

Did You Get that Utrillo on the Web?

Collectors are flocking online to buy pricey art

Ken Raboy, a senior manager at Andersen Consulting in Dallas, loves to haunt art galleries on business trips to New York, indulging his passion for collecting prints and drawings. But this year, Raboy isn't traveling much. So is he collecting less? Not at all. He has simply shifted his shopping to the Internet. Since January, Raboy, 43, has bought five pieces from two online art sites, including a Frank Stella print he thinks he "absolutely stole" for \$2,600 at a Sothebys.com ([BID](#)) online auction in May. "I now make it a regular habit to go to Sothebys.com and artnet.com to see what's new," Raboy says.

Raboy is one of many collectors moving online in search of serious art. Close to a dozen sites, several of them launched this year, offer wide selections, solid consumer guarantees, and plenty of handholding from in-house art experts. True, online art buying got a black eye recently when an apparently fake painting by the late California artist Richard Diebenkorn nearly sold for more than \$100,000 in an eBay auction ([EBAY](#)). The FBI is investigating whether a gang of shills bid up the price of the painting. But collectors say buying art online can still be safe if you do your homework and stick to the most reputable sites. Indeed, what is astonishing many experts is how quickly collectors have accepted buying expensive works over the Net without seeing them. "That we would be selling works in the \$20,000, \$30,000, and \$40,000 range is a surprise," says Craig Moffett, president of Sothebys.com, which was launched by its Manhattan auction-house parent in January. So far, the record online price is believed to be for a work by the prolific Italian artist Lucio Fontana, who died in 1968, that went for \$168,000 in an auction at artnet.com last year. Artnet has a Chagall on auction with a price it estimates at \$250,000 to \$280,000.

While the Web is expanding the market by luring new collectors, it's also attracting artists who might not otherwise be able to find outlets for their work. Artnet.com CEO Hans Neuendorf notes that selling works online costs about half as much as it does via traditional auctions because there are no catalogs to print or salesrooms to maintain. His site's commissions amount to 15% of a work's selling price--10% paid by the buyer and 5% by the seller--about half what Sotheby's and Christie's charge in traditional auctions.

CLOSE EYE. While Web commissions may be lower than those charged in salesrooms, one thing the top Internet art auction houses stress is their consumer safeguards. You can expect works posted on the better sites to have been vetted by in-house experts or associated galleries for signs of fakery or damage. Just plain bad art gets tossed out as well. Unlike eBay, auction sites such as Sothebys.com and artnet.com only allow bidding by registered buyers, who are obliged to supply names, addresses, and other particulars, including credit-card information. Sothebys.com also monitors bidding patterns to make sure nothing untoward is going on.

The best sites generally guarantee to take a work back if it's not in the condition described or turns out to be a fake. Indeed, reputable galleries, which provide the research for sites such as Sothebys.com and eArtGroup.com, often guarantee a work's authenticity for the life of the buyer. Some sites also offer no-questions-asked returns during the first 5 to 14 days after the sale. That's a big reason that Doug Ring, a Los Angeles real estate investor and avid collector, felt confident enough to buy a \$30,000, 10-foot-by-7-foot canvas by Los Angeles artist Barbara Kruger through New York-based eArtGroup.com recently. Is there a cap on how much he would spend online for an artwork? "We'll hit the limits in my checkbook first," says Ring, 54.

While consumer protection is vital, buyers still need to bone up on a work before bidding. Ring, for example, knew Kruger's work and checked with gallery owners and a local museum curator before buying. The good news is that the amount of information available on the Internet is exploding. To make sure he doesn't overpay, Raboy researches prices in the huge databases available, for a fee, at artnet.com and Artprice.com. Artnet.com and Sothebys.com also provide rich detail on the works posted in their auctions. Sothebys.com even posts the reserve price--the minimum bid a seller will accept. Rival Onview.com goes that one better by inviting you to bid lower than the posted minimum if you think it's too high.

Which site you should go to first depends on your taste and budget. A good place to start is [Sothebys.com](#), which claims sales of \$1 million per week, including jewelry, by far the Web's biggest volume. The site offers a broad selection --everything from an East African tribal sculpture at \$250 to works by pop artists at a sale ending June 28. That sale will include a painted paper plate by Roy Lichtenstein, which is expected to draw around \$350, and a canvas by Mel Ramos, which could go for \$50,000 or more.

[Artnet.com](#) is also a good site for serious collectors. It has a section where high-end galleries, including New York's Adelson Galleries, can feature works, and its auction area offers a varied selection of works by established 20th century artists and photographers. Perry Nguyen, a Los Angeles pharmacist, has bought classic photos on the site, including original prints of Walker Evans' *Shoeshine Boy* for \$2,200 and Henri Cartier-Bresson's *Rue Mouffetard* for \$3,600. "That's a good deal," he says. "Dealers out here charge \$5,000 for a Cartier-Bresson." When a photo he bought in April turned out to have a crease in the lower margin, he was able to return it without incident.

Even on a tight budget, you have tons of options. Toni Sikes, CEO of GUILD.com, an online gallery in Madison, Wis., says her site is aimed at shoppers who "like beautiful things in their home but who, instead of going to Pottery Barn, might buy an original piece of art." Among the 10,000 works on sale are prints and lithographs by established artists such as Chicago's Ed Paschke for \$1,200 to \$1,600, juxtaposed with many by total unknowns for as little as \$50.

Other sites offering works by little-known artists screened for quality by in-house art experts include eArtGroup.com and NextMonet.com. Timothy Peterson, a Stonybrook (N.Y.) Web-site developer, recently snapped up a set of fanciful candlesticks by two Russian neo-pop artists for \$850 and a print by American Margaret Kilgallen for \$500 on eArtGroup.

You don't have to rule out mass-market auction sites entirely. The Great Collections section of eBay, for instance, is operated by Butterfield & Butterfield, a San Francisco auction house that eBay bought last year. Unlike eBay's standard auction sites, Great Collections offers full guarantees of authenticity and quality. The authenticity of artwork sold on [sothebys.amazon.com](#), a joint venture of the auction house and Amazon.com, is also guaranteed by Sotheby's experts, even though the average price is only \$500. But so far, both sites feature more jewelry and other collectibles than art.

Online art buying is likely to get better with time. Icollector.com already lets online buyers place advance bids for works in upcoming live auctions, such as an Old Masters sale at Phillips Auctioneers in July. Once online video improves, Icollector.com and Sothebys.com plan to beam buyers into traditional auction rooms and allow them to bid from their computers. If others follow suit, the Net may replace the telephone as the way to bid remotely on multimillion-dollar works. Meanwhile, as computer-screen and other technologies advance, it will be possible to see works online in enormous detail. Sotheby's now offers four high-resolution photos of each work offered online, vs. just one per work in its printed catalogs. Purists will still want to see the expensive works in person. But when collectors buy art in the future, it's more likely to be with a mouse click than a nod at an auctioneer.

By *THANE PETERSON*