

Comment

No Bargain For Artists

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I would like to add some comments to the art auction discussion.

At least eight events annually ask artists for donations: Mental Health, Human Rights, Humane Society, Clarke Heritage, Land Trust, Habitat for Humanity, Taste of Athens and Juvenile Diabetes. There are more, too, and they are all very worthy causes. Very few artists, except those doing multiples or very quick work, have output or time to satisfy them all.

At one time, I was very generous with charities. I was selling my art and grateful for the community support of my work. I gave to everything. Guess what: studio sales of my work dried up. Then one day in a framing store, I overheard a woman say, "I buy all my work at auctions because it is cheaper and the money goes to a good cause."

Mary Porter



The work is cheaper - often much cheaper - at an auction. So many auctions, so many donations: it's a bidders' paradise. Collectors of your work are not going to be pleased to see something similar going for a fraction of what they just paid in the gallery or in your studio. This hurts galleries and artists because it devalues the specific artist's work, as well as all local art.

So, in an act of self-preservation, I joined the ranks of artists who boycott auctions. Some people then implied that I was a selfish meanie by doing this. Actually, I still do contribute from time to time - in fact, I have already made commitments to four causes this year alone, (two from the list above and two additional), and it is barely March. But I know I will be called a selfish meanie or worse again when the other causes come calling and I have hit my limit.

Art is a profession like anything else. The only income many artists have is from sale of work, and quite often they do not make a living wage. Please know that the artist has a lot of money invested in the production of work. Rents for the studio alone have risen sharply along with Athens housing costs. Then there are bills for heat, water and electricity. Quality art materials are expensive. Go into any art supply store and check out the price of a tube of genuine cadmium red, or the cost of just one sheet of all-rag drawing paper. Creating a quality work of art can take an enormous amount of time, and not all attempts are successful.

Further, most people do not realize that galleries take a 40 to 60 percent commission on sales. They have to do that to pay their expenses, too. Often, when an artist has a show, that artist also pays for printing and mailing the announcements, as well as providing the food, beverages and music for the reception. So, even if there are exhibition sales, the artist, and sometimes the gallery, can easily end up losing money in the end anyway.

Artists keep going because we feel that what we are doing is important. A good piece of art enriches all our lives, makes us think, can be a healing presence and records a vision for posterity. Artists donate to the community just by making and sharing our work.

But as professionals, artists must take responsibility to make our work economically viable. If we do not ensure our work is valued, nobody else will. Unfortunately, the plethora of art auctions in this town undermines that.

After considering input from artists, some organizations are beginning to consider the needs of the artist in their events. Community Connection has always given donating artists free tickets to their event - not all groups do. The Land Trust this year is having an art exhibition rather than an outright auction. This idea is based on how the Trinity School in Atlanta has successfully conducted its auction for over 20 years. The Land Trust is exhibiting the artists' work in dignity on a properly lighted gallery wall, rather than propped up in a dimly lit corner of a party room. The exhibition is available for public viewing this week, prior to the actual fundraising event on Mar. 25, so that even those folks who cannot afford to attend the event can enjoy the work. Most importantly, the artists are also offered a 50-percent commission on sales. Perhaps this is one model for future Athens events.

Here is another idea: for those of you folks who would like to see an upgrade in the quality of works at auctions, you could buy a work of art that you like from the artist or their gallery and donate to the cause of your choice. You could even enjoy it in your home indefinitely in the meantime. You will get a tax deduction for the whole value of

the work (the artist can claim only for the materials). You will also be supporting the local economy. If you cannot afford this option, perhaps this will help you understand why the artist cannot either.

We are living in increasingly tight times. Federal programs for the poor are being cut, and more of us are fitting into that category. At the same time, federal support of the arts has all but disappeared. A double whammy! Both social services and the arts must rely more on private support. Somehow we need to find a way to guarantee a decent life - physically, culturally, spiritually - for all Americans.

It would be nice for another segment of Athens society to be the focus of fundraising events. Let's get creative! How about an auction for services from doctors, dentists or lawyers for a change? Artists might be the first bidders!

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