

WORLDCON RUNNERS GUIDE ART SHOW

by Scott Zrubek

Introduction

The Art Show is the fixed area of a Worldcon where fine art is displayed. Art Panels (sometimes 4'x4' pegboard, 4'x8' pegboard, or wire frame grids [aka gridwall]) are used to hang paintings or prints. Tables are used to display three-dimensional art, such as sculptures or jewelry. There is usually a silent auction, voice auction, and an Artists' Reception (or Meet the Artists).

Layout

Supplies

Timetable

Common Problems

Receiving/Returning art

Software

Layout

Panels can be organized in zigzags or rectangles or other shapes. A control desk is usually an L-shaped area where the art show director manages the show with their staff and volunteers. When you layout the show account for folks with mobility issues and good sight lines to the art. Good sight lines can also reduce the likelihood of theft of art from the Art Show.

Supplies

Below is a general list of items to have on hand for an art show. Some of these may not be appropriate for all instances of a WorldCon Art Show, but they give a good idea of things to consider.

Auction/Quick Sale stamps

Bags/boxes

Binder clips (for hanging art)

Bubble Wrap

Clipboards

Computer(s)

Extension cord(s)

Framing repair kit

Packing tape

Painter's tape

Paper (lots, at least a ream for a midsized convention)

Paper cutter

Peg hooks (for hanging art)

Pens (Bic)

Highlighters

Power strip

Printer(s)
Scissors
Sharpies
Signage
Square readers and chargers
Tape guns
Toner
Utility knives

Timetable

Day -1: Set up might start (number of volunteers depends on system being used)

Day 0: Set up needs to start

Day 1: Set up continues and art gets hung. Art Show opens to the public in the afternoon and runs to the early evening

Days 2 and 3: The Show is usually open from 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.

Day 4 (sometimes Day 3): The art show closes at some point to prepare for the voice auction (if there is one). You do not want the auction to compete with the Masquerade or the Hugos, if you can help it. Checkout of purchases should begin, to accommodate members with early travel itineraries.

Day 5: Final day for the Art Show. Final checkout of art purchase. Tear down of the art show set up begins/ends

Day 6: Final teardown, if needed. Ship art back to artists, if possible.

Day 34: Mail out checks to artists no later than this date.

Note that this timetable is subject to change depending on how many days the convention runs, but the basic flow is the same.

Common Problems

1. Changing the number of bids required to send a piece to the voice auction.

The Art Show Director determines the number of bids to go to auction. The number of lines for bids on the bid sheet should equal the number of bids that force a piece to go to auction later during the convention. (Worldcon Art Shows use slips of paper, roughly 4 inches wide by 6 inches long, that contain the artist's name, the media type, the name of the piece, the minimum bid price, the direct/quick sale price, and a number of lines below this information for bidders to place their membership number [or bidder number, if different] and the bid price.)

Whatever philosophy you want to use to determine how many bids are necessary to send a piece to voice auction is fine. But, once the art show has opened to the public, do not under any circumstances change that number. Every time this rule has been violated the committee has gotten lots of grief with little to show for it. The number of bids is generally chosen to try and ensure a reasonably sized voice auction. Worldcon sized

shows typically range from 5 to 8 bids, smaller shows, 3 to 4 bids. It depends on the convention and typical buying habits for that convention.

2. Long, slow checkout lines to pick up art.

Some Worldcons handle checkout lines well; others, poorly. Study how different conventions do this and pick the best system you can find, or ask online. There are lots of past Art Show Directors who would be willing to give you details. Computerized art show software can help make this as efficient as possible. More importantly, having multiple check out stations will help keep lines short. For example a Worldcon sized show should have at least 4, preferably 6 stations running during the busiest check out times.

3. Aisles that are too narrow. If the aisles between panels are too narrow, a number of problems result.

- a. The first and most important is that the dreaded Fire Marshall will not approve the plans, or when s/he shows up on site (and Murphy's law says s/he will), s/he will shut down the art show and if s/he gets angry enough, possibly other areas of the convention as well. Typically, the minimum distance between aisles is 8 feet to keep the fire marshal happy. Having the layout completed and approved prior to the convention is encouraged. Sometimes this means having a layout done a month or two prior to the convention.
- b. Connected to this is that fans in wheelchairs will not be able to get through easily.
- c. An aesthetic problem caused by narrow aisles is that you can't stand back enough to see the art properly. This results in lower sales and raised gripes from both attendees and artists. It is not enough to have good art at your art show, it must be properly viewable!
- d. A worst-case example would be the 1995 NASFiC, which had a maze of zig-zagging panels that at one point had only twenty-six inches of clearance at waist level. Stuart Hellinger (a New York fan) noted that you were awarded a piece of cheese if you made it to the end.
- e. A best-case scenario would be something like the Midwest Gencons, which have ten feet of space between panels. Unfortunately, not all concons have that much space to work with.

4. Lighting is too dim.

This is an especially dangerous problem if a convention has not used those facilities in the past. If possible, see the room when another convention is using it, to get a feel for how well-lit things are when the room is in use. Also, be sure to inspect the room a couple of weeks before the con to make sure all the light fixtures are functioning, and if a number of them are out, have the hotel liaison kick the facility hard to get this issue fixed. If the lighting is known to be insufficient early on, plan on acquiring additional lighting sources. If the art show panels are not designed with lighting in mind, figure out some way to add lighting. Floor lights and clip-on lamps are possibilities to consider.

5. Room is measured incorrectly.

You went and believed the hotel again, didn't you? *sigh* Never trust the hotel! Especially never trust their floor plans! Floor plans often lie. Sometimes they are drawn up from the initial architecture plans before the facility is actually built. Sometimes they are affected by remodeling. Sometimes they were just drawn wrong by the graphic artist, or the graphic artist was given bad information by the hotel's sales staff. Sometimes the measurement numbers have a typo in them. Sometimes there are pillars or electrical junctions poking out into what looks like clear space on the floor plans. Whatever. Please note that the above may not affect how the Fire Marshall views your proposed layout. Fire Marshalls review a lot of layouts, and they may not catch an error made due to a misreading of the plans—they are more concerned with sightlines and clear paths to exit doors and such. So don't trust the Fire Marshall to catch an error in the hotel floor plans, either. For critical rooms (dealers, art show, masquerade/Hugo ceremonies), have your own people take their own measurements well in advance of the con (a year out, at least) and compare them to the floor plan figures. Additionally getting the CAD files of the hotel layout is very helpful.

6. Security.

Art show thefts do occur. Most occur when the Art Show is open to the public. An art show is especially vulnerable if you have no bag check system, by which people must check anything that could hold purloined art. This check must be at the entrance, and must be easy to use. A typical system uses numbered cards (often playing cards) and clothespins; the attendee is given a number (or card) that matches the one attached to the item – this avoids the problem of someone deciding they would like a new purse (and its contents). For night time security at a large art show with lots of expensive items, sleep-in fan security is not adequate – what happens if a theft occurs? Preferably, you should have armed, off duty police officers; at a minimum, use bonded professional security. Whatever you do, the after-hours access list should be kept to a VERY few people – the more people who are (even theoretically) allowed in after hours, the uglier things will be if a theft does occur and the concom (and police) start having to figure out and interview possible suspects. For very small items, suggest that the artist send a lockable display case in which the pieces can be displayed.

7. Print Shop.

The situation regarding prints in recent years has evolved into a tradition of having prints available in a Print Shop that is adjacent to the art show proper. Some shows will have the print shop combined with the artist's silent auction display. When making a decision on where to place the Print Shop, take any possible confusion of the bidders into account.

8. Long turnaround times for checks to get to the artists.

Try to have the checks out to the artists, in the ideal case, by the second week after the convention. If the checks are not on their way to the artists by a month after the convention, you will start to get lots of inquiries from them. It is their money, after all.

9. Long turnaround time for returning art to the artists.

The unsold art should be returned to the artists as quickly as possible. This unsold art might be needed to be sent out to another convention's art show shortly after the Worldcon and delays can affect their presence in future shows. If at all possible, mail the returning art out within a week.

Receiving/Returning Mail-in Art

A high percentage of art in a Worldcon's Art Show is likely to be mailed in by the artist. It's likely it does not make financial sense for the artist to bring it in person, unless they were already going to attend the convention.

The convention needs to set to some centralized location to receive the incoming art. Since the convention probably already is planning on renting storage space to hold large amounts of supplies from other sources, it only makes sense to size it properly to hold mail-in art. Mail-in art should be stored in a climate-controlled whenever possible.

The deadline to receive mail-in art at the storage facility should be no closer to the start of the convention than one week, to allow for vagaries in the shipping services and to allow last minute shipping to actually arrive in time for the convention.

If the convention is near an international border and is organizing cross-border customs service, be certain to allow plenty of time for the customs service to do their job. Two weeks is a bare minimum. To account for problems with shipping services and the time needed by the customs service, set the mail-in deadline to be 3 weeks before the start of the convention.

For the return of the mail-in art to the artist, strive to get it mailed back as soon as possible. The ideal date is the day after the convention closes. Anything after a week after the convention is less than ideal and is likely to frustrate the artists.

If mail-in art is returned through a customs service, set the expectations of the artists realistically. That art is likely going to be on its way back to the artist at about 3 weeks after the convention. Also, it is helpful to have someone local to the customs broker to be able to physically check in on the process after handing the art off to the service.

Art Show Software

One of the best ways to reduce pain points for an Art Show is to use a software package to manage the affair. Things to look for in a package include: a variety of reports, the ability to print bid sheets and control sheets, the ability for the artists to enter in the information for the art themselves, a way to register bidders, and a way to sell art and

prints from the software. When you find a software package that you like, find a convention that uses it and volunteer to help that convention run their art show. See the software put through its paces. Find out if it works the way you want your art show to run.

Some known software systems are listed below:

Artifacts

Artifacts has been used at several regional conventions (ranging from 500 to 3000 in size) and at least one Worldcon. It is also used at the last 20 or so San Diego ComicCons.

Contact:
Steve Hanchar
2813 North 49th
Milwaukee, WI 53210
(414) 444-3853

Art Show Helper

Art Show Helper has been used to run ArmadilloCon since about 2004. It was used for the World Fantasy Convention in 2006, 2015, 2021, and 2022. It was also used for LoneStarCon3 and NASFiC 2023.

Contact:
Scott Zrubek
210 Garden Drive
Friendswood, Texas 77546
832-859-8692
scottz@itmm.com

Unknown software name (because we never called it anything other than “The Artshow Software”)

The Artshow Software has been used in the 2002 ConJose, and at least ½ dozen Worldcons since, 2014 and 2019 World Fantasy, and almost all of the Los Angeles area conventions since 2002.

Contact:
Elizabeth Klein-Lebbink
1010 E. Acacia Ave
El Segundo, CA 90245
310-640-0949
elizabeth@greatscottvisuals.com