
Etiquette of the Studio

As brought to our Attention by Mister Alan Janoes

There are a few rules of etiquette applicable to visitors to the artists's studios, which it will be well to note, the more so because they are special, and might not suggest themselves as a matter of course even to those whom nature presented the whole code of etiquette when she gave them a gentle disposition.

It is against the rules of etiquette to ask to see a work at sight.

It is against the rules of etiquette to ask to see an unfinished work, even if it is one that is being made by your own order.

It is against the rules of etiquette to keep an artist waiting, if you are visiting his studio to sit for a portrait or for other reasons. His time is of value to him whatever yours may be to you; and it is equally rude to detain him after the session is concluded. His politeness may hinder him from even hinting to you that you are trespassing upon his most precious resource, the daylight hours, although he may be fretting silently at your rudeness in lingering overlong within the precincts of his studio.

It is excessively ill-bred to criticize harshly, in the presence of an artist, the works displayed in his studio. Moreover, extravagant praise is also in bad taste. A few cordial words of praise and pleasure should, of course, be spoken, and a friend may sometimes point out where improvements could be made; but it is a thankless task generally, and it is much better taste to leave all criticism to the public journals, magazines, newspapers, and other such resorts of punditry, on the occasion when the works you have viewed in private come to receive a public exhibition.

It is contrary to the rules of etiquette to look around a studio in which you may be sitting for a portrait, unless you are invited by an artist to do so. Remain seated.

If a visitor sees a painting or a piece of statuary which he wishes to possess, he asks simply that he may have the refusal of it; or he says to the artist: "I wish to have this picture, if it is not disposed of." Again, prices are not mentioned.

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After leaving the studio, the visitor writes and asks the price, which should never be spoken of in the studio itself, of which he will be informed by the artist, by return post. Should the price be larger than the would-be purchaser is disposed to give, the patron writes again to that effect, and it is no breach of etiquette to name a the sum which he wished to spend upon the work of art: this give an opportunity to the artist of lowering his price.

Under no circumstances should the studio visitor tempt the artist with offers to buy out of the studio in order to avoid a dealer's commission, if the artist is represented by a gallery; this is exceedingly ill-bred.

It is not customary to haggle about a sum to be paid for a work of art, and the correspondence should not be carried further than above, except that it be an intimation from the artist that he will accept the terms presented by the purchaser, and that the work is subject to his order and will be sent to him upon further instructions.

Unlike sculptors, or painters of scenes, some portrait painters have a practice which, for obvious reasons, cannot be adopted by painters of general subjects – they have a card hung in a conspicuous part of the studio which shows the price at which they will execute portraits of the sizes listed. At the bottom of this card there is generally an intimation that half the price must be paid at the first sitting, the remainder when the portrait is completed.

This practice saves time and trouble, and it would be well if other artists could adopt some system whereby the price of such works as they may have for sale might be made known to visitors. But the price of a fancy picture is to be ascertained by the artist only by what it will bring, and it is quite likely that the wealth of the buyer, or his known admiration for good paintings, may reasonably make a difference in the sum asked by the artist, who might ask a lower price of a collector whom he knew could not afford so much. There is nothing wrong in this, for an artist has as much right to get as much more than the minimum price of his picture as anybody else has to get the best price for his labor or his merchandise.

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Portrait painting is, however, pretty much a repetition of the same sort of work, and the artist would be the last man in the world to admit that there could be such difference in the execution of the work as to warrant a scale of prices in conformity therewith. The same holds true in photo-portraiture.

It is not etiquette to visit the studio of an artist excepting by special invitation, and then only at the hours he may appoint. To go there unannounced at any other time is ill-bred; for although he may be there, he will probably be unwilling to be disturbed at his work, no matter how welcome an expression he may wear in order to mask his displeasure.

It is ill-bred to take a young child to visit the studio of an artist, as there are generally articles there of value which can easily be broken or soiled, not to be replaced; and even if the child is well trained, the owner of such articles would be in terror lest they should be ruined. Likewise, it is inappropriate to bring a large retinue of curiosity-seekers to visit a studio, without first consulting the artist himself.

To uncover and picture or article in a studio that may be veiled or hidden from view, whether bust or picture, is the height of rudeness. It is equally so to turn a picture that is hung to face the wall, or standing facing it, in order to view it without the artist's permission; even to request the permission to do so is of dubious propriety.

Gentlemen never smoke in the studio unless especially invited to do so.

To whisper in a studio is excessively ill-bred; for, although you may make a remark entirely independent of what is around you, you may rest assured that you will have the credit of having ridiculed or censored the work of art⁵ which you have been invited to examine.

To behave in studio as if you were in a department store or marketplace, pricing goods, inquiring about what is for public exhibition, what is not; who commissioned this picture, or that; whose portrait this or that may be; or, in any way to remind the artist that

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his genius shall circulate in the world as merchandise, is indelicate in the extreme.

It is against the rules of etiquette to handle the paintings, sculpture, brushes, palettes or tubes of pigment, or other articles in the studio; likewise is it impolite to interrogate the artists in too great a degree, concerning the means and methods of his work; he may volunteer such explanations of his creative procedure himself but they should under no circumstances within the bounds of propriety be solicited. Asking an artist if he employs such instruments as projectors to attain lifelike outlining of figures in his paintings is outside the realm of good taste. Use of such devices is a private matter.

It is contrary to good etiquette to place the artist in the role of tour guide or entertainment director, by requesting the names of restaurants, cafes, or places of recreation of any sort, in the vicinity of this studio; should he extend the invitation to escort you to such establishments, each must exercise his own discretion.

It is extremely rude, if an artist chooses to continue his employment during a visit to his studio, for the visitor to stand behind him or very near him, or in any way to appear to watch his work.

With these several rules kept well in mind, one can be assured of an enjoyable and successful studio visit.

From: Messers McDermott & McGough, "The Cottage", December 1913, pg. 13 & 14.