This summer I was in intern at the Guarisco Gallery in Washington, D.C., for the months of May and June. Founded in 1980, the gallery has two locations: next to the Ritz-Carlton on 22nd Street, and the other next to the Four Seasons on Pennsylvania Avenue. Being located next to main hubs for D.C. visitors, the galleries get lots of foot traffic from people stopping by to look around. In addition to a random stream of visitors, the gallery often has scheduled appointments with clients who come to see new works that may be of interest. I spent most of my time at the 22nd Street location, a larger space with more academic pieces than the contemporary feel of the other gallery.

Guarisco Gallery is one the largest and leading nineteenth and twentieth century galleries worldwide. The inventory contains over 600 works including oil paintings, watercolors, sculpture, and contemporary pieces. The gallery contains major schools from the nineteenth and twentieth century including Romantic, Barbizon, Victorian, Belle Époque, Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, Modern and Contemporary works. The gallery strives to hold art that has great quality, condition, and aesthetic, all while making it affordable for buyers. They recognize that art is an investment, but also that by owning beautiful art, it increases general quality of life.

As an intern at Guarisco Gallery, I had many tasks to keep the gallery running efficiently as possible. I often tended to the files that hold images and information on the art and artist, including price, size, provenance, and artist biography. Keeping the files stocked with information is important so that we could quickly give clients the information they requested about specific works. I was an extra set of hands when pieces needed to be moved around, taken to the other location, or packaged to be sent out to clients. Some paintings required three or more people to take it off the wall and transport it. Although this was stressful to be carrying multi-thousand-dollar paintings, I eventually became more comfortable with handling the art. I also kept the gallery tidy and cleaned the front windows, especially after an event was held in the space the night before. I learned to safely put paintings in their frames, backing them with a
piece of cardboard to protect the canvas from getting poked or punctured from behind. When frames were returned to the gallery after being restored, I often helped to drill the painting back into the frame and then find a good place for it on the wall.

The first big project I worked on allowed me to get to know the art and artists at both locations very quickly. I was creating binders that held images and information about each piece of art at both locations. One big binder went to the smaller space and held images of all the pieces at the other location, so that clients could easily see images of the entire available inventory. I then did the reverse for the other location. Getting to see visuals on paper of each work helped me to identify the pieces on the floor, and after a couple weeks I had a pretty good grasp on the inventory. As well as doing some small day-to-day tasks, I worked for the last couple weeks sending out handwritten notes and catalogues to a list of 200 potential clients. Although this was time consuming and tedious, it showed me how important marketing is in the gallery business.

Other employees at the gallery were willing to show me how they do their job, including the positions of the preparator and curator. I learned how to take photographs of pieces, then edit them to be printed for clients. The preparator at the gallery showed me the importance of lighting in a space, making sure that the beam is directly on the focus of the piece, drawing in the viewer’s attention. The curator explained how he researched art and artists using the many books they keep in the gallery, as well as websites. He showed me how to fill out paperwork for the corrections form, showing any painted additions to the piece, any tears that have been fixed, and often times telling the relative age of the painting by the quality of the paint. One task I had was to research several artists carried in the gallery in order to update their biography about where their pieces have been shown in galleries in museums in the past.

We took field trips to two frame shops where the gallery has their frames gilded and restored. We took a frame to one workshop in order for them to tell us what century the frame was made and how much it is worth compared to a similar frame from a slightly earlier or later period. The other shop we visited is where many frames are sent to be restored if their gilding has chipped or lost luster. We were able to watch the process of two gilding techniques and how to select the karat and shade of gouache to go underneath the gold leaf. Frames often are what
draw a viewer to a piece before the actual painting does, so it was interesting to see how they are created to fit and complement the painting it is holding.

During the final week of my internship we took a field trip to the National Gallery of Art and saw a new exhibit featuring Hubert Robert’s paintings and drawings of scenes of architecture and ancient cities in ruins. The exhibition was new and we were able to meet the women who put the whole show together. We were scheduled to have a tour of the storage facilities, but due to conservation appointments, we were unable to see the space. We had a scenic lunch in the private café on the rooftop and were able to get some insight on what it is like to work in a museum environment versus a gallery.

My internship at Guarisco Gallery has been meaningful and rewarding, I have learned so many things not only about this specific gallery, but also about the business and functions of art galleries in general. I am excited to be going back to Guarisco from November this January this winter as a paid employee after I return from my semester abroad.