

# Behind the Scenes of a Major Fine Art Fair

## *Interview with Show Master Sanford Smith*

by Steven Yahn



A multitude of guests at the "Works on Paper" show were able to review a wide range of paintings by Old Master and contemporary artists alike.

*In the midst of his 19th annual "Works On Paper" show at New York's Park Avenue Armory, Sanford Smith sat down with Art Calendar in his dressing room, a small but well organized office, for a rapid-fire Q&A session.*

**Art Calendar:** This is your twenty-eighth year doing various kinds of arts and antiques shows. How do you explain your success?

**Smith:** One of the things we started to do when we got into this business nearly three decades ago was to redefine how shows were run. Up until that time, and I'd been a dealer in the antiques field and done shows for other managers, the philosophy was, "Oh you're doing a show for X, Y and Z manager." My philosophy was, and continues to be, "I'm doing a show for X, Y and Z dealers," because they're my clients, they're paying me to take care of them and give them the best show possible.

My staff has been trained to help the dealers in every way. When the dealers move in for a show, they are very calm because we keep them calm. There's no yelling, no screaming, there's no running around. If they have a problem, we fix it immediately.

**Art Calendar:** What is your most effective means of promotion?

**Smith:** We have many. We do direct mail. We maintain a 50,000-name mailing list by show of people who have physically been to a specific show. This is not a list I buy from a broker. These are people who have actually paid money at my door, who have signed a card to register, and who are at the show. We clean these lists twice or three times a year. It's amazing to me how many people move in the course of a year. I use these mailings to let people know we're coming.

**Art Calendar:** What else do you consider prime means of promoting your shows?

**Smith:** *The New York Times* is my principal way of reaching the very upscale national market I want to connect with.

Then I do radio. I do four radio stations in New York City on a regular basis. I reach an upscale listener, a financially attuned listener. I pick my stations by demographics of whom I want to reach.

Radio is immediate. It says, "Hey, we're here this week." It reminds everybody. It's all reinforcement. If you read about it and then you hear about it on the radio while you're driving or having breakfast, it reinforces what you've read. And it's the reinforcement that makes it work.

Then we advertise in target-market publications where we'll reach the people with a direct interest in the kind of show we're organizing.

I would do television, but the trouble with TV is twofold. One, it's very expensive. And you've got to do heavy repetition. I can't afford heavy repetition. I tried TV on a couple of occasions. But I couldn't afford to run enough spots for people to remember it. Radio I can afford. I can run twenty or thirty spots in a week. Plus we cut the spots ourselves, which keeps the costs down.

*Art Calendar:* What other advice do you have on the subject of marketing and promoting shows?

*Smith:* Well, I used public relations people the first two or three years we were in business and I found there wasn't a public relations person who was competent to do this work for the amount of money they demanded. So we brought everything in-house. And we've done everything in-house for the past twenty-five years. I think you pay a lot of money for public relations in the art world and I'm not sure you get a kick for the buck.

Developing relationships with the right people in the press is important, but you don't need a PR firm for that. We do it ourselves. It's a matter of getting to the right person. It's not guaranteed, but the same thing happens with PR firms.

*Art Calendar:* When did you start branding your shows with your name and why?

*Smith:* I started branding my shows with my name about ten years ago. I figured there were so many shows around I had to differentiate mine. People tend to be groupies. They know we're respectable, that we have a history in the business. It gives us instant credibility.

Another important aspect of our form of branding is that each of our shows is different. I don't duplicate a show. I consider all our shows to be boutique shows which are target marketed to small areas. I don't need 20,000 people; I need



The long corridors of "Works on Paper" exhibits were filled constantly with people enjoying the show's 19th annual session in early March.

3,000 to 6,000 targeted people, interested in the materials to make my dealers happy.

*Art Calendar:* On another front, what do you think artists can do to forge better relations with dealers?

*Smith:* Very few young artists have been able to promote themselves well. Only a couple come to mind. Almost everyone else has needed the help of a gallery that will spend the money, give them the shows, produce what's necessary to make it pay. An artist needs promotion. Somehow you need somebody out there to sell your work. It's a long-term process.

*Art Calendar:* What tips do you have for artists to help them sell their work, beyond building a relationship with a gallery?

*Smith:* There are many ways of selling your work. You can put your work in a show, or take a little stand or kiosk like at the Greenwich Village Art Show if you can pass muster with the judges. There are shows like that all over the country where you can sell your work. There are artists who sell their work on the streets. Art is protected by First Amendment rights, so cops can't chase you off. So artists will set up a little table and maybe they'll get a little screen and they'll hang their prints, or they'll hang their small watercolors, and hopefully sell them and make money. Outside the Metropolitan Museum they're packed.

If they can get to a museum curator who likes their work and is willing to recommend them, or if they can enter

contests and win prizes, if their work gets chosen for a museum exhibit, if somehow they can break through to some form of recognition, then they at least have an entrée to a dealer.

It's much like the Sundance Festival. If it's shown at Sundance, suddenly there's a lot of people who might pick it up.

**Art Calendar:** What do you think of artists selling their work on the Internet?

**Smith:** Oh, the Internet is something else again. I don't think I would buy an important piece on the Internet. There are too many forgeries offered there. An individual artist could probably sell and make a living on the Internet if he's painting agreeable pictures. If you go to art on eBay, you can find paintings of dogs and cats and animals and as long as people want to buy them, you might be able to make a living. You're never going to be recognized as a great artist that way. And artists want recognition. Their ego says, "Recognize me for being a great artist." But it doesn't happen. At least not when they're alive. When they're dead, if there's five hundred pictures they've painted, someone's going to come along and represent the estate, or buy the estate, and then market the hell out of it.

**Art Calendar:** What's the selection process for choosing galleries for your shows?

**Smith:** Most of the time we require recommendations from three people who currently do one of our shows. Then the gallery has to submit copies of catalogs they publish or articles about their gallery and then we check with other dealers in the business and ask, "What are they like?" If the quality is there, that's number one. If they're not nut cases, that's number two. You don't want any crazies who will either upset other dealers or the clients.

**Art Calendar:** So tell the truth...

**Smith:** I always do.

**Art Calendar:** Do you still enjoy this?

**Smith:** I still enjoy it except when I've got a lot of aggravation that shouldn't be around. It's never the dealers and it's never my staff. It's usually an external force. ☛

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