

Ask the Artsperts

by Kristine Meek and Juliana Meek

Harmon-Meek Gallery, Naples, FL

Art Exhibition Opening Etiquette

Dear Artsperts:

I share and manage a studio gallery space in the Naples Art District. I've been frustrated by the opening receptions that we host in conjunction with other studios. The behavior of some visitors is off-putting and prevents purchases from happening. Others, will loudly criticize my work. And then when someone does want to buy a painting they want to haggle over the price. It's so frustrating. How do you handle these negative aspects, while ensuring a positive and successful reception?

Signed,
Artist with Studio Gallery

Dear Artist,

Our gallery has been hosting opening receptions in Naples since 1964. We can tell you the obvious – times have changed. During season, Naples in the evening was once a place of classy sophistication. Many chose to dress in their best for an evening out in Naples. Most restaurants had strict dress codes. There were far fewer galleries at that time and openings were a major societal event with collectors lining up outside the door. There would be what our dad refers to as a “feeding frenzy” of people wanting to get a work of art before anyone else. The newspaper and society magazines would send photographers to the opening receptions and articles would highlight the importance of art and culture through the art galleries.

But times have changed and we struggle with the same issues you are experiencing. Perhaps it is time to present a short etiquette guide for going to an opening reception.

Rule #1: Dress UP. An art gallery is not the golf course, tennis court or your backyard, men put on some pants! During the day a gallery is “come as you are”, but in the evening it shows respect to dress up. Artists too should dress nicely. We represent an artist who wears a business suit outside of his studio because he says it demonstrates that he takes his profession seriously. While painting, wear the paint-splattered clothing, but to wear it 24/7 just looks like a schtick.

Rule #2: Don't get Drunk. Bartenders have told us stories of guests who say they could only have wine because they are on medication that forbids mixing with alcohol. Valets have had to take champagne glasses filled with champagne from guests that want to drive off with it in their cup holder. Enjoy the drinks but don't overdo it!

Rule #3: Leave your business cards at home. Don't try to drum up business for yourself. If you are an artist and you are going to another artist's opening, don't try to hand out your business card to the collectors – that's really tacky.

Rule #4: Don't gorge yourself. You are there to gaze at the art not graze at the food table or to pounce on a server. Remember not to double dip or drop toothpicks on the ground and if you put a glass down on a table, use a napkin. Don't use sculptures as arm rests or as high-top tables. They're works of art. Also, if you don't like something don't spit it out in the potted plants (yes this has happened!)

Rule #5: Don't Lie. Don't say you are going to purchase something and get your picture taken with the artist and boast to everyone that you bought a work. Only to call the next morning to say you changed your mind. That's pretty much the worst thing you can do since it made it so no one else at the opening could purchase the work.

Rule #6: Buy Something! So often at an opening we hear from people “oh I'm just here to support the artist”. If you are truly supporting the artist, you would make a purchase of their work and even better do it at the opening to get others excited that things are selling.

Rule #7: The price is the price. If a gallery is honest enough to put a price on the wall, trust that is the price. There is a recent trend where people are under the impression that the price on the wall is a suggested retail price and not what you actually pay. This isn't true. If a gallery is giving discounts, then you have to question what the value of any of the works really are. It's the job of a gallery and in the interest of the artist and longtime collectors to maintain and increase prices, not to slash them.

Now if every studio and gallery printed this etiquette guide and posted on their door at an opening maybe we'd bring back better behavior. We wish you luck!

Sincerely,
The Artsperts

Well-dressed and well-behaved gallery opening attendees (Stockton and Margorie Renfroe) at Harmon Gallery in 1972. Historically, people dressed and behaved better at openings than today. Businesses are afraid to enforce dress codes or correct behavior, but even in our free society, that doesn't mean we can't gently remind people that certain behaviors are not acceptable.

