



Howard Shaw

As Hammer Galleries' President and Director, with over 30 years of experience, Howard Shaw runs one of the world's leading galleries specializing in Impressionist and Modern Masters. Founded in 1928 by industrialist and philanthropist Dr. Armand Hammer, the gallery focuses on artists such as Monet, Renoir, Matisse, Picasso, and Chagall. Interviewed by Genevieve Reichle.

Let's start at the very beginning. One of the things I wanted to talk about was how long you have worked with the gallery, and what the gallery means to you today.

I started as an intern at Hammer Galleries in the summer of 1981 when I was an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, intending to go on to law school. But art got into my blood, and 33 years later, I'm still here and still in love with the art business. From almost the very beginning, I have been interested in technology's place in the art world.

I personally computerized Hammer Galleries when I was a young assistant in 1985, using an IBM 286 personal computer with a 40-MB hard drive. Your phone has a bigger hard drive than that today. We had only one computer and had to do backups on floppy disks. And once we got the hang of it we thought it was the greatest thing since sliced bread.

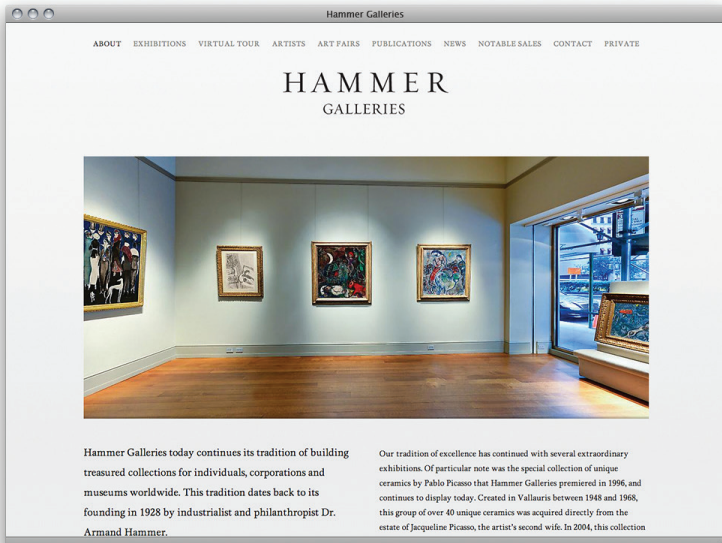
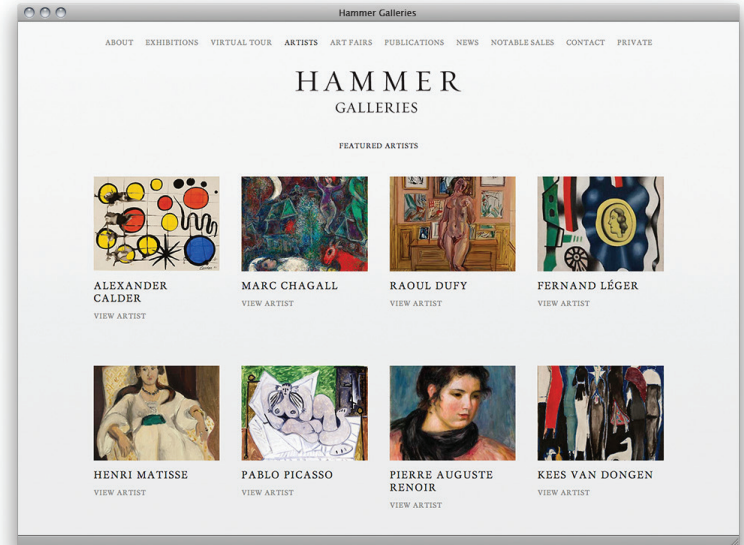
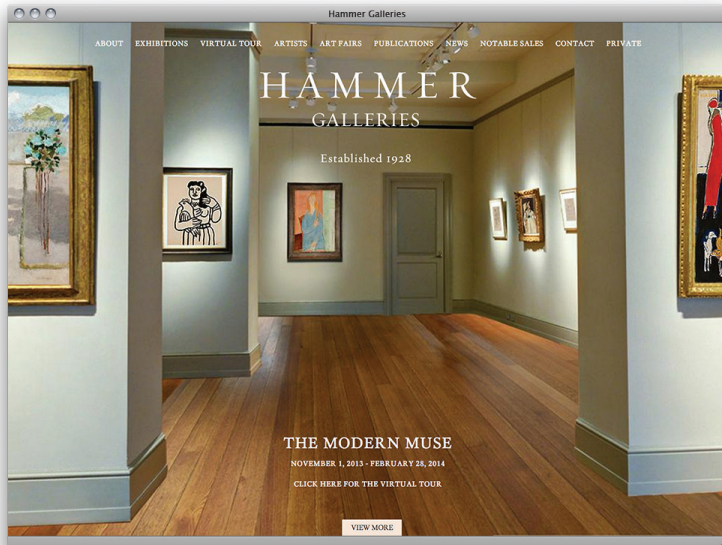
But you knew it was the right way to go. You intuitively felt like it would make a difference.

The personal computer had just been invented and it dramatically lowered the cost of computerization for small businesses like art galleries. My boss at the time (and mentor in the art business), Richard Lynch, said to me, “I will only allow you to buy a computer if I never have to touch it and if I ask for something, it can be brought to me the same way it always has been.” At the time, the business was, I used to say, still very much a “19th-century business,” and we were trying to pull it into the 20th century. A lot of galleries and dealers at that time were somewhat intimidated by technology, not sure which way to go with it. You also have to remember that the technology was much less reliable at the time. Hard disks went bad very frequently and using a computer could be a very frustrating experience.

Your gallery is magnificent, and you handle some very serious work. Somehow when you're here, the works feel particularly substantial. But what's amazing is that one gets something of the same feeling from your website. How does that work? How does technology work to convey the feeling and experience for people who aren't physically here?

This is an interesting question that we've been talking a lot about at the gallery lately because everyone under the sun is pitching us some new kind of digital platform, online auction service or some other new idea for using technology in the art world. The new “new thing” always sounds exciting, but having watched the development of the personal computer and Internet from their beginnings, I have seen many, many potentially “transformative” digital ideas for the art business end up going nowhere. Even the major auction houses have had a difficult (and costly) time figuring out how to best use the Internet.

We were one of the first galleries to launch a website. But the downside of being an early adopter of a new technology is that the technology rapidly improves—and then the people who wait and jump in later often end up with something much better. So in 2013, it seemed clear that it was time for an upgrade. There is an old saying that you don't get a second chance to make a first impression, and these days our website is often our clients' first impression of the gallery. You can think of it in terms of how you frame a painting. As dealers in Impressionist and Modern Masters, we are very fortunate to be handling museum quality works by some of the greatest artists of the 19th- and 20th-century. We spend a lot of time working with the top framers in the city to select the best frames for the paintings we exhibit. We want a great painting to look its best with the perfect frame. For example, the extraordinary Modigliani in our current exhibition happens to have, rather than a modern frame, a magnificent 18th-century antique frame. Of course, there are limits to framing: you can't put a bad painting in a great frame and expect it to



be transformed into a great painting. To continue the analogy, we want our location here on Park Avenue and 57th Street to be the perfect frame for the art. We try to replicate the look of our gallery at the major art fairs, such as Art Basel Miami Beach and TEFAF Maastricht, again to provide the “perfect frame” for our paintings. In the virtual world, our website is the “frame.”

So you decided to redo your graphic identity and website. What made you decide to go with exhibit-E?

About four years ago, we had two significant changes at Hammer. We moved the gallery into its present location on Park Avenue and the co-director of the gallery decided to retire, resulting in my becoming sole director of Hammer Galleries. These changes gave me the opportunity to rethink the direction in which we were going and decide if we wanted to perhaps change a bit. So we focused on upgrading the physical space and the gallery’s identity as a whole. With the website, I noticed that every time I received an elegantly designed e-announcement from another gallery, I’d look at the bottom and see the exhibit-E logo. And when I visited websites that I felt had a beautifully organized layout, I was not surprised to find that they had been designed by exhibit-E. This literally happened dozens of times. So eventually it dawned on me that perhaps I too should call exhibit-E.

So once you decided to work with the people at exhibit-E what was the actual process like? Were they able to meet your needs?

The process was great. Going into it, my one concern was that most of their clients seemed to be contemporary galleries. The

websites had a certain look, often showcasing these minimalist, airplane-hangar-like spaces. But Hammer is a more traditional gallery, specializing in Impressionist and Modern Masters, so I wasn’t sure if exhibit-E was the right fit for us. When I first talked with Billy and Dan, they invited me to come down to their offices so they could show me design options on their computers, but I said, “No thank you, you need to come up here. I want you to see the space, see the art, see what we do, and then, based on that, we can talk a little bit about the look and the feel we’re going for.” And so that’s what we did. The conversation we had was extremely productive. The fact that it was not their typical project only made them all the more excited.

Which came first, the rebranding or the website?

We knew from the outset that we wanted to do both, but as a practical matter we first redesigned our stationery, our business cards, picked new fonts, new logos, etc. This had to be done first because the website would be based on the new look and fonts and so forth. I remember when the design team came up for the first meeting, we brought together the entire staff, and the designers put about 50 different business cards in different sizes with different fonts and compositions on a table in front of us. The first meeting was probably an hour and a half of looking at fonts and talking about style and talking about how it relates to the artwork. Then we honed it down and finally we came up with something we were happy with. It was only after that we started talking about the design of the website and what we wanted our new look to be.

Once all the design decisions had been made, both for your re-branding and your website, how did the launch of the site go? And how did your public receive it?

The most difficult parts of the process for us were the stylistic choices, both for the re-branding and the redesigning of the website. Once we gave Dan and his team the green light, they took care of everything, all the behind-the-scenes work. It was very smooth. The launch was seamless, easy, a piece of cake.

And your longtime clients, did they notice the difference?

Yes, we continue to get great feedback from longtime clients as well as great comments from new clients. In fact, just two days ago, I had a call from Asia in which I was offered a major painting. I eventually asked the caller what had made the sellers think of us, and the answer was twofold: we had been recommended by someone I had done business with many years ago, but also, the gentleman said, “we sat down and pulled up your website and were just so impressed—with the work you had on exhibition and the notable sales that you’ve made in the past.” And then he added, “And the website was so easy to use and to navigate—it was a real pleasure. So we decided that you would be the right gallery to handle the work.” I immediately called Dan to ask him if it had actually been him on the line, disguising his voice. But all joking aside, the design and website are everything we had hoped for and the call was a great validation of the choices we had made.

Can you speak more to what makes your website special?

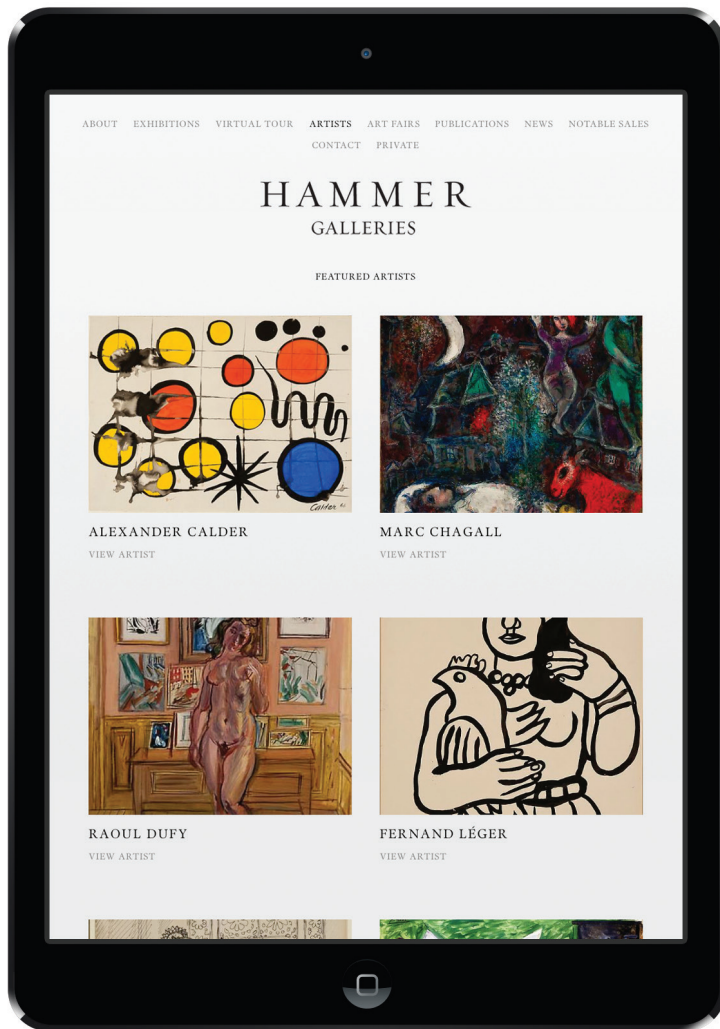
One big part of the website is our virtual tour. I should say that this is not a feature from exhibit-E but rather something

we developed, prior to working with exhibit-E that has now become synonymous with Hammer. My feeling has always been that the reproductions of artworks that are on most websites don’t really give you much of a sense of the works. A few years ago when we were exhibiting at the European Fine Art Fair in Maastricht, our booth was photographed and put on their website as a virtual tour. Though it has the feel of a video, it is actually produced using panoramic photography and special software. It allows you to see the framed paintings hanging on the wall, as well as the gallery and the furniture, which gives more of a sense of the scale. Once the rooms have been photographed, the company we work with uses special software to drop high-resolution images of the works into the frames. It looks spectacular and our clients love it.

This completely elevates the level of the picture.

Someone recently asked me, “Aren’t you afraid that the virtual tour is so good that people won’t bother coming into the gallery?” Seeing a painting online will never replace the experience of seeing the work in person, but we want the online experience to be good enough to make the viewer want to visit the gallery to see the actual painting. We certainly could have gone with an off-the-shelf template for a fraction of what we ended up spending. But we wanted the best possible design and we wanted it to be for the long term. It’s OK if it doesn’t lead to an immediate sale. That’s why we went with exhibit-E, and by the way, that’s also why we went with responsive design.

I was just going to ask you how you felt about responsive design, which, to clarify for readers, is an approach to website design that



www.hammergalleries.com on the iPad



www.hammergalleries.com on the iPhone

addresses the problem of adapting websites for smartphones and tablets—a single website solution that works on all devices.

Dan said, “Look, this is not something you can add later, so I’d strongly recommend that you do it now: everyone looks at things on mobile devices these days, whether it’s a phone or an iPad.” He really pushed me to do it, and I’m glad he did. Just yesterday, I was looking at our website on my new iPad and was amazed how easy it was to navigate. On the iPad, the site used to be somewhat erratic. Now it’s just like looking at it on a regular computer.

I think that ties back to your commitment to brand consistency. If your gallery didn’t have responsive design, someone on a mobile device would have a totally different—and much worse—sense of what the gallery is like than someone on a computer because the functionality is so frustrating.

Yes. Exactly.

You just mentioned iPads. Can you talk a little bit about what impact they’ve had on your business?

An iPad is a fantastic tool for an art fair. In the old days, we would bring big notebooks filled with documents—provenances, catalogue raisonné xeroxes, certificates of authenticity, condition reports. Now all that’s on the iPad, and the whole process is a pleasure. At an art fair, you have thousands of people coming through. They’re visiting hundreds of booths—if you have 30 seconds of someone’s attention, you’re lucky. Having everything at your fingertips is invaluable. If someone wants a condition report or a high-res photo, we can email it as we’re talking. If someone wants to see works

that are back in the gallery, we can call them up right then and there.

Something else that we do with an iPad at art fairs is a bit of an innovation of ours: we had our framer create a special iPad frame that we can hang on the wall to show works that are on view back at our gallery in New York. Or we can use it to play a slideshow of period photographs of the artist in his or her studio. An interesting thing happened the first time we used it, when we inaugurated our new gallery space with a one-man Renoir exhibition which we also toured to several fairs. We ran a slideshow on our framed iPad with great old photos of Renoir and people were just mesmerized. Then at one fair, we didn’t have the wall space, so instead we took the iPad out of its beautiful gold frame and put it on a plastic stand that I had picked up at the airport. But even though it was just as easy to watch, no one looked at it—the same exact slideshow, but no one looked at it. Yet when it was framed on the wall, everyone was mesmerized.

This speaks to how we react to presentation.

I computerized Hammer in 1985 and over the last 30 years all sorts of ideas, related to technology, computers, and the art world have been pitched to me. What I’ve learned is that you have to be very selective because a lot of the ideas originate on the tech side. Someone who has a great software background says, “I have this program that does x, y, and z in these other industries, so naturally it should work for the art world.” And that’s not always the case. For example, Facebook and Twitter may be wonderful for some businesses but for our gallery at this stage they’re insignificant.

I should add that our Web presence hasn't replaced the printed catalogues that we've always produced. In fact, we're printing more elaborate, more beautiful and more expensive catalogues than ever before. Of course, we could rely on digital "e-catalogues"—the distribution cost is essentially zero—but we feel they can't replace the experience of sitting down with a beautifully printed full-color catalogue. Even this interview is being printed in one of exhibit-E's annual books. In addition to our exhibition catalogues, for the last several years we have been producing hardcover coffee-table books for our clients for the works they acquire from our gallery. There are now such economies of scale in online production that the same companies that turn your vacation photos into hardcover albums can be used to make beautiful, customized coffee-table art books for our clients. In the old days, we had a black notebook with xeroxes and plastic sleeves filled with documents. Today we scan everything—including related works and biographical material, all the literature regarding the works—and we make a unique hardcover book for just about every major painting we handle.

And then you can order them as needed right?

Well that's the beauty of it—you don't have to print a thousand. We literally print two at a time. So if we give them away to clients we just print two more.

And you can change the book—you can update it easily.

Yes, if our research turns up some new and interesting information, we can easily update the book and reprint it. Invariably a copy of the book ends up on the coffee table of the purchaser. In fact, these books have become so popular with our clients

that sometimes a client will insist that a custom-made book on his or her new painting is part of the deal.

Let's stick with the world of art fairs. Do you feel like the website and the tools help at the fairs beyond people coming in and browsing the iPad?

Yes. We're now thinking a lot about how we can use some of these new extra tools on our website that we never had before. For example, I recently had a meeting with the former curator of a major museum. I was talking to him about doing a video for one of the paintings we're going to take to Maastricht—we wanted to do something special, in addition to the wall card with an essay. But we can't put a video in our booth because it's too crowded there, and it would be too noisy in our booth. And for our staff, listening to a three-minute video loop for eight hours a day for the 11 days of the Maastricht fair would be a bit too much. Then it occurred to us that we can put the video in the news section of the website. So when we're talking to people in front of the work, we can say, "Later when you're at lunch or you're back in your hotel room, please watch this video." It's the kind of thing I want to do a lot more of.

That gives an added value, doesn't it? Being able to present the backstory of works in video form? Both for potential buyers and for people who aren't buying but want to be educated about art: It gives them history about a world, and a business, we love.

In the discussion I had with this curator, again vis-à-vis the long term, I said, "I don't want the focus to be on selling the painting. I want this to be a scholarly piece. Only do it if you are excited about the work and think it will be fun to talk

about.” We’re not simply looking to make a quick sale. We want to expand the web experience for our clients.

Another area we’re interested in exploring is how to use the “private room.” When you get paintings at this level, many of which are in the multi-million-dollar price range, you have conflicting goals: on the one hand, you want to keep things very quiet, very exclusive, to show important works one by one to your major clients. On the other hand, so many people view our website and/or portals that we advertise on, such as Artnet, and we don’t want to miss out on someone who may be searching for just the kind of work we have. By using the private room, I might meet someone at a fair and either open up the room for them right there, or I can say, “Here’s a password. This is a very important painting and if you want to show it to your spouse later over dinner you can view it in this private room.” We’re hoping to set up a few of them before we go to Maastricht.

We spend a lot of time trying to get everything right. We sell very high-end, museum-quality artworks. They are not inexpensive, and it’s rare that someone just walks in and says, “I love it. I’ll take it.”

You have to work hard every day at finding great works of art, at researching them, at presenting them in their best possible light, and at establishing relationships with clients—the website can help in a variety of ways with all of that. It’s important to get it right.

Hammer Galleries rose to prominence in the early 1930s, when it exhibited the world-famous Russian Imperial Easter eggs by court jeweler Karl Fabergé—seen for the first time in the West.

For more than 50 years Hammer has focused on 19th- and 20th-century European and American Masters. Exhibitions at the gallery have included extraordinary works by European artists such as Bouguereau, Corot, Monet, Renoir, Picasso, and Chagall as well as American artists such as Chase, Wyeth, Cassatt, Hassam, and Sargent.

View more at www.hammergalleries.com

PICTURED ON PAGE 72: Howard Shaw, President and Director, and Iris Krensis Cohen, Vice President, seated in front of a painting by Amedeo Modigliani (Italian, 1884–1920), *Jeune fille assise, les cheveux dénoués (Jeune fille en bleu)*, 1919, oil on canvas, 39³/₈ x 25¹/₄ inches, (100 x 64.1 cm), Signed upper right: Modigliani.