

Art World Catalyst

Artsy

Online Platform for the Entire Art World



Artsy team working on the Art Genome Project

*Innovating the digital spaces of art to
bring education, critique
and commerce together under one app.*

by Kyle Chayka

With the aim of overcoming the rampant elitism of art circles across the world and offer anyone with an internet connection the chance to learn about, engage with and even buy art, Artsy represents a pinnacle of ambition for art media companies. With an impressive database of work extending through art history as well as the latest applications to allow you to bid in auctions from your phone, to what extent does Artsy promise to touch upon every aspect of our art lives?

Artsy, an online platform for visual art founded in 2009, launched with the staggering ambition of creating a classification system for the entirety of art history. This was their "Art Genome Project," a digital taxonomy that tagged artworks by qualities like subject matter, associated movements, and even color, a sort of online library catalog for every artwork across all time. The Art Genome Project currently collects over 350,000 works made accessible to the public. But six years down the road, Artsy's goals are perhaps even more ambitious: to become a digital back-end for the entire art world.

The company is "a classification system and discovery tool that fosters learning about artists and artworks," says Artsy's young founder and CEO Carter Cleveland, a computer science engineer and Princeton alumnus whose father, David, is an art historian and collector. Art is traditionally seen as an inaccessible cultural field. Artsy's public database ameliorates the elitism. "We're working to break down those historically high barriers to access by creating a resource that anyone, at any level of interest or prior knowledge, can use to learn about and explore the world of art," Cleveland explains.



We're working to break down those historically high barriers to access art.



The company offers a one-stop shop for the art economy. Casual visitors can learn about art; collectors can buy works through Artsy's gallery and auction house partners; and those partners can enlist Artsy to help them with building Web presence, publicity, and even event planning. As the art world continues its shaky transition to the Internet, Artsy aims to provide a universal, easy-to-use platform, a goal that's becoming reality. In addition to its database of artworks, it hosts "over 4,000 galleries, 600 museums, 60 art fairs, and select auctions," Cleveland says.

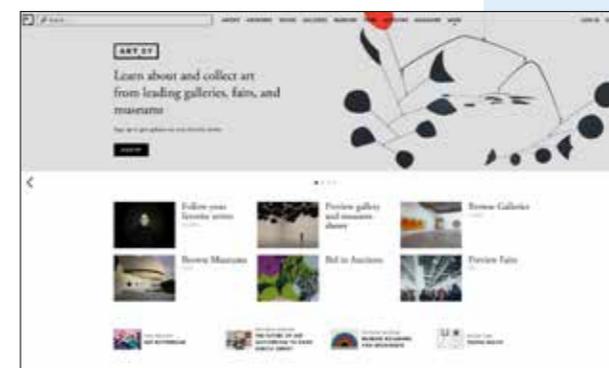
An All-encompassing Vision

Cleveland founded Artsy with the help and investment of art-world heavyweights including dealer Larry Gagosian and collector Dasha Zhukova. Sebastian Cwilich, former executive of Christie's, also provided leadership. Yet the company's business model was initially unclear. It spent big on developing the Art Genome Project, promoting it as the art equivalent of the streaming service Pandora, which used a similar classification system to recommend music. Hype followed, but tangible results took more time to arrive. Slowly, galleries and fairs started competing to list their exhibitions prominently on the site. Artsy became a prestige venue, where institutions could connect to quality collectors as well as a wide audience.

"At first, it was tough to bring galleries and museums onto the platform. Once top galleries like Gagosian and Pace were on board other galleries increasingly joined up and experienced firsthand the value of being on the platform," Cleveland says. "The number of institutions, galleries, and art fairs on Artsy have each roughly doubled in the last year."

Artsy

An online platform which aims to bring all the world's art to a single place on the Internet and offer ever greater opportunities for learning, collecting and appreciating art across the globe. Established in 2009 by recent graduate of computer science, Carter Cleveland, the site and its application services aim to realize the "Pandora" of the art world, opening up leading international galleries, museum collections, foundations, artist estates, art fairs, and auctions amongst its constantly growing database of 350,000 images of art, architecture, and design, its critically engaged writing and its expanding support in the purchase of art.



Artsy Website (www.artsy.net)



We've shifted some of the initiative to the hands of the user, giving them the means to access a wealth of artists, artworks, galleries, and institutions on Artsy, as well as the choice of how they do so.



Artsy's cast of utopian idealism, teaching intimidated viewers to appreciate art by exploring its database, will help more people to understand art. But it is the website's ability to provide a central clearinghouse for industry insiders rather than its public mission that drives profits. Artsy's current business model depends on three main revenue streams, Cleveland explains. The first is monthly subscription fees that galleries pay to list their art and artists publicly on the site; big-name clients include Pace, Galerie Perrotin, and Jack Shainman. The second is referral fees that Artsy receives from the likes of Sotheby's, which presented its first major auction house collaboration in 2015 with an online-only sale called "Input/Output."



Portrait of Carter Cleveland, Founder and CEO of Artsy
Photo by Sophie Elgort

Artsy's "Magazine" section, which boasts its own staff of writers and editors, provides a way for the company to draw new clients and build context for its current partners. It's a way of educating even the professionals. "Collectors find the editorial platform an important resource as they think about the market and how to build their art collections," Cleveland says.

Yet this model isn't exactly new. Artnet, a German company, grew on the strength of its data subscriptions, selling access to auction and sale information for thousands of artists. It since added an editorial news team, including the influential critic Ben Davis. But the company has been struggling with attrition in its gallery listings business as Artsy muscles in. (Among Artsy's advantages

is a back-end that lets galleries directly update their own online inventories.)

Artspace and Paddle8, two newer companies that offer online auction services as well as editorial content, face similar challenges to Artsy in attracting a loyal audience. But both seem to be aiming for a more mainstream user group than Artsy, with lower price-points and a wider array of goods—Paddle8 offers as much design as art. The digital-native New Hive is busy commissioning artworks for its online-only art platform, but it's unclear how the company will sell or monetize the works. Electric Objects produces a digital frame for artwork, creating an ecosystem for collectors to buy and display work, but appears limited to a niche audience willing to pay for the device.

With the help of its venture capital funding, Artsy is outpacing its competitors, however. Its vision seems more expansive. The third, and likely most unique, source of revenue for the company is its new sponsored content service, which produces online media commissioned by clients like UBS. For the bank, Artsy created a series of videos about the Venice Biennale as well as a Year in Art feature at the end of 2015. The productions serve both Artsy's audience and its clients. "These content partnerships are increasingly driving revenue to Artsy as well as facilitating compelling content that will interest and engage our users," Cleveland says.

It's provocative to see Artsy outpacing more traditional media-only companies at taking advantage of the digital landscape. Only a very few art publications create sponsored content (among them the website Hyperallergic), and none have moved beyond articles into video or events. Artsy's OnSite arm has lead over 20 events on three continents, including exhibition tours, studio visits, and performances. Many of Artsy's endeavors already create direct revenue, but all of them also increase the platform's user base, cultivating future opportunities.

The Pitfalls of Success

Artsy is no doubt creating more systematic access to art online. There's never been a better time for the art-world neophyte—it's possible to learn as much from Artsy's website as a college course or expensive art history textbook. It's worth remembering, however, that Artsy controls this new ecosystem as a private company rather than museum or non-profit. While open for viewers, the platform is not exactly democratic. Galleries that can't afford their rates might find themselves stuck outside a lucrative pen of collectors and viewers, like museum-goers without a ticket.

Artsy's editorial mission, too, can be problematic. While art media is often embroiled in the market it covers, no magazines have as comprehensive a monetary relationship with the subjects they cover as Artsy, Artnet, and Artspace. Its publishing is targeted toward converting the wealthy into consumers of art, as Cleveland says: "Only 2 percent of millionaires are art collectors, which shows the potential growth of only one part of a potentially much bigger market."

In the art world, personal vendettas can also undercut credibility. Artsy fell into controversy when Artnet News alleged that the company misrepresented its relationship with Art Basel, a major art fair that Artsy does not work with directly (it contracts with galleries that participate in the fair), and that Art Basel had complained in a private email. The complaint turned out to be fabricated. The incident demonstrates the extent to which Artsy is already embedded in the art world at the highest levels, threatening, or at least influencing, incumbents.

An Opening of Doors?

Though we might not recognize it yet, Artsy is actively changing how we consume art. "I think we've shifted some of the initiative to the hands of the user, giving them the

means to access a wealth of artists, artworks, galleries, and institutions on Artsy, as well as the choice of how they do so," Cleveland says. No longer are we limited to academic experts or even curators—we can choose which art we want to see, when we want to see it. Thousands of works get tagged by hand and added to the Art Genome Project every month. Compared to a time before the Internet, it's a dream come true for art fans and connoisseurs alike.

Artsy embodies a consolidation of the art world's digital infrastructure on a scale never before attempted. While it's true that its influence will shape how the public experiences the art world, it's also possible that Artsy will bring the public closer to the inner machinations of that notoriously private arena. Transparency is as important as accessibility, and Artsy will have to embrace the former as well as the latter to gain trust. As it continues to grow, the company will ideally provide its audiences with the opportunity to consider not just the breadth, color and excitement of visual art, but its power structures as well. ©



Onsite bidding powered by Artsy's bidding kiosks (top) and in-room projections (bottom)