



ERIC SMITH

Dalí, Kahlo, Monet, Warhol. Almost immediately, mental pictures associated with these artists come to mind. What is not thought about as quickly are those responsible for seeing to it that these great works make it from artist to venue or from gallery to home. The work that goes on behind the scenes in the art world is just as important as the art itself for without it, there would be no platform for the masses to enjoy and appreciate both the artists and their art.

Someone extremely familiar with just what goes on behind the scenes is Redwood Media Group CEO, Eric Smith. Starting at an art and retail framing company in 1987, Smith became an art consultant for Martin Lawrence Galleries, and quickly worked his way up to manage sales for more than 20 gallery locations. From there, he joined the team at Art Expo New York

and eventually bought the company. The success of Art Expo New York encouraged him to form Redwood Media Group, which focuses on creating event venues designed to bring artists, galleries, art dealers, publishers and framing professionals together. Redwood Media Group manages several major annual events and notable national publications.

MEET THE EXPERTS

Although he admits that he cannot paint or draw, art is an important part of his life. Not only has he built a career surrounded by the arts, the works themselves make an impact on his lifestyle. "It's like music in a lot of ways", divulges Smith. Like music, art conveys universal messages about the human condition, and everyone, whether or not they possess any talent, can connect to those messages. "Because we can't create it ourselves, we have to go seek it out elsewhere. People have a desire to collect beautiful things," he observes.

Smith recognizes that the art industry differs in many ways from other areas of business because art and emotion are so closely connected. "Artists and their work," Smith says, "wear their emotions on their sleeve. They have pride." Artwork is personal. As an art professional, his dedication to these artists' emotions carry prevalence

over personal financial gain. The money comes when every other part of the process has been fulfilled. Smith has an obligation to his professional relationships to involve highly talented artists, and it is a delicate responsibility to intertwine financial responsibilities with work as personal as art.

Over the past few decades, Smith takes notice of two major developments that have dramatically altered the art industry: the Internet and digital printing. Firstly, the Internet's accessibility has changed not only how artists represent themselves, but how collectors, vendors and dealers buy and sell artwork. While negotiating price, anyone can look up the auction price of a piece or research comparable works of art by that artist. The results are almost immediate and can affect art transactions. Digital printing, in terms of printing artwork, has also changed how art is bought and sold. The cost of printing digitally is offset by the reduction of other costs in the traditional print process. Artists also have more control over color-correcting and digitally manipulating their artwork to go to print. Overall, these changes have altered how collectors approach acquiring works of art.

When asked for advice on building a professional art career, Smith offered several powerful suggestions. "Learn from the ground up, create a collector base," he said. "Learn about

the art. Go to shows, whether it's a solo show or Art Basel in Switzerland." Smith notes that in the beginning of his career, he began to study art and everything associated with it before he sold anything or approached collectors. He felt that he needed to be completely knowledgeable about what he represented in the gallery in order to be a resource for his clients.

Carrying on the idea of being a resource for others, Smith mentioned how galleries can be prosperous venues for artists. "For a gallery, the most important thing to have is a key director. All galleries need someone like Ruth-Ann, who is passionate about the art and about the direction of the company." A director and company leader needs to see the bigger picture and be someone who can keep things moving and make decisions.

He sees the future of the art business in the next decade growing in the number of art shows and developing a more level playing field for artists. "That being said, good art will always sell," affirms Smith. The major art shows around the country have not only become popular for art enthusiasts. In fact, many cities see these events as opportunities to generate large profits, and the resulting media events, after parties and celebrity attendance all contribute to a new attitude toward art in general. While many of the installations in the main venues remain highly avant-garde, the surrounding art events and opportunities can often be more accessible to collectors. These major art fairs support the galleries in the hosting city, even if the art varies in style and value.

While Smith has been exposed to many artists and their works throughout his lifetime, the paintings that he has collected are selective. "I have a Julian Schnabel, a [Ronnie] Cutrone, who worked with Warhol." Collecting art is not just about the artist's name and reputation, the work must speak for itself. Paintings by Juan Ruiz, an artist who exhibited his work at an event hosted by Redwood Media Group, also caught his eye and compelled Smith to buy. "Never buy art just because it is in fashion," he cautions. Like many seasoned collectors, Smith's advice to others is the same, "Buy what you like."

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