



# Selling and Displaying Art Made by San Quentin Death Row Inmates

By Maddy Wenig

## ABOUT ME AND BACKGROUND

My interest in criminal justice began after I wrote a paper about recidivism my sophomore year of high school. I learned that we are in a crisis of mass incarceration as there are currently 2.3 million people incarcerated in the United States and 4.6 million people living under probation (Brennan, 2016). As a 16-year-old, at the time, I was unsure how to make a difference. So, I did some research and found a woman named Nicola White living in the U.K. who had a collection of art made by San Quentin Death Row Inmates. San Quentin being only 30 minutes away from where I live, I had the idea to display and sell this art locally. I reached out to her and she happily sent over a 100+ pieces of artwork. Now, I am displaying this work in universities across the nation and selling them on my website, [artworkbehindbars.com](http://artworkbehindbars.com) and my instagram [@artworkbehindbars](https://www.instagram.com/artworkbehindbars). All of the money I make from the art will go directly back to the prisoners (and their families).

## THE PROBLEM: THE FAILED PRISON SYSTEM

- ❖ “Although the U.S is home to only 5 percent of the world’s population, it incarcerates an astounding 22% of the prisoners on the planet” (Brennan, 2016).
- ❖ “Today’s parolee receives a sweat suit unsuitable for a job interview and \$200; out of which is deducted the cost of his bus ticket and decades of devaluation. The parolee, having received no real substance abuse treatment, no serious education or training, no useful mental health counseling, and holding barely enough money for a short stay in a flophouse, is cast back out into the real world to swim, or more likely, sink” (Hartman, 2016).

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- ❖ Scheduled art exhibitions in 2020 at Columbia University, Tulane Law School, George Washington University, Northeastern University, and Stanford Law School.
- ❖ Art Exhibition in 2018 at Menlo School for 4 months.
- ❖ Sold 50+ pieces of art.



## PLANS IN THE FUTURE

- ❖ Have an instagram shop of 1000+ followers.
  - Having famous influencers support and promote my instagram.
- ❖ Curate an exhibit at local high schools.
- ❖ Collaborate with existing art programs: Prison Creative Arts Project, the pARTner project, and The Justice Arts Coalition.



## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

- ❖ Buy or display prisoner art!
- ❖ Become pen-pals with a prisoner
- ❖ Read and spread awareness about Shaka Senghor’s book called *Writing My Wrongs: Life, Death and Redemption in An American Prison*.
- ❖ Contribute to the prison reform organization #cut50 (<https://cut50.squarespace.com/>).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## REFERENCES

Austin, James and Lauren Brooke Eisen. “How Many Americans Are Unnecessarily Incarcerated?” *Brennan Center for Justice*. <http://www.brennancenter.org>

Hartman, Kenneth. “The Trouble With Prison.” Last modified May 2009. <http://counterpunch.org>



“Everyone is so amazed at how quickly I learned to paint, and even myself because I never knew I could paint until I tried it, and I am no longer afraid to use color. I am enjoying every single moment of it. Even at times when I feel frustrated I turn it into a positive by telling myself that it was a learning experience of what not to do when something doesn’t turn out how I would like it to.” - Royal Clark