

DENVER ALLIED ARTS GUILD

May 15, 2010

Marion Wright, Editor

Fleecing Lessons

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Like many artists, I have a website featuring my work, a bio and an artist's statement. This website was just recently set up and activated. My e-mail contact listed on the website received the following inquiry: "Hello, my name is S. Walker and I am interested in your painting...is it still available and how much is it for sale?"

The e-mail received was welcome to an artist whose sales have suffered from the recent economic downturn. An individual named "S.Walker" inquired about one of my paintings posted on my website asking if it was still for sale and the current price of the painting. I responded that it was available and discounted the price a bit as the painting had been displayed for several months. The response e-mail was enthusiastic, despite the rough English, which identified Mr. Walker as not comfortable with English as his first language, and told me to "consider it sold" and not to worry about making shipping arrangements because his "mover" would handle that aspect of delivery following my receipt of a certified check in payment for the piece as he was leaving on a business trip. The syntax, grammar, content and English used in the e-mail raised the hackles on my neck that something was not right. Indeed, a check of his name via Google led me to the ArtQuest.com website. It provided the individual's name on a list of scammers of artists! Needless to say, there was no sale for me and certainly no painting or victim for him.

For those reading this, you might wonder how the scam this man was perpetrating would work. Simply stated, had I responded, he would send me a certified check but made out for more than the amount of the painting. He would follow up with a message saying he made a "mistake" on the amount and could I send back the difference. Meanwhile, the certified check originally sent would be deposited and go through the banking system and eventually be determined to be fraudulent! Oh, and the "mover" would never be heard from...or if he did pick up the painting from my rural location, I'd be out the painting and the whole amount of that certified check plus bank fees! Please note that most financial institutions operate under federal regulations that require them to make funds available from a deposit within five business days which doesn't make the check legitimate until it has processed back to the issuing bank...which can take weeks!

I sent out a memo e-mail to other artists I regularly correspond with alerting them to this fellow. I asked about their experiences with website predators and got quite an education! Many had had contacts of a similar nature. One artist works as a customer service rep for MoneyGram and said similar schemes were perpetrated on their clients which means the schemes are not limited to artists.

Artists who do respond and receive the overpaid check(s) and who refuse to cash the check and respond asking for a new check issued for the correct amount for the painting(s) often get verbally abused by the scammer when they hesitate to deposit. That is why, like Mr. S. Walker who contacted me, the scammer asks for your phone number, "standard" address, etc. Please, never divulge this information. Checks are never mailed to phone numbers! Try to set up and use a Post Office Box or other mail service to receive payments so your physical address is never posted. Use a system such as PayPal to have payments made for your pieces

sold via the web.

ArtQuest is not a broker for artists but a listing service that helps potential purchasers find artists via a virtual gallery. Their skill seems to be linkage to other websites and they brag that visitors to their site usually browse paintings there for as much as 30-45 minutes. They have a safe payment transaction with secure encryption for credit card, transfer of credit, checks or money order payments. A visit to their website would provide more information about their services.

International Money Orders, Certified Checks and business or personal Checks must be verified by contacting the bank that issued them as to authenticity. Cashiers Checks are among the most easily counterfeited. Most scams are initiated from countries outside of the USA because the crime will not be pursued. The FBI only goes after million dollar fraud cases and the sale of a painting by most contemporary artists doesn't qualify for their attentions. Keep your radar tuned to earmarks of language difficulties exposed in an e-mail and that the purchaser is going on a trip (business or personal) that necessitates you working with their "mover", representative, or friend who is in the United States.

Finally if you receive fraud or scam attempts as a result of your website, notify the Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) toll-free hotline 877-382-4357, on line at www.ftc.gov or the internet Crime Complaint Center at www.ic3.gov/ or your local non-emergency phone number for local police. I also forwarded a copy of the scammer's response to the Art Quest website to thank them for compiling a listing of known scammers and posting it for artists to reference. Best advice is to fully "vet" all potential purchasers, to never provide any financial information such as bank account, credit card, social security number, ebay or PayPal information and trust your gut feelings if a situation presents that doesn't ring true or contact someone you trust for a second opinion.

Pastel Society of Colorado May/June Newsletter