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The New Sober-Curious: How Cannabis Drinks Entered the Art World

Our Friends · Thursday, April 23rd, 2026

A gallery opening in Bushwick, a private view in Mayfair, and a warehouse party during Miami Basel. The art on the walls changes. The outfits change. What does not change is that someone, at some point, hands you a drink, and the real work of the evening begins.

But look closer at what is in the glass. The free wine is still there, of course. Somewhere nearby, though, there is often a tall can with restrained typography, cold condensation on matte-finish metal, and something citrus or floral printed small on the label. You take one. You read the back. You realize it is not an alcohol product at all. And the person who handed it to you, a gallerist in her late thirties, is quietly having one too.

When the bar goes dry

Something has shifted in the past five years, and art spaces were one of the first places to notice.

According to Gallup's 2025 Consumption Habits survey, **only 54% of Americans now say they drink alcohol**, the lowest rate in nearly ninety years of tracking. The drop is sharpest among adults under 35, whose drinking rate fell from 59% in 2023 to 50% today. Roughly two-thirds of young adults now believe even moderate drinking is harmful, a figure that has nearly doubled since 2018. The data is so consistent across age brackets and regions that it is impossible to read it as anything other than a durable cultural change.

What is interesting is that this shift is not really being met with sobriety. The sober-curious movement, as it has come to be called, is less about abstinence than about substitution. People want something that mimics the social effects of wine but not its morning-after effects.

Galleries and museums were always going to feel this first. The opening reception, the vernissage, and the after-party. These are events built around the idea that a drink in your hand makes it easier to stand in front of a painting next to a stranger and say something honest. When the crowd starts drinking less, a basic question emerges. What takes the place of the open bar without changing the temperature of the room?

Why cannabis drinks, specifically

Edibles, for all their recent popularity, are not quite right for a gallery. A 10 mg gummy has an unpredictable onset of 45 minutes to two hours, which is not the timing you want during a

conversation with a collector about a painting you are trying to sell. Smoking is not an option indoors. Vapes feel private, almost furtive, which is exactly the wrong register for a social event. What the art world needed was something visible, social, and timed roughly to the arc of an opening.

Availability is what accelerated adoption. For several years, hemp-derived THC beverages were legal across most of the country under a provision of the 2018 Farm Bill, which moved them out of dispensary-only status and into gas stations, liquor stores, grocery coolers, and chain retailers like Target and Total Wine. A search for **THC seltzers near me** now pulls up results in places that had no legal cannabis infrastructure three years ago, including package stores in the Carolinas, gourmet markets in Georgia, and the beverage aisle of your neighborhood Whole Foods. Whatever the future of the federal rules looks like, this wave of mainstreaming has already shifted the category.

Cannabis beverages happened to match the brief almost exactly. According to BDSA Consumer Insights, 42% of edible consumers in adult-use states prefer a dosage of 10 mg THC or less per occasion, with **2.5 to 5 mg being the most common choice**. That is microdose territory. It's sufficient to notice, but not so much that it disrupts a conversation about a Julie Mehretu painting. Nano-emulsification technology has also pulled on-set time down to roughly 15 to 20 minutes, bringing it close to the pace of a glass of wine.

The art world's long relationship with altered states

It is worth remembering that the art world has never been sober.

The studio-as-party-space goes back at least to Picasso's Montmartre, and by the time Andy Warhol was running the Silver Factory in the 1960s, the idea of the art venue as a social experiment was fully established. Looking at a **full retrospective of Warhol's work** like the one SFMOMA mounted in 2019, it is striking how much of that era's output came out of spaces where work, socializing, and altered states ran together without clear borders. The Factory was a studio, a salon, a film set, and a social scene at the same time, and the art that came out of it was shaped by that overlap.

What is different now is not that artists and their audiences use substances. It is that the substance on offer has changed shape. Where the 1960s gallery crowd had pills and champagne, the 1980s had cocaine and dive bars, and the 2000s had natural wine and small-batch spirits, the 2020s crowd has a can with 5 mg of THC and a splash of bitter orange.

The shift carries cultural implications worth noticing. Cannabis, despite its new commercial packaging, still carries an association with creative introspection that alcohol never quite had. Alcohol loosens the tongue. A low dose of THC tends to slow it down, pull focus inward, and widen the visual field. In a room full of paintings, that is not incidental. It is arguably closer to the mental state the artist was trying to induce in the first place.

What is actually in the glass

The category itself is more varied than people assume. Cannabis drinks are not a single product, and the differences between them matter more than the packaging would suggest. The formats on offer have been sorted into a few clear categories:

- Sparkling THC seltzers at 2 to 10 mg per can, designed as direct alcohol substitutes and sold in

liquor stores and grocery coolers

- CBD-forward sodas and tonics aimed at the wellness market, with no psychoactive effect and a heavier functional-beverage positioning
- Hemp-derived Delta-9 products that ship across state lines where local law permits. This is what expanded the category's national footprint.
- Dispensary-only beverages reaching 50 to 100 mg per bottle, positioned for experienced consumers and usually not meant to be finished in one sitting

Cannabis drinks now include sparkling THC seltzers at 2 to 10 mg per can, CBD-forward sodas and tonics aimed at the wellness market, hemp-derived Delta-9 products that ship across state lines where local law permits, and higher-dose dispensary-only beverages reaching 50 to 100 mg per bottle. The **global cannabis beverage market** is projected to grow sharply over the next decade as legalization expands and formulation improves, with the low-dose social format growing fastest. That growth is concentrated precisely in the slot alcohol is vacating: the weeknight drink, the opening, the dinner party, and the second glass you would not quite have.

Formulation matters more than it seems. Early cannabis drinks suffered from off-tastes, slow onset, and unreliable dosing. The current generation uses water-soluble emulsification to get cannabinoids into suspension without oil slicks or vegetal flavor, and the best products taste like any other craft seltzer. The experience of drinking one at a gallery opening is, at least for the first fifteen minutes, indistinguishable from drinking a La Croix. You only remember what you were drinking after standing in front of a painting for a while.

Dosing is the other quiet revolution. A 2.5 mg can is a genuinely social product. You can drink two drinks over the course of an hour and still be able to drive home after leaving the gallery. A 10 mg can is closer in effect to a glass of wine. The grammar of the category is starting to stabilize around those two settings, which is what a functional beverage industry needs to mature.

The social contract of the opening

What all of this amounts to, in practice, is a quiet renegotiation of what an art event is for.

The open bar was never really about drinking. It was about giving people a reason to stay in a room with art and strangers long enough for something to happen. A conversation, a sale, an idea, a relationship. If the crowd no longer wants alcohol, the function has to migrate elsewhere. Cannabis drinks fit surprisingly comfortably into the same **social rituals** that have long shaped cannabis subcultures.

Galleries that have leaned into this trend have done it carefully. Nobody is branding their openings as cannabis events, and nobody should. The drinks appear alongside wine, sparkling water, and occasionally mezcal, offered as one option among several. The branding is understated, the dosing is low, and the messaging is not about getting anybody high. It is about offering something that lets guests participate in the social ritual of the evening without committing to the physiological one.

This is the most functional form of sober-curiosity: not a pledge, not a movement, but simply a slightly different option available.

There is also a generational element worth naming. Younger artists and gallerists are more likely to have grown up with cannabis as a normalized consumer product and less likely to have grown up with drinking as a rite of passage. For them, the question is not whether cannabis belongs in a

professional creative setting. The question is the dose, flavor profile, and if the packaging works at the bar.

What it changes

None of this means alcohol is leaving the gallery. Wine will always be there. The natural wine crowd is not going anywhere, and certain kinds of art events will continue to run on champagne specifically because they are meant to feel like champagne evenings. What is changing is that the gallery bar is becoming pluralistic in a way it has not been before. You can have wine if you want wine, sparkling water if you want sparkling water, or a low-dose THC seltzer if you want a version of the evening that ends in a different place than your usual one.

That plural bar is probably a better reflection of what contemporary art actually looks at than the single-beverage version ever was. Art right now is about multiplicity, about different ways of seeing the same room. It is about the overlap of rituals, states of attention, and what is sold as experience and what is lived as one. The drinks, finally, are catching up.

Photo: Elsa Olofsson via Pexels

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