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Artists and Charity

by *Daniel Grant*

Artists can often find their hearts and minds in conflict when asked to donate their work. Charity auctions regularly ask artists to contribute a work of art that can be sold to raise money, and certainly there is satisfaction in helping a worthy cause. However, unlike art collectors who are entitled to deduct the full market value of any object they donate, artists are only permitted to deduct the cost of the materials used in creating their donated work. For this and other reasons, many artists see more drawbacks—such as seeing their artwork picked up for a fraction of its value, forgoing any tax benefits, the unlikelihood of a donation furthering their career—than advantages to giving work to charity.

In many cases, however, a situation that may seem to take advantage of an artist may actually end up working to his or her benefit. As part of its ongoing fund-raising efforts, Wisconsin Public Television, in Madison, holds an annual six-day auction, the first day of which consists exclusively of antiques and artwork. "We wondered how we could best showcase the talent and commitment of the artists who donate work for the auction, and then we realized that we should ask the artists themselves," says Kathleen Callaghan, the auction manager for Wisconsin Public Television. "We'd rather give more to artists who donate their work than to businesses that donate \$125."

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As a result, the station initiated a program that features the artists and their artwork in the weeks leading up to the auction and throughout the year in the monthly magazine *Airwaves*, which is distributed to members. An online catalogue for the auction is also available for viewing several weeks before the event, and artists who contribute their work are permitted to set up links to their own websites for those who want to see more. Additionally, the public-television station allows artists to leave their business cards and brochures at the site of the auction for those bidders and visitors who come in person. "This opportunity for exposure has helped a number of artists raise their profiles in the community," Callaghan says.

Wisconsin Public Television isn't alone in its efforts to make charity more professionally rewarding for artists. West Valley Art Museum, in Surprise, Arizona, holds an annual two-day Arts Silent Auction that splits proceeds 50/50 with participating artists, allowing them to both give and receive something tangible. "This seemed like a great way to motivate artists to help us," explains Mike Bailey, the museum's education coordinator and manager of the auction, "and it only seemed fair, since artists get a split when they sell their work through a gallery." Additionally, the museum runs art fairs in the spring and fall, reducing artists' booth fees by \$75 when they donate a work of art worth more than \$75.

Another annual silent art auction, held in Fort Wayne, Indiana, by an organization called Artists Against Multiple Sclerosis, provides participating artists with such incentives as a brunch, thank-you gifts, and individual display areas at the auction site. In another approach, an annual Art Against AIDS benefit staged by the Chicago-based Heartland Alliance solicits contributions of artwork that will be put on exhibition and sold to the public, with all proceeds going directly to support the Alliance's HIV/AIDS programs. Artists who donate their work may deduct the money paid for the art on their tax returns.

A somewhat different program of soliciting donations from artists is the Boston-based The Art Connection, which places donated artwork in nonprofit social-service agencies throughout the city, such as hospitals, senior and community centers, and domestic-abuse shelters. "It is bringing artwork to populations that may not have much exposure to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston," explains Tova Speter, the program manager for The Art Connection. She notes that many donations are older works that the artists aren't exhibiting anymore, but some of the donations are newer. Although it is unlikely that the clients of these social-service agencies will become collectors, these organizations still put up plaques next to each artwork, identifying the artist and the individual piece, and they also hold receptions for the artists. Their websites frequently feature the artwork and provide links to the artists' own sites, as does the website of The Art Connection itself.

When deciding whether to donate, artists should seek organizations that offer these kinds of incentives. Other options include negotiating arrangements with charities holding auctions, such as establishing minimum bids, which would ensure that the art is not sold unless the bid reaches a certain amount. Artists can also offer works for sale at charity auctions, donating the money earned (or a certain portion of that money) to the charitable cause, which they may then deduct in full on their tax returns. Certainly, donating does not have to be a negative experience for artists, and many find great fulfillment in freely giving of their time and talents.

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