

How to Be a Famous Artist After You're Dead

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(This is a revision of an article that appeared in *Vizual Dog* in the summer of 1998)

Not everyone cares about being famous.

It takes a lot of work to ensure that you will survive in humankind's collective memory after your death, and we are surrounded by examples of how fervent focusing on an afterlife tends to diminish the joy of the present (Check out ultraconservative Christians.).

Planning immortality can be downright tedious and time-consuming. But if you are adamant about being remembered as a famous artist, here is what you need to do.

Ask yourself why.

Do you think your art work offers insight to future viewers? Is your work indicative of the state of the human condition during your lifetime? Are you afraid of being forgotten? These are hard questions that you should ask yourself; the answers will guide you as to how much effort you expend. The pursuit of influence on the future is labor-intensive.

Get back into the studio and do the work.

This is the most important factor in being remembered as an artist. The art itself must survive, which means the artist must produce a sufficient number of original works—a critical mass—to guarantee the continued existence of a large body of work despite the inevitable loss of some pieces to fire, flood, neglect, or other damages.

The exact number of art works required for critical mass is difficult to define. Alexander Calder produced an incredible 16,000 works, while Vermeer is remembered despite his limited production. The best rule of thumb is the universal truth repeated by Gladys Engel Lang in *Etched in Memory: The*

Building and Survival of Artistic Reputation: one cannot have too much of a good thing. Note the word “good.”

The artwork must be very good.

Art that seems most important to our own generation may be only marginally important to those of the future. For example, the eighteenth century monumental landscapes portraying nature as the throne of God today seem spiritually contrived. In contrast, the self-portraits of Rembrandt and van Gogh strike a chord with each generation. They convey a more universal idea—the examination of self as a method of exploring the meaning of existence.

Content and subject matter are actually part of how society measures the importance of an art work, and topics such as sex, war, redemption, love, despair, and beauty, as well as formal aesthetic considerations, are the topics that concern every generation without fail. Today there is a very successful artist known for his paintings of famous golf courses. I don't remember his name and I don't think anyone in the future will either.

Complex works with multiple layers of interpretation best withstand the test of time; while some viewers may appreciate your use of color, others will revisit your work for its symbolism or social comment. In *American Visions*, art critic Robert Hughes remarks on Winslow Homer's *The Veteran in a New Field*, 1865:

Homer is rarely as simple as he looks. This early painting has both a narrative and a symbolic level....

It is also advantageous to produce recognizable bodies of work. Josef Albers explored the square, and Toulouse Lautrec recorded Paris night life. Chuck Close has a recognizable format even as his style changes.

Produce artwork that can physically last over time.

Artwork must be physically capable of surviving beyond the artist's death. Being technically knowledgeable about media is important. Cracking paint, crumbling limestone, and fading watercolors can thwart the immortality of the artist. The ancient Roman works surviving today may not be the best that the Romans produced, but they are the only examples we have to study.

Archival materials are a must, including archival framing. Works that are archival framed will have the best chance of survival. Even enthusiastic art patrons do not always know the best way to care for your art, so begin with archival materials.

For an artist's work to survive, the art process must most often result in an actual object. Many activist, installation, and performance artists whose own works are fragile, spontaneous, or temporary have denigrated the objectification of art as part of their philosophy.

But these same artists often go to great lengths to document their work—in writing, film, or photography—for posterity. That documentation becomes an object that replaces the art object, but it is often a poor substitute because it will not provide the strong aesthetic experience or intimate detail as the original art.

You need good custodians.

To survive, the work must also have proper custodianship. Libraries, museums, public art collections, and serious private and corporate collections are entities that value art and, thus, provide conservation measures to protect and maintain it. In 1998, Lucinda Barnes of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago stated that approximately eighty percent of the art in American museums (in-

cluding those in Alaska) was donated from private collections. Get as much of your work as you can into these collections.

Donating works to a museum—an obvious solution—is not always an alternative; the cost of caring for art does not allow museums or art banks to accept all works that are offered to them. Donating art is a collaborative effort between the artist and the custodial institution.

Proper custodianship also means making written arrangements for the care and dispersal of your art upon your death. Hopefully, your family loves you enough to want to keep your memory alive, and they will arrange for your works to remain together as a private collection or be donated *in toto* to an art institution. The last thing you want your family to do is to scatter your art among relatives merely as keepsake mementos. Choosing an executor knowledgeable in the arts is not enough; leave clear and detailed instructions.

Provide a paper trail—with slides.

Art historians only research those artists they are capable of researching. One of the several reasons that women artists are not well recorded in history is that they were once not allowed membership in art societies, were rarely invited to exhibit, or were rarely awarded or critiqued. They left few or no paper trails during or after their lives. The artist must ensure that enough information survives to attract and assist future art historians.

Start personal files.

You should maintain at least a 1) resume, 2) a vita, 3) exhibition files, 4) provenances of art work, and 5) a clippings file. Documenting work with well organized slides or archival photographs is also very important.

You may organize images of your work on electronic media, but it is not a good idea to rely solely on electronic formats. Many of these have become obsolete (such as the zip disc and Pagemaker® program). Computer images are now being allowed by galleries and museums as submittals to juried

or proposed exhibitions; some archivists are already worried about the viability of these formats. Maintain hard copy (paper) files and slides or photographs that are archival fixed.

A vita is a detailed resume that covers every honor, activity, and award that you ever received. It provides a fuller description of achievements than a resume. For example, a resume might list:

1990 *All Alaska Juried Exhibition*, Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Alaska. Drawing.

The same listing in a vita might be:

1990. *XXIII All Alaska Juried Art Exhibition*. Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Alaska. Juror James Demetron, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. 116 of 625 works accepted. Graphite: *Graywacke with Quartz Intrusion*. Representational drawing of small stone on vellum; 11 x 14 inches; silver wood frame. Purchased by Alexander Sanders, Anchorage.

Keep an exhibition file for every exhibit. Include as much as you can of the following: printed announcement, press releases, descriptive list of works, price list, names and addresses of buyers, copy of the artist statement, viewers' written remarks, printed reviews, and labeled slides.

Maintaining a provenance—a history of ownership—on all works is a time-consuming activity, but a godsend to art historians. It means keeping a list and description of who receives or purchases your art and a description of the artwork that allows it to be readily identified. Art entities rely on provenances to help establish legal ownership or find work to mount a retrospective exhibition. One easy way to provide future information is to affix to the back or bottom of works any labels from exhibitions or mailed postcards.

A clipping file holds copies of every article that has been published about you or your work. Most of these clippings come from newspapers that use poor quality paper. Copying the clippings onto rag paper will provide a good record because copiers today are, in fact, laser printers that produce prints that keep well if protected from light.

Spread the paperwork.

Give copies for inclusion in artist files (such as those at the Anchorage Museum library). If you produce a catalog, disperse copies to locations likely to be used by art researchers and to owners of your work, such as research or university libraries.

Provide a resume to purchasers of your work. Keep journals and copies of correspondence about your work. Before you think such documentation is not important, look at the American presidents who keep every scrap of paper produced during their term in office and build huge libraries to house it all. Documentation is your second most important asset after the survival of the art work itself.

Supplemental Strategies

Be physically located near the arts.

Be part of the academia, museums, libraries, organizations, and circles that are known for their involvement in the visual arts. For example, pursue your education at an art college with a national reputation and forge friendships with other people in the arts. Allow art to define the majority of your social activities outside your studio.

Think beyond your regional boundaries. It is difficult for Alaska artists to exhibit nationally on a continual basis due to distance and cost, but proximity to and inclusion in nationally recognized art venues are important.

Is regional fame ever enough? Yes, for many artists. Regional museums most often define their mission as supporting and emphasizing local artists, and usually define their collections by holding mostly regional art. (Local exhibitions in both museums and galleries may even dramatize the importance a local artist may have played in the national or international arts.)

If you choose to donate artwork, have a plan.

Respond to organizations that take pride in their own art collections, represent many good artists in successful and well recognized community programs, or will professionally display and auction the work.

Being part of a silent auction puts your art in a subordinate position; some artists refuse to donate work unless they are guaranteed inclusion in live auctions. Donating artwork to a fundraiser—unrelated to art and organized by nonprofessional volunteers—and then having your art sold at silent auction for a bargain price to an impulsive buyer is the worst way possible to disperse and preserve your work.

Never donate art to an entity that does not publish a catalog or other document of the event and always ask which other artists will be featured with you.

Consider donating annually to a specific event that benefits the arts; have your annual support be part of your artistic identity, much like your longterm memberships in certain arts organizations.

Be personally memorable, but be careful deciding exactly what that entails.

Take part in your society, align yourself with important causes and issues of your generation, and, most of all, be involved with other artists. Audubon, for example, was not the only good science illustrator of his time, but he was associated with the emerging environmental movement and that helped increase the value of his work.

Unfortunately, notoriety writes much of art history. No matter how crummy Dread Scott's work really is, he will always be remembered for putting an American flag on the floor to be walked on and will, thus, be considered some kind of hero of free speech. Andrew Wyeth will certainly be remembered—with a smirk—for concocting an imaginary affair with his model Helga for publicity reasons. More positively, Calder was placed on Nixon's Enemies List in the 1960s for his involvement in anti-war demonstrations, and issues of censorship brought Mapleson's work to the attention of many. If you can choose notoriety, choose it carefully.

Develop tangential markers.

Being linked with a professional or cultural group or movement provides additional historical infor-

mation about an artist and also helps researchers define the importance of that artist. For example, Sam Francis was part of the Bay Area Figurative movement and George Bellows was one of the Ash Can School artists. Alaska examples include SoNot, and Acme Art. Maintaining links to art academia increases your chances of being remembered.

Being associated with a well known artist is also of value. Philip McCracken, a Washington artist who was the 1971 juror of the All Alaska Juried, listed first in his credentials that he apprenticed to sculptor Henry Moore. Twenty-seven years later, for the Anacortes Arts Festival, he still mentions Moore near the front of his credentials.

Are you having fun?

In many ways, planning to be remembered as an artist is similar to the strategies and efforts that go into planning the most successful career in any profession. Few people are willing to totally commit themselves to achieving success at any price; most of us prefer to live with more balance and variety.

Hillary Clinton, in a 1998 address to the graduates of Howard University, stated, "Just because you have a career doesn't mean you have a life." Just because you are going to be a famous artist doesn't guarantee you will enjoy getting there. Personally, I prefer the advice of Kurt Vonnegut: "I tell you, we were put here on earth to fart around and don't let anyone tell you any different."

The power of myth tempts some artists to upgrade their own history (particularly when self-publishing). For example, thanks to Sydney, there are Alaskans today who still believe a Laurence painting is in the Louvre collection. In fact, little that is "known" of Laurence can be documented.