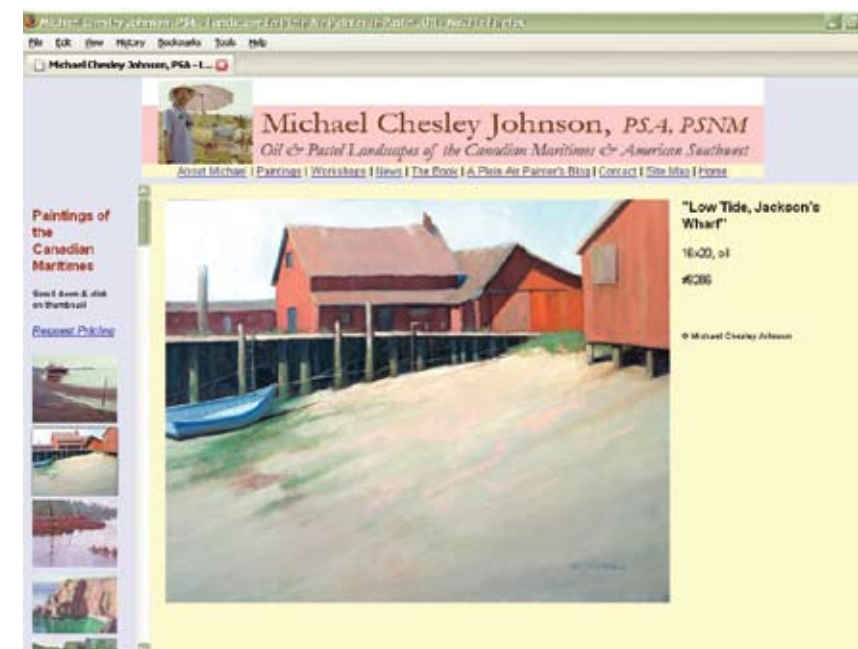
Staying Connected A blog (see example above) allows you to share new paintings with collectors quickly and efficiently. A personal website (see example at right) can be used to promote your work and special events.

add a "Buy Now" feature, allowing buyers to pay either through their PayPal account, by credit card, e-check or bank transfer.


Another option is to post to a weblog (or **blog**). Because people can subscribe to your blog and receive images of your paintings moments after you post them, the immediacy of a blog generates a certain excitement that websites can't. Google's Blogger (www.blogger.com) is a good place to start, and it's free.


You might also try **eBay auctions**. Talk about creating excitement! Some buyers hang around their computers until the wee hours just to make sure no one outbids them in the last second. Success requires you to develop a following, though; artists who put up auctions intermittently don't do as well.

Another option is a **virtual gallery**. Some of these are just presentation galleries, whereas others serve as retail agents for your work and offer e-commerce options. AskART offers an entry-level, presentation gallery, where for \$16.50 a month, you can put up several pieces on a personalized gallery page. Buyers contact you directly for purchases. (AskART does have other levels of participation; see www.askart.com for more details.) Other sites, such as Art-Exchange (www.art-exchange.com), handle transactions and typically charge a fee. Art-Exchange has an



introductory package of \$275 per year, plus a 10 percent commission on sales.

There are many places to sell your work. The best way to explore these different venues is to talk to successful artists. WetCanvas! (www.wetcanvas.com) is a great networking site. Not only do they have a variety of forums dedicated to different media and painting approaches, but they also have a business forum and another for Internet sales strategies. Get ready to sell, sell, sell. 

 Michael Chesley Johnson shares more tips for marketing your art online at www.artistsnetwork.com/article/get-on-the-web.