

SAN FRANCISCO DOWNTOWN

FEATURE

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Art for the Masses

By Monica Ortiz

They are a draw for even the most casual stroller, a visceral tug toward parks filled with white umbrellas that shield wire and metal sculptures and canvasses with bold splashes of color. The outdoor exhibitions planned by the Artist Guild of San Francisco each feature an impressive array of original work by Bay Area artists, from conservative still lifes to high energy cubism and pop art. Far from cheap and mass-produced, these are gallery quality, one-of-a-kind pieces that invite even the most reluctant of would-be collectors to stop and take a second look.

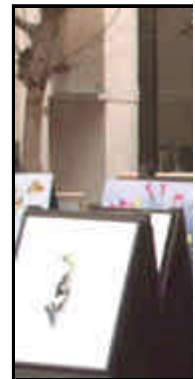
Connecting artists with the public has been a mission for the Artist Guild of San Francisco since it was founded in 1961. Guild officers and volunteers organize nearly 75 events each year, including Artopia, a music, dance, poetry and fine art festival, and Hands On Art, a fundraising open house event where a \$40 ticket gives participants the opportunity to work directly with an artist to create an original piece. The Guild's focus, however, is on the outdoor exhibitions hosted nearly every weekend in locations across San Francisco, including Maiden Lane, Union Square, Washington Square Park, Fort Mason, Marina Green, and South Beach.

"Everyone should acquire original art," said Sonya Paz, owner of SpazArt in San Jose. "The Guild has a vast collection of work from sculpture to painting to three dimensional pieces to charcoal. And in a venue like this, artists are very approachable about their work."

In an industry where there are more artists than galleries, Guild exhibitions provide a forum for local talent to build a name and learn about self-promotion.

"The Guild's mission is two-fold," said Guild president Richard Bolingbroke. "First, to bring art and artists to the community for public interaction and communication. Second, to help artists develop skills that will permit them to sustain themselves with art as a full-time career."

And they succeed; nearly all of the Guild's roughly 60 members are full-time artists. Guild membership itself is a serious business. Applicants must present a minimum of five original pieces in a formal, professional galley-like display, to a jury of peers for evaluation. But despite the atmosphere



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of intensity and professionalism, Guild artists are friendly and approachable, always willing to discuss their art and convince even the most fearful of admirers that original art is a worthy, conceivable purchase.

"A lot of people don't feel familiar with art, so buying it becomes uncomfortable or is seen as a risk," said Marilyn Kuksh, a bronze and metal sculptor. "A good gallery will always treat you well, but it can be an act of bravery to step across that threshold. Our events are more casual. You get to talk to the artist and ask questions about what art is and how it is produced. This process demystifies the artist and establishes a personal connection."

A newfound love affair with original artwork doesn't require a hefty bank balance or an advanced degree in art history.

"I love encouraging young people to start collecting, because they have embarked on something that will be with them for the rest of their lives," said Kuksh. "There is a misconception that if someone is buying or showing art on a street, their art is no good or should be cheap. But by coming to our shows and asking questions, people see the quality of the art and realize they are getting a good price. And when you look at artists, you see ordinary people."

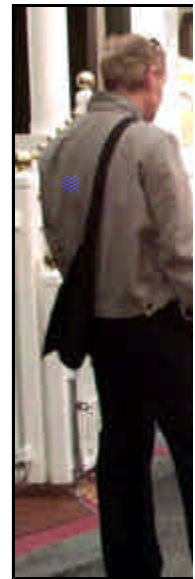
Meeting the artists directly also has more practical benefits – removing the overhead costs of gallery operation from sale prices, for example.







"You can work out payment terms with the artist or arrange to have it shipped," said Paz. "If you like it and it's one of a kind and you have to have it, don't be afraid to ask if you can work something out. Ask about credit cards or payment plans. These aren't unreasonable questions."

Purchasing art shouldn't be an investment, however, according to Bolingbroke and Kuksh. Buying art in the hopes its value will appreciate is a risky venture that depends too much on supply and demand and the subjective evaluation of an appraiser.

"Buy what you love. Spend as much as you can afford. Take care of it carefully," instructs Bolingbroke. "If you do these three things you will never regret the purchase. Don't buy it to match your couch or because it is a fad. Don't worry if no one else likes it. As long as you do, it is worth the asking price."

Information about the Artist Guild of San Francisco events can be found online at www.artistguildsf.com. Sonia Paz can be found on www.spazart.com; Marilyn Kuksh at www.kuksh.com; and Richard Bolingbroke at www.rbolingbroke.com.



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Monica Ortiz is a native San Franciscan whose articles have appeared in San Francisco Downtown, AsianDiveristy.com, Rime Magazine, Linux Today, Martial Arts Professional Magazine, Kung Fu Qigong Magazine and Inside Kung Fu Magazine.