

## **Art Fair on a Shoe-String**

### **By Mark Rouse**

**You will need...**

#### **A Canopy/Booth**

In 2020 I entered my first art fair since college. I didn't have a canopy. Trust me, you need one. I cooked in the sun. After I got my first tent, I encountered more sun, rain and rambunctious dogs. The Canopy/Tent made life easier in all cases.

#### **A Way to Collect for Sales**

When people buy from you, you need to be able to collect payment. Most people don't carry cash anymore. Make it easy for them to pay with a credit card device such as Square or Stripe and an online method like PayPal or Venmo.

#### **A Way to Sell Online**

The week after an art fair, I almost always see a bump in my online sales. You can only take so much stuff to the fair, so having something like an Etsy site provides more opportunities.

#### **Business Cards / Literature**

Make sure you have a way for people to remember you, and if you have a compelling story, a way to remember your story. This should also help them navigate to your website after the fair is over.

#### **An Email Sign-up Sheet**

Some people will give me their email address so that you can contact them about upcoming shows, new work etc. Always get email addresses from people who buy from you, and send an email saying thank you.

#### **A Helper**

It's possible to do your setup, teardown and sales by yourself, but it's always better to have someone with you. Train your helper to collect payment. People buy art from artists, and having someone else in your booth frees your time to talk with potential customers. Besides, you gotta pee sometime...

## Your Canopy

This is where things can get expensive if you aren't careful and creative. When I started, I was broke, so I needed to minimize my cost. There are a few things to remember though:

1. Don't get the cheapest canopy. Cheap canopies cost more in the long run because they wear out quickly. At a recent art fair, the people in the booth next to me were inspecting my tent. They said that they had to replace their tent every two years and were surprised that mine was three years old and still in great shape. That said, you don't have to buy anything really expensive either. My canopy cost \$150 in 2021. Here are a few things to look for:
  - a. A white canopy. Some Art Fairs don't allow colored or printed canopies. White can be used at any Art Fair.
  - b. Get a canopy with straight legs. Angled legs reduce the amount of space under the canopy, and they are not as durable.
  - c. The sandbags that come with the tents are usually too small and will start lurking sand. Don't pay extra for them.
  - d. Vinyl walls can be used to close up your tent for two-day shows, but are useless for displaying art.

My canopy came with sandbags and vinyl walls. I replaced them after the first year.

2. If you are hanging art, you have a lot of choices from Pro-Panels to home-made walls. I couldn't spend a lot on walls, so I found heavy duty mesh tarps. I use curtain hooks to hang my paintings. I hang them with zip-ties and have had as many as 15 pieces hanging on a single wall. Three walls cost me less than \$100.
3. The least expensive weights for your tent are bags of water softener salt. The ones with the handles can be tied to the canopy, or a long bungee cord can be used. If you want to make the look better, you can go to Farm and Fleet and get some burlap bags to put them in. These cost about \$5 per bag.
4. You will also want to get a small table for your booth. This can be about anything you want depending on your needs. I needed something to display signage, business cards and prints. A folding four-foot table works great for me and is easy to transport. The one I got adjusts to three different heights, the tallest being the height of a countertop. It cost about \$35.

Soooo..... there you have it. If you do some shopping and use some creativity, you can have a nice place to hang and display your art at art fairs for around \$300. Of course this is basic, and you will want to personalize things. I've updated some things and added some other items. Your needs may vary depending on what type of products you offer.

## Other Hints.....

Just a few things I've learned in the past few years.....

1. People draw people. If there are people in your booth, more people will come in. You will not sell to the people walking by outside your booth, so you need to provide a compelling reason for people to come into your booth. Having large, original art in your booth will help draw people in. Interact with people. I've even been known to give away a few prints to interested kids.
2. People buy art from artists. Be available to talk to the people coming through your booth. Talk about your art, and the "people" stories behind your art.
3. Pricing. It's important. I'm still trying to figure it out. At an art fair, it's important to have a variety of prices. I generally have three different price points:
  - a. Impulse buy - These are items priced at \$20 or less. For me, these are inexpensive prints that don't require a bunch of time or effort to prepare. These are a high margin item and usually my best sellers.
  - b. "This would make a nice gift..." These are items priced over \$20 but less than my original paintings. Generally, for me, they are priced at \$40, \$60 and \$100.
  - c. Originals - Pricing here is dependent on the fair and where are you in your career. My current pricing (2024) for my original paintings range from \$350-\$1,000. I may raise it at more expensive arts fairs like Penrod, but generally keep things within the same range. As you start attending multiple fairs, or going back to the same fairs year after year, you will meet people who you've met at other fairs. Big price hikes might scare them if they came looking for you to buy something, and big reductions in price might cause a former client to think they got cheated when they purchased a work at a higher price. For this reason, I don't offer discounts at my booth. If a former client wants to buy a second (or third) piece, I might offer a discount to make them feel important, because they are!
  - d. Once I set my prices for prints, they do not change for the season. This ensures that people can send their friends and family to other shows and they'll get the same prices.
4. Keep track of what people are buying (especially prints) and pay attention to which pieces are getting the most attention, and what people are saying. This is not to change your style, but to help you pick out which pieces to take to the shows. Shows are different, but people are a lot the same.

**Some Nifty Links:  
Where I get stuff:**

**My Tent**

Go on Amazon and search for “MasterCanopy”. The price, as of 2024, is \$145

**My Walls**

Tarps Now- [www.tarpsnow.com/black-mesh-shade-tarps.html](http://www.tarpsnow.com/black-mesh-shade-tarps.html)

They also have white shade tarps: [www.tarpsnow.com/white-mesh-shade-tarps.html](http://www.tarpsnow.com/white-mesh-shade-tarps.html)

**Frames**

I’ve found that a lot of my clients reframe original paintings to go with their decor. It seemed silly to me to use experience frames, after all, I’m not in the frame sales business. The Cardinati Floater Frames are very nice and available in several sizes. Go to Jerry’s Arterama online and search for “Cardinati”.

**Prints**

I currently use three different printers. For small, inexpensive prints, I use one of the many local quick print shops. Choose the one that is convenient and gives you the quality you want.

For archival Giclee prints, I use Grand River Giclee. Small shop, great quality and excellent service. They print most of what I sell on my Etsy Shop.

[www.grandrivergiclee.com/](http://www.grandrivergiclee.com/)

Finally, I’m excited about the printing capabilities of Vintage Adventures. I’m not sure what products they are going to make for me, but they will be excellent and cool. They will probably handle my higher end print products.

[www.vintageadventureshomedecor.com/](http://www.vintageadventureshomedecor.com/)