

A Scam to Avoid
Robb McKenzie

We all love to receive inquiries about our art from potential customers, but when I saw I had received an email from the ‘Contact Me’ page of my web site, I was a bit surprised. Most of us have a contact form on our web site, but no one ever uses them at least not on my web site. This is a variation of the “anniversary” scam. The email was a hotmail.com address from, let’s call him Nate and read:

Hi, I'm interested in your works. Please kindly get back to me so I can make the right selection for purchase. Thank you.

The awkward phrasing “Please kindly....” immediately raised some suspicions, but who wants to ignore a possible commission, so I responded thanking him for his interest in my ceramic works and asking him what pieces interested him. I also referred him to my Etsy page.

He responded:

Hello, Thanks for your quick response. Before I proceed with my choice of selections purchase, I would like to know if you will accept a check payment as means of payment payable to you in advance? At this moment, that is the only option I have right now to pay for the items. Once you receive it and cleared, then, we can proceed to process the order. If this arrangement is okay by you, get back to me. Thanks.

Who doesn’t have a credit card? That was another clue I was being scammed. I told him a check is fine as long as it was from a U.S. bank. He replied asking for the price of four of my works. His email included the photos from my web site. I responded with a price and telling him I would need his ZIP code so I could calculate shipping.

Nate responded with:

Shipping address :
[REDACTED] Greenhall way
[REDACTED] CA. [REDACTED]

*Get to me with your contact address and name to make out the check to you with the final total.
Thanks*

By this time I had already checked for Nate in Facebook and found nothing that could lead to identifying who this person was. So I also Googled his name and found even less, but interestingly enough a page titled “How To Recognize An Art Scam - Agora Gallery - Advice Blog” did pop up, but only because it contained the name “Nathan” and “Rachel” in its text, but no Nathan Araquel. Maybe Saint Catherine (the patron saint of artists) was trying to tell me something. By now I am pretty confident it’s a scam but wanted to see how this all could play out, so I gave him my address. It’s amazing that even when we know something is amiss how long we might hold out hope for a real sale.

His next response was:

*Will you posted. Can you send me your cell to keep you updated prior delivery of the check?
Thanks*

Grammar, grammar, grammar! Now I'm pretty positive I'm getting scammed, but now I feel like I'm kind of vested in this whole thing. However, there was no way he was going to get my personal cell number. So I subscribed to a Google Voice number NOT in my home state, as if that really matter since he already had my home address. The nice thing about Google Voice numbers is they function like any telephone number and you can even use them to receive and send text messages.

His next email:

Yes.I will have mailed out the check to you.

Followed by this really strange one:

Hello, Just a note to let you know I have instructed one of my partners to get the check to you and delivered to your address, when you receive the payment and it clears, I will make arrangement with my mover/shipper for pickup. So, get back to me and confirm you received the check. I have arrangements with my personal movers for pickup of items for me. I wish to conclude this deal in few days and have it picked up. Thank you

Who has partners to get checks delivered or has mover/shipper to pick up something? The box weighed less than seven pounds and the postage was under \$35.00, so why would anyone arrange pickup with their 'personal mover'. Ding, ding, ding, ding!

I received this email

Hello Robb,

I have sent text to your cell number 571-707-4568 and have not acknowledged. Please confirm your cell digits again and reply my text and mail. Confirm you got the check payment. Thanks

I had forgotten to check my new Google number, so I logged into Google Voice to check for text messages. Grammar seems to be a bit of a challenge for Nate.

Hello Robb McKenzie . This is Nathan Araquel that purchased your works. Kindly confirm receipt of the check delivered to you today with me and proceed with the deposit. Once deposited,go ahead and process my order and get back to me. Thanks

[REDACTED] 2464 • Fri 3:29 PM

Hello Robb

[REDACTED] 2464 • Fri 5:12 PM

Hello Robb, do you receive the check?

[REDACTED] 2464 • Fri 7:32 PM

Good morning Robb. Keep me posted when the deposit of the check is completed. Thanks

[REDACTED] 2464 • Sat 11:00 AM



Hello Robb????

[REDACTED] 2464 • Sat 12:59 PM

I responded to his text, telling him the check had not yet arrived. The following Monday I received this text from Nate:

Good morning Robb.

[REDACTED] 2464 • 10:09 AM

August 9, 2021, 2:18 pm
Delivered, Left with Individual
AUSTIN, TX 78750
Your item was delivered to an individual at the address at 2:18 pm on August 9, 2021 in AUSTIN, TX 78750.

The check has been delivered Robb

[REDACTED] 2464 • 3:10 PM



Hello Robb??

[REDACTED] 2464 • 4:02 PM

“Hello Robb”? I think he was anxious for me to respond. When I checked my mail I found a large manila envelope with a ‘USPS Priority Mail Express 1-Day’ delivery label from BASF Corporation in California (the chemical company probably best known for recording tape). Inside the envelope was a check for \$1500; fours time the amount of the commission. As strange as this story already is, it gets stranger; the check is from a fertilizer manufacturer in North Carolina. The check looks real and has all

the security features a corporate check normally has. When I scratched the verification box on the back with a coin a number actually appeared. Even the ‘Heat Sensitive Shield’ on the front disappeared when touched. However, there was one thing wrong with the check. The paper didn’t feel right; it felt too light for a corporate check. Leave it to an artist to intuitively feel the weight of paper. So I looked up the fertilizer company in North Carolina and gave them a call. I could tell it was really in North Carolina when the I heard the sweet southern accent of the lady who answered. I asked for their accounting department and was asked what the call pertained to. I told her I was an artist and received a check for \$1500 written on her company’s account and was inquiring to it authenticity. She politely chuckled and said, “I think it’s a scam”. Bingo! Apparently this wasn’t the first time she had heard something strange was going on with their company checks. I gave her the check number and told her I would be glad to send them the check in case they wanted to investigate its origins or file fraud charges against Nate. She said she would check with their accounting department and let me know.

Back to Nate; I told him I received a check, but it wasn’t from him. He replied:

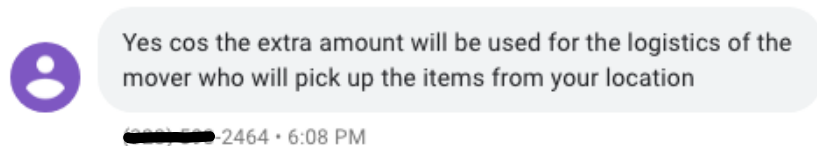


The check you received today is my check .

It came through USPS

[Redacted]-2464 • 5:55 PM

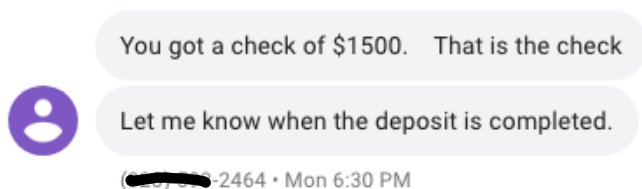
“But it’s for too much money” I texted and he replied:



Yes cos the extra amount will be used for the logistics of the mover who will pick up the items from your location

[Redacted]-2464 • 6:08 PM

I told him I could overnight express for less than what he’s paying a mover. I think his response was a bit snitty.



You got a check of \$1500. That is the check

Let me know when the deposit is completed.

[Redacted]-2464 • Mon 6:30 PM

Knowing this had to end soon I told him I had discussed getting this commission with an artist friend and that she said it sounded like a scam, though she couldn't tell me how. I told him she also said I should ask for his personal check in the exact amount of the transaction. I reminded him I could still ship the items overnight, but it would add around \$100 to the cost.

Twenty-four hours later:



Hello Robb

(903) 509-2464 • 4:32 PM

Hey Robb. Have you deposited the check yet?

(903) 509-2464 • 4:44 PM

I told him to read my last text



What do the email stated? I can't find it

(903) 509-2464 • 5:02 PM

I repeated my previous message adding that I was told not to accept a corporate check from a fertilizer company on the opposite side of the country from where he is at.



Ok



(903) 509-2464 • 5:24 PM

And that was the end.

Sometimes I wish I let it play out a little further to see exactly how the scam worked, but I didn't want to be the one who knowingly deposited a counterfeit check in a bank. I can only guess; after I deposit the check, he would want me to give the amount of the check that was over the commission price to his personal mover in cash. He would also have to act quickly, before the check bounced on the bank and unlikely he had a "mover" in Austin. More likely he would tell me he decided not to use his 'personal mover/shipper' and ask me to mail him a check or the difference or suddenly he would have a Venmo account or worse he would ask for my credit card number. Anyway, had played out it would have ended with me being \$1500 poorer and Nate \$1500 richer.

Deep down I knew it was a scam from the beginning, but I so much wanted it to be a real commission. Scammers know that about artists; we are inherently self-doubting people and always thrilled with the potential of a sale. Sometimes when someone really likes our work we will cast all logic and common sense aside and do it for someone we don't know and have never even seen.

Are we that gullible? No, not really. Everyone wants to be appreciated and maybe artists a little more than most. We put so much time and effort and passion into each of our works, it's nice to hear positive words and dream of the art supplies we could buy. That being said, while trusting people is better than distrusting everybody, it's always good to be a little paranoid. As a former president once said, "Trust

but verify”. Do a little research on Google, FaceBook, and LinkedIn. If you can’t find the person in one of those three places, they likely don’t exist.

If you don’t care about Internet geek stuff, just bypass this paragraph. One more thing you can do, which after being in IT most my life, I should have done from the very beginning. Go and check the IP address of your ‘client’. An IP address is a unique internet address that might help determine if you’re getting scammed. If the email came in from your web page, you have their IP address. Login to your web site and go to the form page entries; the IP address will be in the from data for that specific email. You should be able to just click on the IP address to get detailed information on its origins. Nate’s IP address was 192.252.220.4 which traced to “eels.geekinternet.com.au” which is an IPv4 address owned by Performive LLC located in Los Angeles. That just didn’t look right. Someone’s IP address should be associated with Google Fiber or ATT Service or SBC, or any number of communications companies, not some weird address owed by someone who doesn’t even sound like a communication company. Taking this one step further, I googled Performive LLC came up with a number of possible links. Some links for a legitimate company named Performive, but also a scam alert from Scamalytics for Performive LLC. They apparently anonymize (mask) the real IP address of their users, so they could be anywhere in the world. This was a dead end, but one that confirmed this was a scam.

As odd as it may sound, two days later from the ‘Contact Me’ page of my web site. It was a real sale from a real customer! Trust but verify!

Lessons Learned:

- One mistake I made was giving him my real address. I probably could have arranged for one of the businesses I work with to accept a letter for me.
- I nearly gave him my real phone number. Always use Google Voice or similar voice service when someone you don’t personally know ask for your phone number.

Remember:

- If the “buyer’s” grammar and sentence structure is way off, it’s a scam.
- If the check isn’t for the exact amount agreed upon, do not even go to the bank, it’s a scam.
- If address on the envelope is different than the buyer’s address and/or the check is written on a bank on the other side of the country, it’s a scam.
- If the check just doesn’t feel right or look right, it’s probably a scam.
- If the signature on the check isn’t in the name of your buyer or if it doesn’t look like it was physically signed with a pen, it’s probably a scam.
- If the buyer starts talking about having his “personal movers” pick up the work, unless it’s Elon Musk, it’s a scam.
- If anything changes from the original agreement, it’s probably a scam!
- If it sounds too good to be true, it’s probably a scam.
- Be careful what personal information you divulge.

Resources:

U.S. Justice Department Public Advisory: <https://www.justice.gov/archive/opa/docs/08public-advisory-counterfeit.pdf>

FDIC Consumer News: Beware of Fake Checks:
<https://www.fdic.gov/consumers/consumer/news/august2019.html>

Agora Gallery How To Recognize An Art Scam: <https://www.agora-gallery.com/advice/blog/2017/05/25/how-to-recognize-art-scam/>

Scamalytics: <https://scamalytics.com/ip/isp/performive-llc>

If any CAS members have a question or think they might be getting scammed I will be glad to help where I can. Just email me at rmckenzieART@gmail.com