

Shaping the Art World (excerpt)

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Women leaders in the Western art industry share their journeys, insights and outlook.

The Western art market is rich in its variety including traditional cowboys, landscapes, wildlife and Native American art, to name a few. In recent years, there has been a stronger push for more viewpoints to enter the fold to help show the real stories of the Southwest. Among the many industry leaders who are moving the market in new directions are the women at the helm of galleries, auction houses and museums. Their fresh approaches and challenging perspectives allow for broader conversations in a thriving market, with access to more representation across the board.

In this feature, you will meet four women who are shaping important auction houses, museum departments and galleries: Alissa Ford of Heritage Auctions; Shanana Campbell of Sorrel Sky Gallery; JR (Jennifer R.) Henneman of the Petrite Institute of Western American Art at Denver Art Museum; and Katherine Halligan of Bonhams. Their journeys to the Western art market are all different, but the unifying passion for this genre of art has propelled them to be game changers.

Shanana Campbell

Owner

Sorrel Sky Gallery

sorrelsky.com

For over two decades Shanana Campbell has carved a strong and steady career in the Southwestern art world with her Sorrel Sky Gallery, specializing in paintings, sculpture and jewelry. To say this was a dream realized for the entrepreneur wouldn't be a stretch, for



when she told her parents at just 12 years old that she wanted to be a gallerist, her father, jeweler Ben Nighthorse, gave her all the encouragement she needed.

“We had gone to a gallery opening, and I remember meeting the gallery manager and thinking she was just a rock star,” Campbell shares. “She had the gallery in tiptop shape, artists adored her and she had this really cool fluency with clients. It was like meeting a movie star in my mind. When we were driving home, I announced to my parents that I wanted to manage an art gallery. Dad stopped the car and turned and looked at me, and said, ‘You could do that; you could own a gallery.’”

That night at home, Campbell and her father sat down together and mapped out the process. During high school she began working in a local gallery, then in college she started to sell art. Following that, she worked for the Smithsonian in their division of product development and licensing, and then spent a year running her father’s jewelry studio. She started at the Franklin Mint soon after and had eight Western states as her territory where she would go to art shows and meet artists. After getting married and wanting to slow down from life on the road, Campbell returned to Durango, Colorado, and managed the gallery she worked at in high school for eight years.

Her background in all areas of the industry prepared Campbell for anything ahead when she opened the doors to her first Sorrel Sky location in Durango nearly 22 years ago. She’s since expanded to a second showroom in Santa Fe, New Mexico, that will celebrate its 10th anniversary next year. The journey hasn’t been without challenges—like devastating Colorado wildfires that greatly impacted the region early in her years owning the gallery—but Campbell knows how to pivot (even starting an art consulting business to place works in corporate collections) and how to thrive in all circumstances.

“I think having that desire and knowing what is necessary to make it in the art business is important. It’s not easy,” says Campbell, who adds that many who open galleries only become modestly successful. In addition, because the roots of the Western art world are deeply masculine, Campbell admits the environment was a challenging one for a woman to navigate.

Keeping up with changing technology over the years has been instrumental in staying ahead of the curve. Early on, Campbell was one of the few galleries with a website to showcase—but could not yet virtually sell—the art. She also doesn’t shy away from thoughtfully planning partnerships with artists who now typically use social media and websites to showcase their art.

“Artists weren’t easy to get ahold of before, and you really controlled the work and the narrative for collectors,” Campbell explains. “Now you can search and contact them directly, so it’s about having high integrity and working with like-minded people.”

As an established gallery owner, with recognizable spaces in two states, Campbell looks to the future: “I wanted to see what the first few years of a second location would be, and now that I have all of that down, the goal is a third location when an opportunity presents itself.”

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