



GROUNDING YOUR PRESENTATION

Over many years of creating sales presentations for artwork, I have found that if the presentation hinges on an academic tie-in, or better, an historical connection, the more influence it has. And the more legitimate the artwork will appear in the eyes of the customer.

One of the more important factors in exacting a positive buying decision is to create the perception of value. In our business, that's a pretty difficult concept to define. Dealers themselves may not be sure what actually does constitute value in art. My own opinion is that in many cases it has been an Emperor's New Clothes dynamic—in the late '80's, many art collectors who fancied themselves among the in-crowd because of the art they owned, were in fact, walking around in their birthday suits.

Artwork was foisted upon unsuspecting customers in the '80's under the guise of an "investment" vehicle, and a mere five years later was found to have had no value at all, let alone the thousands of dollars the customer may have paid for it.

We, as ethical art dealers, must find a way to establish value in the mind of our customers. Not a perceived value, but the real one. A quality work of art at a fair price. When discussing intangibles, like a piece of paper in a frame, or a sculpture or a piece of hand blown glass, the customer usually goes to this question in his or her mind:

I wonder how long it took to make this?

or,

Hmph! it probably only cost about fifteen bucks to print this.

With thoughts like this in our customer's mind, it's a tough task to establish value. (More about value later.)

It is for this reason that any connection that can be made to the world of academics, when discussing the work of art being presented, the stronger your case will be.

I always make an attempt to tie the art I'm presenting into an historical context—a movement of art, a genre of art, a particular style of art the patron will have heard of. Impressionism, of course, is the most obvious example, and will be the most widely accepted historical term. (We used to say that Impressionism was like Sara Lee: "...nobody doesn't like it.")

This presumes that you, the art consultant—or using the term I prefer, salesperson—have some knowledge of art history.

THE READING LIST

To tie in your artist, you'll need to know a little about the basic trends of art history, particularly European art history, since the middle of the

19th Century. If you aren't knowledgeable about it, get books on the basic genres of art that have developed since that period in Western Art. In almost all the areas of our presentation—technique, importance, aesthetics, etc.—you'll need to have a storehouse of knowledge of those areas of Art History in order to fashion a convincing debate. You don't have to be encyclopedic about it, just an awareness of the trends of art, and who some of the major players were since the 1850's. In addition, some reading on American Art History since the turn of the century is also advisable. But since much of what happened to influence Western art happened in Europe, specifically Paris, that's where you'll want to start building your base of information. (Please, no letters or scathing email spam: I know there were influences from nearly everywhere—from Alaska to Zimbabwe—that impacted American Art in the early part of this century, but we're just talking about major influences in broad strokes).

In addition, you'll want a good working knowledge of how all the print-making mediums are executed, how all the three dimensional art is made or any method by which the art you show is produced.

Obviously, it's beyond the scope of this book to go into each of those areas, but there are a myriad of books on these specific mediums that are far more informative than I could be on the subject. I cite them only to illustrate the lengths to which your knowledge should extend. You don't have to know the intricacies of each of them, but you should be able to briefly describe the process in order to illuminate it for your client.

As an example, there is a dizzying array of processes with which to create three dimensional art: foundry bronzes, cold cast bronze, the lost wax method, investment casting, plaster, wood, metal, stone, etc.

For those artists you may represent who create artwork using an unusual method, you can get information from the individual artist. But the techniques I mentioned are the more predictable media and you should be able to talk intelligently about them.