UNIQUE ONLINE TOOL DESIGNED TO HELP ARTISTS PROTECT THEIR LIFE’S WORK

Free Step-by-Step Legal Guide to Estate Planning to Benefit Artists and Those Who Care for Their Estates

WASHINGTON, DC, November 24, 2014. When Pablo Picasso died in 1973 at the age of 91, he left behind a fortune in art and assets—but no will.

Without a legal document spelling out what was to be done with his enormous estate, Picasso’s family spent years and millions of dollars fighting over the artist’s work, as well as his villas and other valuable holdings.

Picasso’s artistic genius was exceptional; his lack of estate planning is not. Artists in general are disinclined to prepare a will or estate plan, according to research. To help address this problem, Columbia University and artists’ advocates collaborated to create a unique new online resource that provides step-by-step instructions to encourage creators to ensure their work lives on beyond them.

The Elder Artists’ Legal Resource was created on behalf of the Research Center for Arts and Culture at the National Center for Creative Aging. The website was designed by students in Columbia Law School’s Lawyering in the Digital Age Clinic in collaboration with Columbia University’s Office of Government and Community Affairs and Columbia University School of the Arts.

The online tool offers intuitive, easy-to-understand guidance for artists who want to inventory their work, document its value, and protect it posthumously.

According to Above Ground, a survey by the Research Center for Arts and Culture, 61 percent of aging professional visual artists in New York City have taken no steps to address the legacy of their work, 77 percent have no will, and 97 percent have no estate plan. Among the general U.S. population, only 21 percent of people do not have an estate plan, while around 50 percent do not have a will, the center says.

“It’s an overwhelming problem,” said Joan Jeffri, founder and director of the Research Center for Arts and Culture. “When artists reach a critical age, they have concerns that their work will end up in a dumpster. We wanted to be able to do something to help them. A resource like this, which allows artists to engage difficult legal issues in a simple way, is a wonderful contribution to existing tools in the field.”

The Elder Artists’ Legal Resource was created in response to artists’ advocates who approached Marcia Sells ’84, associate vice president for program development and initiatives in Columbia University’s Office of Government and Community Affairs, to let her know about their concerns.

“The Office of Government and Community Affairs exists in part to find opportunities for the University to work with our neighbors to solve a problem,” said Sells, who is also associate dean for
The Research Center for Arts and Culture
the Office of Community Outreach and Education in Columbia’s School of the Arts. “The Elder Artists’ Legal Resource helps fill a void.”

The tool was designed based on the feedback of artists from the Research Center for Arts and Culture’s ART CART: SAVING THE LEGACY, a project begun at Columbia and now part of the National Center for Creative Aging in Washington, D.C., and from Westbeth Artists’ Housing, which provides affordable living and working spaces for artists and their families in New York City.

Columbia Law School Clinical Professor Conrad Johnson, co-director of the Lawyering in the Digital Age Clinic with Professor Mary Marsh Zulack and Director of Education Technology Brian Donnelly, said he was surprised to find that an online artists’ estate-planning tool did not exist previously. He said the Elder Artists’ Legal Resource helps fill an important niche—not only for artists, but also for their family and friends.

“This isn’t just for elder artists,” Johnson said. “This is for the people who are going to care for their estates, such as family members and loved ones.”

The website is written in plain language and provides simple templates for creating an inventory. The site offers information for visual artists who want to understand the estate-planning process, gain access to valuable resources, or prepare to engage legal services.

“Time after time, a life’s work ends up in the trash because it’s too complicated or expensive to do anything about it,” Johnson said. “This is a free, one-stop starting point for estate planning.”

The Elder Artists’ Legal Resource website is a unique collaboration among Columbia Law School’s Lawyering in the Digital Age Clinic, the City University of New York Elder Law Clinic, Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts, and the Research Center for Arts and Culture at the National Center for Creative Aging. The collaboration extends work begun by ART CART to document older artists’ work. Columbia Law School’s Kernochan Center for Law, Media and the Arts also collaborated on the project.


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