

What Role Do Galleries Play in the Art World?

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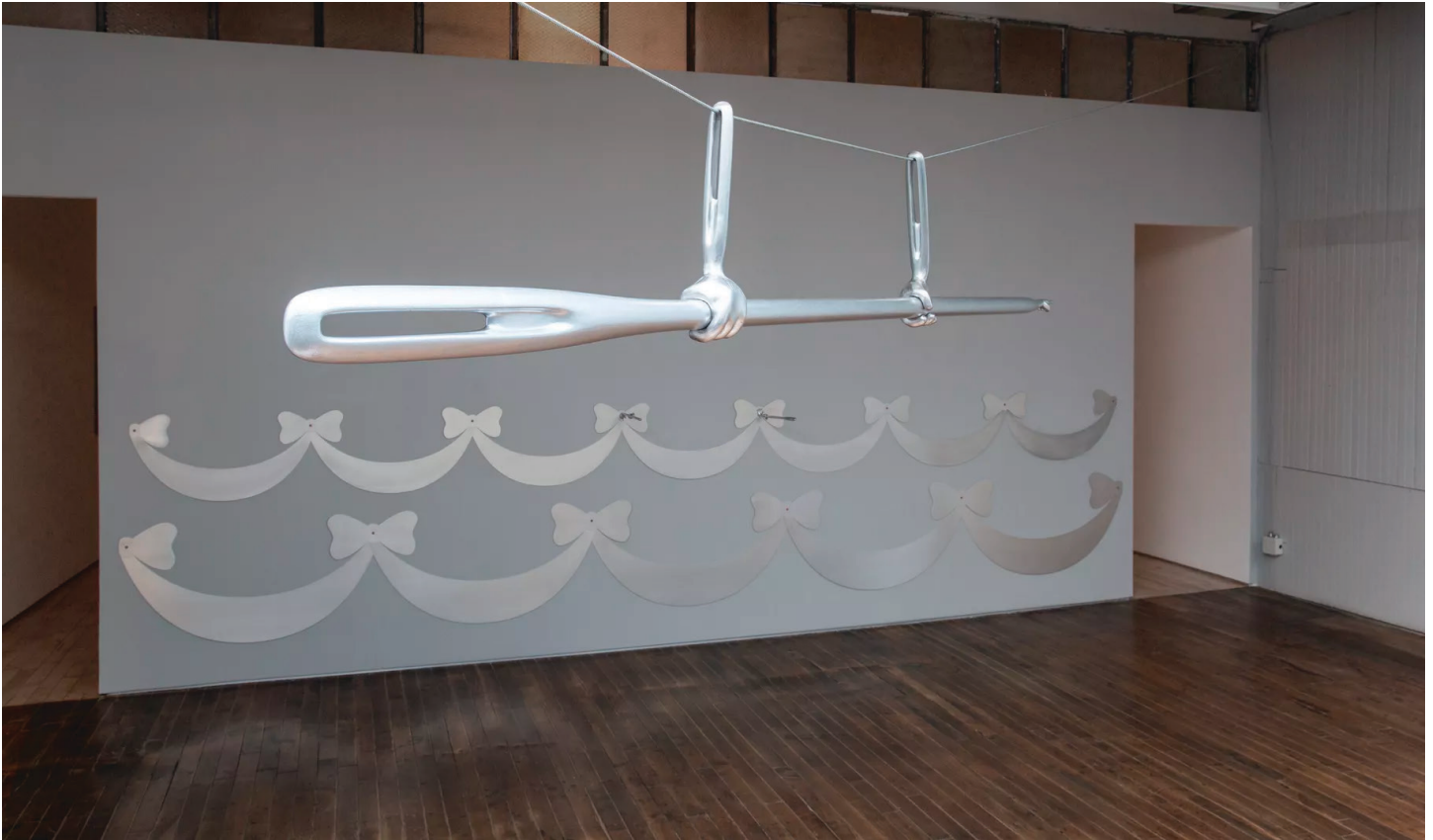


Giuliana Cunéaz, installation view of "3D" at Gagliardi Art System (now Gagliardi e Domke Contemporary), 2012. Courtesy of Gagliardi e Domke Contemporary.

If you've looked at art outside your home, then you've likely done so in a gallery. Understood most simply as spaces that display art, galleries play a crucial and multifaceted role in the art world and broader culture.

Art has been bought and sold for almost as long as it has been created. Alongside the Western art gallery, places to view art, such as royal collections, museums, and salons, have existed for centuries. The type of art gallery more closely aligned with what we imagine today began to take shape in the 19th century.

This article focuses on these commercial galleries, which are private businesses that showcase and sell artworks and work with a roster of artists. Today, these businesses sit at the nexus of a network where artists, collectors, curators, critics, institutions, and markets all play a role in deciding which artists and artworks get noticed and platformed. Galleries also support artists, organize exhibitions, work with collectors, and help move art into public and private collections.



Xiang Huidi, installation view of “goes around in circles, til very, very dizzy” at YveYANG Gallery, 2025. Courtesy of YveYANG Gallery.

For many, these spaces still carry a reputation for exclusivity—white-walled, hush-toned rooms catering to a select few. However, these spaces also allow any curious visitor to engage with the art on view, usually free of charge. “The art world can feel exclusive or hard to access, but galleries are here precisely to bridge that gap,” said New York gallerist Yve Yang of the eponymous gallery.

Still, knowing what a gallery does, the different types of galleries, and how to engage with them can be hard to pin down. Here, we explain what you need to know about these businesses and the role they play in the art world.

A short history of art galleries

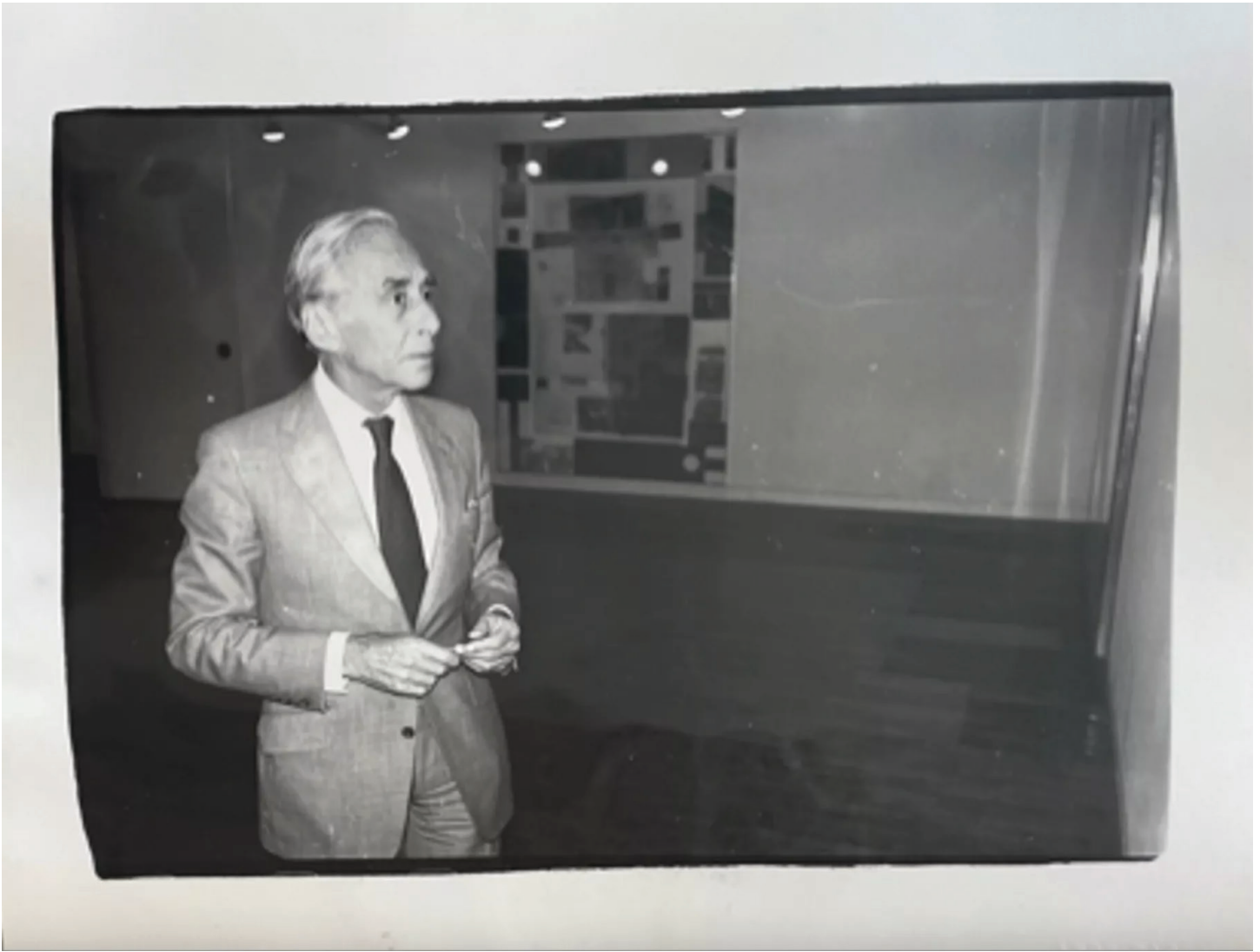


Goupil & Co. Editors's office in Place de l'Opéra, Paris. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

The commercial art gallery, as we understand it today, emerged in 19th-century Paris and London. One of the earliest examples is Goupil & Cie, founded in Paris in 1829 by Jean-Baptiste Adolphe Goupil. It pioneered the idea of selling artworks in a way akin to a storefront. Rather than commissioning work by artists, Goupil displayed finished artworks to the public and offered them for immediate purchase, setting the stage for the gallery as a retail space.

The gallery sold paintings by artists including Jean-Léon Gérôme and Vincent van Gogh to a growing class of international buyers. By the 20th century, galleries had begun to take on a more central role in the art world and, by proxy, cultural life. Many helped shape emerging artistic movements by platforming new artists they believed in and promoting them to the public.

Few galleries were more influential in this regard than Leo Castelli's, which made the blueprint for the modern dealer-artist relationship, helping to launch the careers of artists including Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol.



Andy Warhol. *Leo Castelli*, 1975. Hedges Projects. US \$24,000.

One of the major changes Castelli made was to make the reputations of his artists a priority, etching their stories into the fabric of the then-solidifying international art world. He regularly placed his artists in major institutional shows and museum collections, understanding that critical acclaim and institutional backing drove reputation and market value. Many of the world's most famous artists today were discovered and platformed by galleries early in their careers.

The core function of commercial galleries—exhibiting and selling work—remains unchanged. But they have since grown to occupy a central role in the art world, with more than 20,000 in operation today. Each is made distinctive by its 'program'—the term used to describe the exhibitions and artists that they showcase—as well as the brand identities that set them apart.

As the art world has evolved, so have galleries. Today, a physical gallery space is no longer a requirement, with many selling works and mounting shows online. "The rise and rise of the internet and social media have made it much easier for people to connect with art in a variety of ways, often from their phone and their sofa at home," said director Kenneth Young of Hong Kong-based Karin Weber Gallery. "The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend, as many activities (such as art gallery visits) were unable to take place in the format we know."

What do art galleries do?



View of artist Kensa Hung hosting a talk at Karin Weber Gallery in Hong Kong. Courtesy of Karin Weber Gallery.

Galleries provide a bridge between artists and audiences. On the surface, they mount exhibitions, promote their artists, and sell art to collectors and museums. But much more takes place before this is possible.

Most galleries will run a program of exhibitions throughout the year. To do this, they need artworks. Galleries will commission their rostered or prospective artists for works to present. For deceased artists, they often work closely with their families or estates to curate a cohesive body of work. Before an exhibition, galleries undertake research to help contextualize their artists to their audience. This can involve producing press releases, books, exhibition texts, social media posts, and reaching out directly to collectors and audiences that may be of interest.

Vanessa Addison of Sante Fe's Addison Rowe Gallery describes the gallery as an “educational tool,” providing not just the art but its value, historical context, and significance. “It’s our job to do shows, and write about the artists, and educate where they fit within the art community at the time,” she said.



Fabio Viale, installation view of “Fifteen” at Gagliardi e Domke, 2019. Courtesy of Gagliardi e Domke.

Then, galleries are tasked with selling those works. The gallerists will invite collectors to the gallery to show work, host events, and cultivate new relationships with those who drop by the space. Galleries can also sell works at art fairs and online.

Beyond organizing shows, several galleries also function as strongholds for their local arts community. “Art galleries need to be a hub where artists, critics, and most importantly, collectors, gather,” Andrea Mosca, director of Turin, Italy, gallery Gagliardi e Domke, told Artsy. He admits that as the art world becomes more interconnected, particularly due to growing wvonline channels, region is “less relevant compared to the past, instead communication, digital [connection] especially, plays a stronger role in offering information, images, and solutions.”

The different types of commercial art galleries



Paolo Consorti, installation view of "Anno Domini" at Gagliardi e Domke, 2013. Courtesy of Gagliardi e Domke.

The commercial gallery landscape is vast and varied, with businesses ranging from multinational enterprises to informal artist-run spaces.

Like in most industries, businesses are most easily categorized in terms of their size. In the art world, the largest galleries are colloquially called mega galleries. These galleries, like Hauser & Wirth and Gagosian, span continents and represent internationally recognized artists. These spaces have grown to resemble institutional spaces: Many of the artists they work with show art at museums, and the businesses themselves branch into different arms such as publishing and video production.

Following mega galleries are mid-tier galleries. These businesses are typically smaller in scale, but they still maintain a strong roster of artists, participate in regional or select international art fairs, and have multiple staff members. Then there are small galleries, small businesses that are the backbone of the art world, helping to cultivate the early careers of artists.



Mike Kelley
Untitled (Allegorical Drawings), 1976/2001
 Hauser and Wirth
 US \$45,000



Beyond a gallery's size, it can be categorized by different types. Other terms you may hear most often include:

- **Blue-chip galleries**, which work with art at the most expensive end of the market. Not all blue-chip galleries are big businesses: A small gallery of just a few staff could sell blue-chip works.
- **Project spaces** are often small, independently run venues that operate outside the commercial pressures of the traditional gallery system. They may be founded by artists, curators, or collectives, and they typically focus on experimentation and short-term exhibitions.
- **Artist-run galleries** are exactly what the name suggests: venues where the artists themselves are in charge of selling the work.
- **Secondary-market galleries** specialize in selling artworks that have been previously owned.

How do galleries work with art collectors?



Trine Drivsholm
Lapis XVII, 2023
Soneva Art & Glass
Sold



Clare Belfrage
Flourish III, 2024
Soneva Art & Glass
US \$15,500



For collectors, galleries are more than just points of sale. They can help art buyers discover new artists, build coherent collections, and sell artworks they own. Retief van Wyk, studio manager of the Maldives’s Soneva Art & Glass, explains that a gallery is “like going into shoe shop and you have to convince the [buyer] that this is a really good pair of shoes and it’s made really well and it’s better than those pair of shoes: ‘It really looks good on you. This is going to fit in with you very well.’”

Many galleries also cultivate relationships with the people they sell art to. “Purchasing artwork from a gallery should never be viewed as the end of a relationship, as collectors and galleries ultimately share the same goal: to see the artwork appreciate in both cultural significance and value,” said Yang. “Acquiring an artwork is an investment in an artist’s career, and nurturing that career—through thoughtful placements with institutions and other informed collectors—is the primary responsibility of the gallery. Collectors should therefore view galleries as long-term collaborators.”

How do galleries work with artists?



Lexia Hachtmann, installation view of “Waiting Room” at YveYANG Gallery, 2025. Courtesy of YveYang Gallery.

Galleries also act as collaborators and advocates for the artists they work with. This can take many forms: financial investment in production, career planning, curatorial support, and exposure through exhibitions, art fairs, and online platforms. Much of this falls under the umbrella of representation, which is a formal business relationship between an artist and a gallery.

Mosca describes the gallery as a long-term partner, deeply involved in how work is developed and displayed. “The gallery has supported artists for a long time and has invested much in their artworks, and their display within the gallery space, and also at art fairs around the world,” he said. This practice was largely pioneered by Castelli and American art dealer Allan Frumkin, both of whom gave their artists stipends to help cover studio costs between shows.

Why you should engage with art galleries



Installation view of “Transcendental and Beyond: The Essence of Art” at Addison Rowe Gallery, 2024. Photo by Victoria Addison and Margaret Fensterer. Courtesy of Addison Rowe Gallery.



If you want to discover new art, then engaging with galleries is pretty much essential. Most are free to visit, and for art lovers, there are few better ways to spend an afternoon than to explore what they have to offer. If you're not near many galleries, then there are plenty of on-line channels, including Artsy, that allow you to connect with these spaces and discover the art that they platform. Many galleries use Artsy to upload artworks and online shows, making them easy and accessible to view.

If you're considering acquiring your first artwork, galleries are an ideal place to start. Yang emphasized that her best piece of advice for someone new to galleries is not to "hesitate to ask questions and discover what you like and don't like."

"Galleries are there to make you feel welcome and enjoy the experience of connecting with art," said Yang. "That's our job. So whoever sits in a gallery to receive visitors should be there to create a good experience for a guest, regardless of their budget and experience. So you should never hesitate to walk in and ask as many questions as you like, or simply relax, browse, and make your own discoveries...Whether you're buying or looking, Art should be a wonderful experience that's a treat and not a chore. And the more you see, the more you learn."