

Art-O-Mat

By Felicia Kleingeld

ART-O-MAT

The vending machine waited patiently for me to make up my mind as I scanned the pieces of art and descriptions for the third time, making sure I didn't miss one. Most slots were tempting, but one stood out from the rest. I pulled a crisp five-dollar bill from my wallet and fed it to the machine, watching as it swallowed Benjamin Franklin. I pulled the lever and was rewarded with a loud '*clunk*' that vibrated through the quiet museum room. Smiling, I picked up the object. My five dollars were replaced by a piece of unique pocket-sized art. I thanked the gods for the marvel that is the Art-o-mat and for Clark Whittington who invented it.

Do you have any questions? Are you wondering what exactly I'm talking about? Good. Because I have *all* the answers. Today I'll be sharing everything Art-o-Mat-related, from its birth, locations, artist contribution, and even some tips when you decide to go find one in the wild!



© artists in cellophane

WHAT IS AN ART-O-MAT?

An [Art-O-Mat](#) is a “retired” cigarette vending machine that now dispenses art instead of cigarettes. Yes, you heard right. Instead of a box of death sticks, one gets a piece of art. Some artworks are painted blocks of wood, while others are boxes with a piece of art inside. There are a variety of different art mediums from artists all over the world.

WHERE DID IT START?

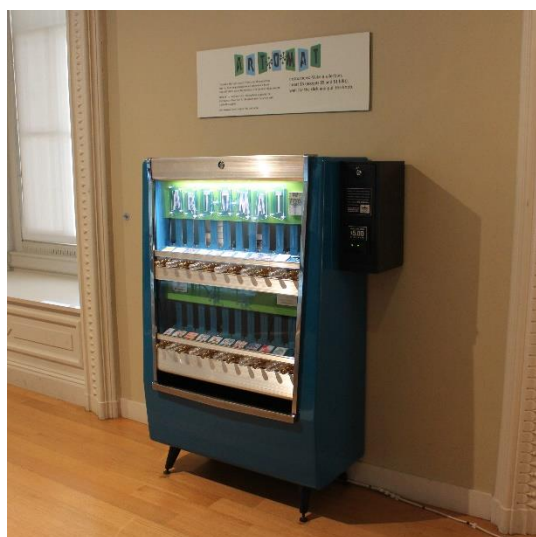
It all started with the Pavlovian theory. This is when something triggers a certain response. Like smelling coffee and then craving it, even if you don't like it. In this case, a friend of Clark Whittington's had a Pavlovian reaction to the crinkling of cellophane. When he heard a snack

being opened, he had the overwhelming craving to have one as well. As most smokers would know, opening cellophane packaging can create the same effect. When a packet is being opened it often triggers the craving to smoke a cigarette, especially if it isn't your packet.

In 1997, Clark Whittington debuted the re-used cigarette machine at a local café in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Inside were wooden blocks mounted with some of his black and white photographs and wrapped in cellophane waiting to be purchased for \$1 per piece. Cynthia Giles, the owner of the café, asked if the machine could stay permanently, and by doing so, started the Art-o-mat revolution. Today the artists of the Art-o-mat are known as Artists in Cellophane (AIC for short). The popularity has grown over the years and there are currently more than 100 Art-o-mats in use. The Art-o-mat has appeared in various magazines, newspapers, and news shows. It's even made an appearance in Ripley's Believe it or Not magazine, Reader's Digest, The Washington Post, ABC News, and the *German Playboy magazine*.

MY ART-O-MAT EXPERIENCE AT THE LUCE CENTER

Art-o-mats are located all over the United States, but the one I keep returning to sits in the Portrait Gallery in Washington DC. Before I get carried away by my Art-o-mat experience let me tell you a bit about this stunning location. The [National Portrait Gallery](#) and [The SAAM](#) (Smithsonian American Art Museum) share an enormous building where an array of important American art is housed. The focus of the Portrait Gallery is (yes you guessed it) portraits of famous Americans throughout history. Actors, poets, scientists... The list goes on and so do the walls inside the building, which are adorned by portrait upon portrait. The gallery also holds all the president's portraits, including the famous and captivating 2018 Barack Obama painting.



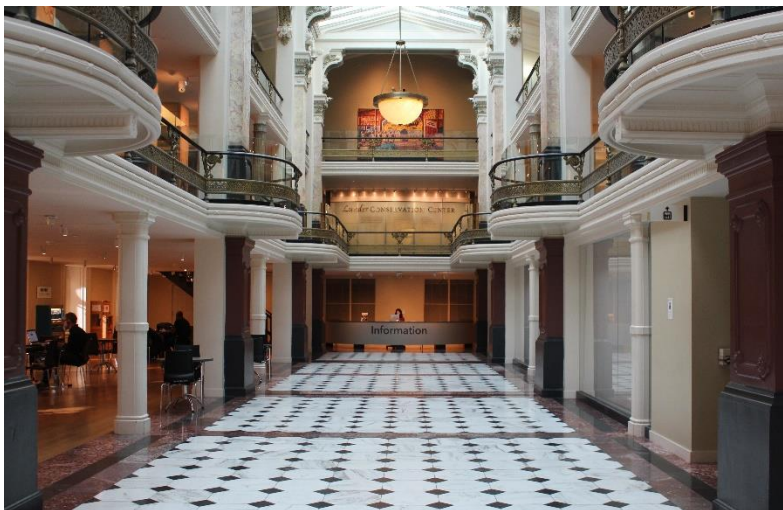
The American Art Museum areas feature a variety of American art, from the Gilded Age art to Folk art. My favorite is the contemporary section which is a giant room with large and flamboyant pieces. Including the famous Electronic Superhighway by [Nam June Paik](#) who is known as “the Father of Video Art.”

On the third floor, you'll find the Luce Foundation Center. The center allows visitors to experience American art in different ways by hosting a variety of activities like meeting local artists, workshops, scavenger hunts, and more. This is also where the Art-o-mat is waiting for art lovers and collectors.

My friend and I set out to find the Art-o-mat, but we were smart about it. We asked at the information desk where we could find it. It honestly might have taken the entire day if we'd just gone searching ourselves. So, with clear directions we made our way to the third floor, passing

notices of where to find Michelle Obama's portrait, passing other visitors, and walking through the beautifully aesthetic Great Hall to arrive at the Luce Center.

I was surprised by the architecture and magnificence of the room, with its staircases leading to rows upon rows of marble busts, the tiled floor, luxurious seating area, and overall inviting ambiance. It didn't appear fit for housing a vending machine of any kind, but when we saw the Art-o-mat it became apparent that there was no better place for it. Buying art in an art museum is canon. We excitedly scanned the artist



names and art descriptions. We placed in our notes, pulled the lever, and waited for our art to drop. It was satisfying and one of those small moments that stick in one's memories for years to come. My piece was by [Tiffany O'Brien](#) who paints all manner of whimsy creepy characters. My block of wood was pale pink with a tiny skull on it (and it's been sitting on my desk ever since).

This specific 1950's vending machine was found near Nashville, Tennessee. It was custom made and the entire process was documented, from where it was picked up, transformed, and finally placed at its new home. It arrived at the Luce Center back in 2010 and hosts 176 artworks at a time by 22 artists.

THE ART



The art inside an Art-o-mat is unique. Each piece is handmade by the artists, whether it be a watercolor painting or a small sculpture. On the vending machine is a piece of paper giving the artist's name, a brief description of what's inside, and usually some color or pattern that serves as a hint. I usually try to peer inside to make sure I've made up my mind. Sometimes the artwork note is vague, and you just go for it. The only certain thing is that you get to pick the artists, the rest is a surprise!

Some art mediums include (but are not limited to): paintings, prints, jewelry, Zines, Watercolors,

Sculptures, mixed media, and collages. There is a good amount of art mediums that are featured, each used differently. These are ones I've seen, read about, or heard of. I don't doubt that there are many more mediums out there. The only way to find out is to go buy some.

ART-O-MAT ARTISTS

Apart from the whole Art-o-mat ritual and the art, the artists play the most important part. Without them, the vending machines would be empty and gather dust in a storage unit. I've used the machine three times now and each time I've been blessed with a different piece of art that I adore. Lucky for me I got to interview two Art-o-mat artists and get their thoughts on the project.

Ronda (known as [Art by Ronda](#)) has a talent for card-making, she hand-makes cards for every occasion. I love cards and was curious to see how cute the tiny cards would be, so she was my obvious choice at the Art-o-mat. I was not disappointed. Inside my cigarette-shaped box were a pretty tag, two small cards, and an envelope. As someone who collects and obsesses over stationary, I love it! Each card was different from the next but still in her beautiful, detailed style.



I reached out to Ronda to get the artist's perspective on the Art-o-mat. She first saw an Art-o-mat back in 2007 in Farmville, Virginia. Afterward, her daughter encouraged her to send in a prototype with her art. She was doing pottery at the time "it was challenging to make something small enough to fit in the box." Since then, she has transitioned to cards. I asked her what she loved most about the project, and she said, "the ability to create LOTS of different cards." I can only imagine how challenging yet satisfying it must be to handcraft tiny cards. A lot of time and effort is placed into each piece, and it is visible when you see the clear-cut lines and precision of the décor. Ronda said that one of her memorable – yet nervous – moments was when someone filmed their Art-o-mat experience and her art was chosen, luckily the person was happy with their selection!



Anne from Art Indulged is another artist whose art I picked in the Art-o-mat. Her pieces are mixed-media sceneries that center around memories and how we perceive them like photographs. For such a small piece of art, it spoke a thousand words (which is ironic, seeing as there are words incorporated into the artwork). One of the main reasons Anne decided to become an Art-o-mat artist was to broaden her horizons in the scope of her work. She often receives emails from people who have chosen her artwork and feels that the project has helped her reach people she otherwise wouldn't have reached.

However, she doesn't believe that it has encouraged anyone to purchase some of her larger pieces - yet.

Her favorite part of the project is the "community of artists from all over the country and world, and all various backgrounds." It inspires her to see what the other artists are up to. She also told me that Art-o-mat sends out quarterly cards that show where art is located and being purchased. This way the artists can see where their art is being sent out. Anne has had the opportunity to purchase one of her artworks from an Art-o-mat. Her work allows her to make her schedule and travel around, so whenever she is on the road, she tries to find an Art-o-mat along the way. Her hometown is Winston-Salem, NC, where the first Art-o-mat was introduced!

ART-O-MAT LOCATIONS

Art-o-mats are located all over the USA and there's even one in Australia and two in Vienna. A lot of the [District Taco restaurants](#) have Art-o-Mats as well. Placing these machines within a restaurant or a café is a great way to entertain customers. Imagine going out for lunch and while you wait for your food to arrive you browse the vending machine and purchase a piece of art. This could also make for a very memorable date. If you are interested in purchasing some art or just to have a unique experience, check out the [location map on the Art-o-Mat](#) website to find one near you!

BECOMING AN ART-O-MAT ARTIST

Art-o-mats aren't just limited to professionals, it's for artists of all levels and backgrounds. Artists can purchase an Art-o-mat prototype which assists them in creating their art with the right materials and dimensions. That way they aren't clueless but rather guided through the process. This prototype is available on the Art-o-Mat website for \$19.99. When the artists' example is complete, they send it in and await feedback. If their art is chosen, they'll need to produce about fifty pieces to start with.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Art-o-mat creates art communities, gives artists a broader platform, and brings art lovers joy. If you have the opportunity to pull an Art-o-mat lever, do so! You'll not only get a unique experience, but also a piece of art to do with as you please. If you're not near one, you can donate to the organization. There are also a variety of videos, pictures, and articles online if you want to find out more. As well as pictures of the entire Art-o-mat collection on the website. If you are lucky enough to be close to one, make sure you have enough money on you!

This article was inspired by the book [111 Places in Washington That You Must Not Miss](#) by Andrea Sieger. For more unique and interesting places in and around Washington DC, be sure to pick up this book. Or if you are located elsewhere and would love to explore your city or plan to

travel somewhere, check out the [111 Places](#) guidebook series for locals and experienced travelers. They might have a book dedicated to the destination you have in mind.
