

Best Practices for Artists' Web Sites

When I recently wrote a proposal for designing an artist's website, I found myself explaining my philosophy of design when it comes to showcasing artwork online. I thought it might be useful for other artists to consider these points when they plan their online presence.

Navigation

This element, on *any* site, is critical. I know of one artist's site that showcases the most magnificent work, and is the worst online experience I've ever had. I always leave frustrated and angry because I can't find my way to the work I want to look at. It'll drive you away from a site faster than anything else, and turn prospective customers off. Make your site worthy of the work it displays.

Put yourself in the viewer's position... imagine you've never been to your site before. Where would you want to go? What logical steps might you take to get there? A wise friend told me early in my design career that on any site you should always know where you are, and how to get to anywhere you want to go from where you are. ALWAYS. ON EVERY PAGE. Unless it's a page showing a detail of a painting, the navigation should always be clear, prominent, and easy to follow.

Conventional wisdom is that if it takes more than three clicks to get to where you want people to end up, you have too many 'layers.' I've seen many sites that take as many as five or more clicks to end up at a viewable image of the art being shown. I leave those sites quickly-I don't have the time or the energy to navigate through that many pages. The point in web design is to make it EASY for someone to see what you want them to see, and how you want them to see it. And remember that with the web, speed counts. People want to get there quick, get their information (or in our case, see the art), and go home. Don't make it hard for them to do it!

Similarly, you don't want to overwhelm them. If you have more than seven pages in your navigation, it'll appear like a LOT to wade through. I recommend breaking them down into sections, or areas of the site, where like pages contain a second level of navigation. I did this on my own site, and have found it keeps the main site from looking cluttered, and organizes information into logical categories and regions.

Nomenclature

I once read someone decrying the use of the word "gallery" to describe a page on a site showcasing an artist's work... I found myself agreeing that the use of that term in websites is confusing. Does the page title refer to the artist's work on display on the site, or their representation at a real-world gallery?

But I also found myself stumped when it came to finding an alternative. I've considered "showcase," or just simply titling the pages by genre, medium, whatever. I think those are workable alternatives, and I recommend them to my clients.

Site Structure

The following pages are generally contained (in one form or another) on most artists' sites:

- Home
- Paintings (often referred to as a “gallery page”)
 - Landscape (these pages are just suggestions of what is commonly found)
 - Figure
 - Still Life
 - Wildlife
 - Drawings
 - Archived Work
- About/Statement/Bio (all in one, or separate)
- Galleries (that you're represented by)
- News/Events/Calendar
- Classes/Workshops
 - Registration pages
 - Supply list pages
 - Maps/directions
- Contact (w/feedback form?)
- Links (good to repeat gallery links here, and other organizations you're affiliated with)

You certainly don't need all of them, and it's up to you to decide how you want your site to represent you to the 'real world.'

Getting To The Art

The thing that (to me) makes or breaks an artist's site is the way it presents the art (duh!). But seriously... next to navigation, this will either make your visit a dream or a nightmare. As I mentioned on the phone, I used Rob Barber's excellent site as my primary guide in rebuilding my own site earlier this year, particularly his image navigation. I'll try to explain it by using an outline format. Your site will start with a

Home Page. Make this page do something! “Splash” pages (clever intro pages that are only clever the first time you click on them... then they're really annoying) should be outlawed. They waste time and bandwidth. And annoy the viewer.

You should show samples of your work here so people can see immediately what you do. If you categorize your work into different genres or media, you might have a sample of each on this page, linked to a showcase page featuring thumbnail images in that category. You may also want to have these categories repeated on a separate page (some call this a “gallery page”) which may be titled something like

Paintings. If this page shows your categories, it'll lead you to one of your category pages, let's say

Landscape. This page will show thumbnails of all the paintings in this category. On some artist's sites, it shows all the paintings ever done in this category; others show available paintings here, with another section reserved for "archived" (read SOLD, or older) paintings. The thumbnail image should be large enough to clearly see the painting and discern the subject and composition well enough to entice you to see it larger. When you click on a thumbnail, you'll either see

a pop-up window with a larger image of the painting, which you can then close when you're done looking at it, or you'll be taken to a

new page showing the detailed version. Here is where most people put the title, dimensions, etc. of the work (though some put that info next to the thumbnails, which I find curious, since you usually can't see the image well enough to wonder about what the details are, and when you can see the image well enough, the information you want isn't there. But I digress...).

Whichever method you choose, do the viewer a favor and make the detail image significantly larger than the thumbnail! Few things are as disappointing as clicking on a thumbnail and getting to an image that is only marginally larger. Give the viewer a real payoff for their taking the time to click through.

Back to "getting there." At this level, some people (myself included, until January of this year), include arrows (left and right) so you can scroll through all of your images at the detail level, but also include a link back to the showcase page, should you want to go back there at any one point. This is a nice feature, but if you're maintaining your own site, it's a logistical nightmare (you have to link and relink all those left and right arrows when you update the site), and God forbid you move one of your detail pages into an archive section! A great alternative (for viewer and maintainer alike) is to have the detail image linked back to the gallery page, and you just click on the image to go back to the gallery. Which makes updating (and moving whole pages around) a veritable breeze. A minimum of relinking is required, and it gives the viewer a chance to focus on each image with single-minded focus, and not be tempted to rush through the site seeing everything and remembering nothing.

This structure requires thumbnails large enough to see what you're clicking into. I've seen many sites with images so small you have to click on them to see what they are, and that can be annoying.

Optimally, you want people to click as few times as possible to “get to the goods” (techies call it ‘drilling down’). Again, conventional wisdom is that if it takes any more than three clicks, you have too many levels.

Images: How Many? How Large?

I’ve seen artist’s sites with so many paintings it would take days to go through them all. Too much information! The old designer’s maxim applies here: less is more.

Back in the old leather case days, portfolios were generally considered too big when they showed more than twenty images. The same case could be made for online portfolios, but I think there is some leeway here. You don’t have to be legalistic about this, but when you start to show more than twenty five or thirty images, you’re really showing a lot. Why not cull it down to twenty of your very best work? Unless you have some really famous “iconographic” paintings that you’re known by, and need to keep them around to maintain your reputation, I’d keep it down to fewer paintings of your very best work. As you refine your selection process, you’ll find yourself being challenged to do better work-it’s one of the great things about showing your work either “in the flesh” or online-it sharpens your critical eye.

In these days of ubiquitous broadband connections, file size is not as critical as it was just a few short years ago. Still, I find some artists’ sites (and even worse, gallery sites) where the images take forever to load... even with a high-speed connection. Often this happens when only one image is used as both a thumbnail and a detail image, forcing the browser to resize the image on the fly. On top of that, often that image is not “optimized,” or reduced in size as small as it can be and still show a quality image. If your images are not optimized, they’ll strain your browser, and take longer to load. Again, you’re holding up the viewer. That’s a no-no. Make the images lean and mean, and absolutely have separate images for your thumbnails and detail images. While it may seem like extra work, it pays huge dividends. This is an essential aspect of site development.

Another thing to note is that as computers become more sophisticated, their specs change. Again, a few years ago our monitors were calibrated to display a screen measuring 800 x 600 pixels. Now, the standard is 1024 x 768, which makes images that used to appear large now seem small. A good designer will know how much “real estate” they have on the screen, and how large they can make your images so you can see the largest possible image along with the navigation and other text on the page, with little or no scrolling. You should NEVER have to scroll to see an entire image. EVER. People don’t like to scroll to begin with, and if they can’t see an image in it’s entirety, it is exasperating to the viewer. If you need to show a detail shot to show texture, strokes, etc, then have a separate image for that. But again, it should be of a size you can see at a glance. No scrolling allowed!

Watermarking Images

I think for the viewer, it’s such a distraction (and disappointment that they can’t really see the work) that it does more harm than good. Yes, someone could copy the image and ‘reproduce’ the work... Not well, since the resolution would be so bad, but my feeling is that watermarking does more damage in the long run. People come to see your art-let them see it in it’s best light, and unobstructed.

How to Handle Gallery Links (as in ‘Brick and Mortar Galleries)

Some people just list the gallery name, some include a link, some include address and phone. My thinking is you want it to be as easy as possible for viewers to get to the gallery site. Give all the info, and a link (opening in a separate window, as all off-site links should). Some of us also include images that are currently on view at the gallery. It’s more to maintain, but it shows that you’re showing, what you’re showing, and where they can find it. And it promotes your gallery.

“Framing” Your Site

Using a “Frames” structure (i.e., where the top or left panel remains in view all the time and the bottom or center panel scrolls). The reason is that you cannot bookmark separate pages with these sites, which restricts a viewer/patron/collector from bookmarking a specific showcase page of yours that they like. Again, make it quick and simple for them to find you, see you, and contact you. Plus, search engines have a hard time reading and rating these sites. Few people use them these days for these reasons, and I recommend that my clients avoid them.

Conclusion

Those issues are the key issues for artist’s sites to attend to. Beyond that, it’s a matter of determining how formal/informal you want to be, and how to best put your personality/style across to the viewer. A designer’s personal style will influence the ‘look and feel’ of a site, and how well they discern the artist’s style and personality, and put that across to the viewer.

Artist’s Sites to Look At

Here are some sites that I think are particularly well designed, and worth looking at as models of good design and structure:

Todd Baxter Dawson (<http://www.toddbaxterdawson.com>)

Denise Dumont (<http://www.denisedumont.com>)

Kenn Backhaus (<http://www.kennbackhaus.com/index.html>)

Daniel Gerhartz (<http://www.danielgerhartz.com/index.htm>)

Bob Jackson (<http://www.robortejackson.com/>)

Bernard Dellario (<http://www.bjdellario.com/index.html>)

Timothy Horn (<http://www.horndesign.com/>)