

Buying Art on the Internet

By Shelly Dee

The art world, like nearly everything else, has changed dramatically since the rise of the internet. Whether it's buyers using an online auction service, curators researching their latest show, galleries enticing prospective customers or artists reinventing themselves, the internet has made art more accessible and the business of art more competitive.

Buying Art Online

Online art venues are changing the way art is bought and sold as more people become comfortable with the idea of buying art on the web. Motivated by the chance to view hundreds – even thousands – of works at a time, collectors are increasingly turning to web-based galleries, artists' websites, virtual and 'actual' gallery websites, live streaming auction-house sites and even eBay.

In the early days, potential buyers were concerned about fraud and internet safety, and image quality was often poor. But collectors say buying art online is safe if you stick to the most reputable sites, and with advances in technology, today's buyers can zoom in for an incredibly detailed view of artworks. The best sites generally guarantee the condition and authenticity of their artworks, and some offer no-questions-asked returns during the first week or so after the sale. For information on pricing try www.artapa.com and www.artprice.com

Online Galleries

With literally millions of art galleries online, sometimes knowing where to begin looking is a challenge. The thematic online gallery guide www.fineartsites.org, the Fine Art Dealers Association's site at www.fada.com, and the contemporary art and artisans site at www.Artspan.com are useful guides for potential buyers. Also browsing web-based galleries such as www.ugallery.com and www.galleries-online.co.uk can be a good way to discover emerging artists.

The first online art fair took place in January 2011. During the weeklong VIP Art Fair (in these democratic times the VIP stands for 'Viewing in Private' – or even 'Viewing in Pajamas') 139 leading galleries from around the world exhibited more than 8,000 pieces. Buyers and sellers were able to communicate in private chat-rooms and enjoy many aspects of gallery browsing. Looking was free, but buying came at a price: a US\$100 premium for the first two days and US\$20 thereafter. The most expensive piece was a Chris Ofili bronze which





sold at US\$375,000. Though beset with technical failures – especially with the much-touted chat functions – the fair registered over 41,000 users and another has been scheduled for 2012 (see www.vipartfair.com).

While the web is expanding the market by attracting some new buyers, not all collectors are willing to buy online. Apart from the appeal of seeing a work in person, some believe that galleries' support of their artists indicate those works are more likely to increase in value. Work that is hand-selected by galleries may be a welcome alternative to the daunting overabundance available on the internet. And in a field in which top collectors are keen to signal which artists and galleries they like best, the anonymity of internet purchases may actually be a drawback.

Online Auctions

Another development for buying art on the web is real-time, online bidding at auction houses. In 2010, Christie's recorded 28 per cent of its buyers bidding online. Go to their website for more information, www.christies.com. And with sales of US\$1 million per week, www.Sothebys.com is the Web's biggest mover of art and jewellery. There are other sites to fit more modest budgets – but beware, they can be addictive! Try i-Gavel www.igavel.com, Heritage Auction Galleries www.ha.com, Heffel Online Auctions www.heffel.com and Artnet Online Auctions www.artnet.com

Researching and Viewing Art Online

The internet has become an invaluable tool for researching art and is transforming the experience of viewing art as well.

For general information, www.artcyclopedia.com is a good place to start. For those interested in art history, sites

such as www.arthistoryresources.net and www.harmsen.net will direct you to a multitude of specialty websites. The professional networking site www.linkedin.com has art-based groups that keep members up-to-date on events in the art world, as does the first online art newspaper www.artdaily.com. *PASSAGE* readers may be interested in sites such as www.asianart.com, www.chinapage.com and www.saffronart.com which specialize in Asian art.

Earlier this year, Google announced its Google Art Project (www.googleartproject.com) which enables users to view works from 17 of the world's most prominent art institutions. Using Google's Street View technology, the site provides a virtual walkthrough experience, with the works hung in the context of the museum hall. Currently, visitors can access 385 gallery rooms, including more than 1,000 high-resolution images of works by 486 artists. The photos are digitized at 7 billion pixels, a thousand times more detailed than most digital cameras – giving viewers an unprecedented close-up look at some of the world's greatest masterworks.

Not to be outdone by online upstarts, the Louvre has created its own website (www.louvre.fr), which also offers virtual tours and currently receives 11 million visits a year – 1.5 million more than the museum itself!

Shelly Dee collects art and artefacts. Many pieces from her collections are in both USA and Singapore museums. She is on the boards of the National Museum of Singapore and the American Association of Singapore. Previously, she served on the boards of the Natural History Museum in London and the Houston Museum of Natural Science.

Illustrations by Sian Appleyard