

'Shazam for art', the app designed to bring culture to the masses

new

Magnus can, in most cases, identify a painting, tell you the artist and the cost. Its creator hopes it will make art feel more attainable




Magnus Resch trying out his app in a gallery in New York

JENNIFER S. ALTMAN FOR THE TIMES



Will Pavia, New York

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We are in a Soho art gallery in New York hung with large paintings that show the shadow of a woman on a wall, framed in the bright light cast by a window. Magnus Resch pulls out his phone and calls up the app that he describes as “the Shazam of art”.

“Let’s hope it works,” he says.

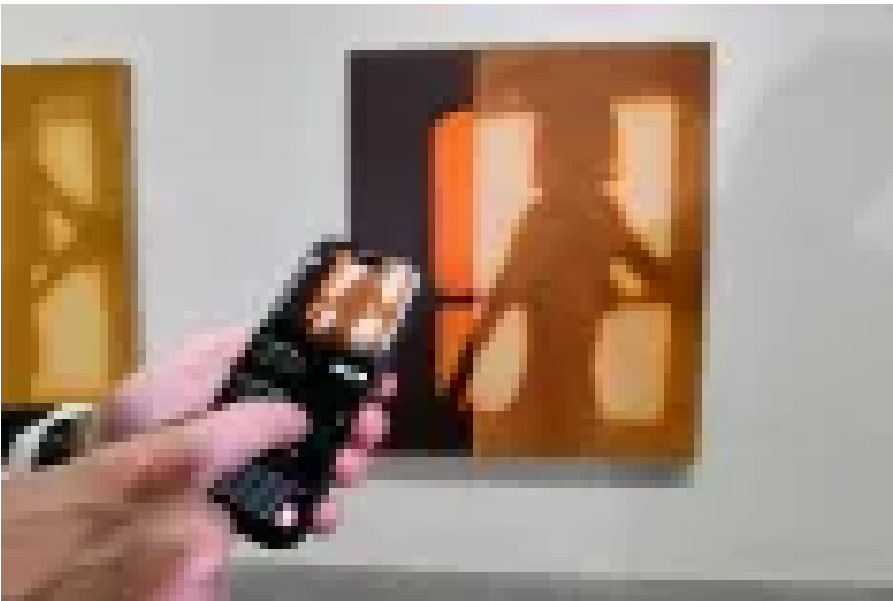
Just as Shazam can recognise a song, Resch’s app is supposed to be capable of identifying a work of art, and telling you its price, drawing on 15 years of sales data. Galleries can be strangely reticent to sully the air with a price, when you ask for one.

“They say: ‘What’s your name? Let me call our director,’” says Resch, 41, an economist who lectures at Yale. He believes that this lack of transparency is the art market’s greatest flaw, holding back large numbers of potential buyers. It is one he hopes to fix using his app called Magnus.

The app, which is free for the time being, takes a photograph of the painting before us. Then a pulsing mosaic of red dots appears over this image and Magnus, the app, announces that it is “searching millions of artworks”.

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A few seconds later it tells us that this is *Suspending Time 5*, by the Cornish artist Jess Allen. It tells us the painting has already been sold by this gallery, Nino Mier, for \$34,500.



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Then it lists paintings from the same series that are being offered at the same price, and several similar but smaller paintings that were offered last autumn at a gallery in Mayfair for £9,700.

“This always makes me happy, seeing comparable prices,” Resch says, scrolling through the list. “You can immediately see comparisons with prices of other galleries.”

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Magnus is powered by what Resch says is the largest art price database in the world, which has more than ten million prices. “There is no other database in the world that gives you this,” he says, proudly.

Resch grew up in [Munich](#) and went to university in Switzerland, where, to fund his studies, he co-founded “a small gallery, selling artists who I knew”. He transferred to Harvard to finish his degree and completed postgraduate studies in London, Switzerland and Hong Kong, becoming an economist focused on the art market.

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By 2018, he had built up a dataset of art exhibitions, sales and price quotes from nearly a million exhibitions in thousands of galleries, museums and auction houses. The data came from 143 countries, over 36 years, according to a paper published in *Science* that drew on it to show that artists who were quickly granted shows at prestigious institutions were far more likely to continue working than those whose first shows were at lesser known galleries.



The Nino Mier Gallery

The idea has attracted investors including the actor Leonardo DiCaprio, he says. “He’s a big art collector.” But early versions did not work. “The technology wasn’t there yet,” he says. He is now more confident.

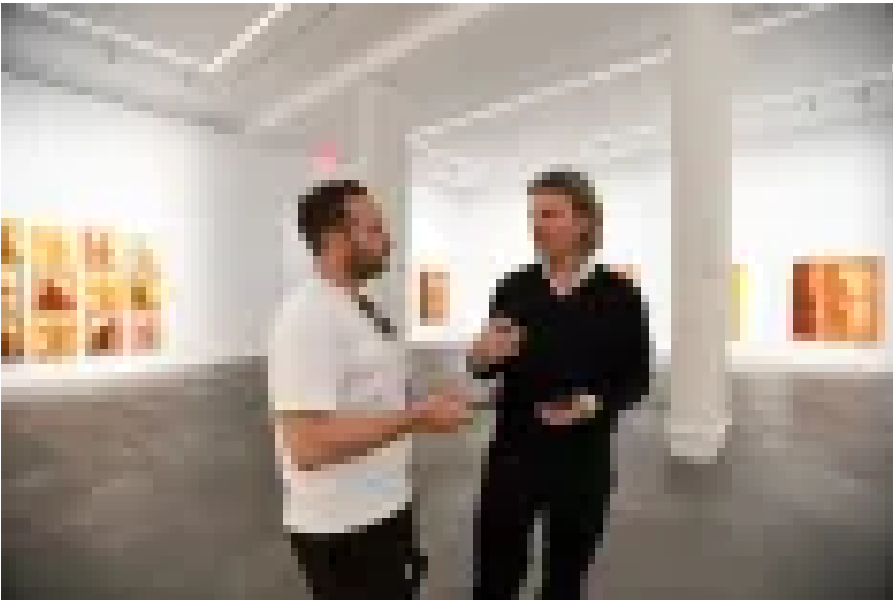
A slow launch of the free app began this month, for users who had been given a password, and Resch began approaching people in galleries to show them how it works, in videos he posted on Instagram.

“We have 4,000 people on the wait list,” says Resch. “This is really word of mouth. I probably get 30 messages a day from people asking me for a password. People approach me on the street.”

As well as photographing an art work, users can load a picture of one for Magnus to identify, and the most “Magnused” work initially was [the Mona Lisa](#): a painting that is easy to identify and almost impossible to price. Resch recorded a video message that pops up whenever anyone attempts to Magnus *Mona Lisa*. “The one work that the entire world knows and you are using it to test my app,” he says. “Come on! You can do so much better.”

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As we are busy trying it out on the paintings in the Nino Mier Gallery, an artist and architect from Geneva named Matthieu Rapin, 34, steps in to look at them. He is never sure how to price art, he says. "Even as an artist, it's quite hard to know." He looks at the Jess Allen paintings. "I love these ones," he says. "They would be big for my living room."



Resch explaining how it works to Matthieu Rapin

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Rapin has sold a few collages to friends. He pulls up one from his Instagram page: a phrase from a novel, printed in large red letters over pages of black and white text.

The app does not recognise it, but offers some similar pieces by other artists, including one by [William Kentridge](#). "Look at this," says Resch, after we have stepped out of the gallery onto the street. "It's so similar. It's a useful tool for artists in the process of making their work, to see similar pieces."

Resch leads the way to the Peter Freeman gallery on the next block, which is showing some minimalist sculptures. "Historically, when we first launched it, it couldn't recognise sculptures," he says, and as soon as we step into the gallery you can understand why.

One of the sculptures is a series of nine stainless steel rods laid out horizontally like railway sleepers. It runs along the floor between two metal pillars, that seem to be structural to the building, rather than part of the artwork, but I'm not sure how the app will know. I'm a little unsure. I have by this point asked Resch about the large and mottled square block of tin on one wall and he has assured me that it is not an artwork but just a very large door.

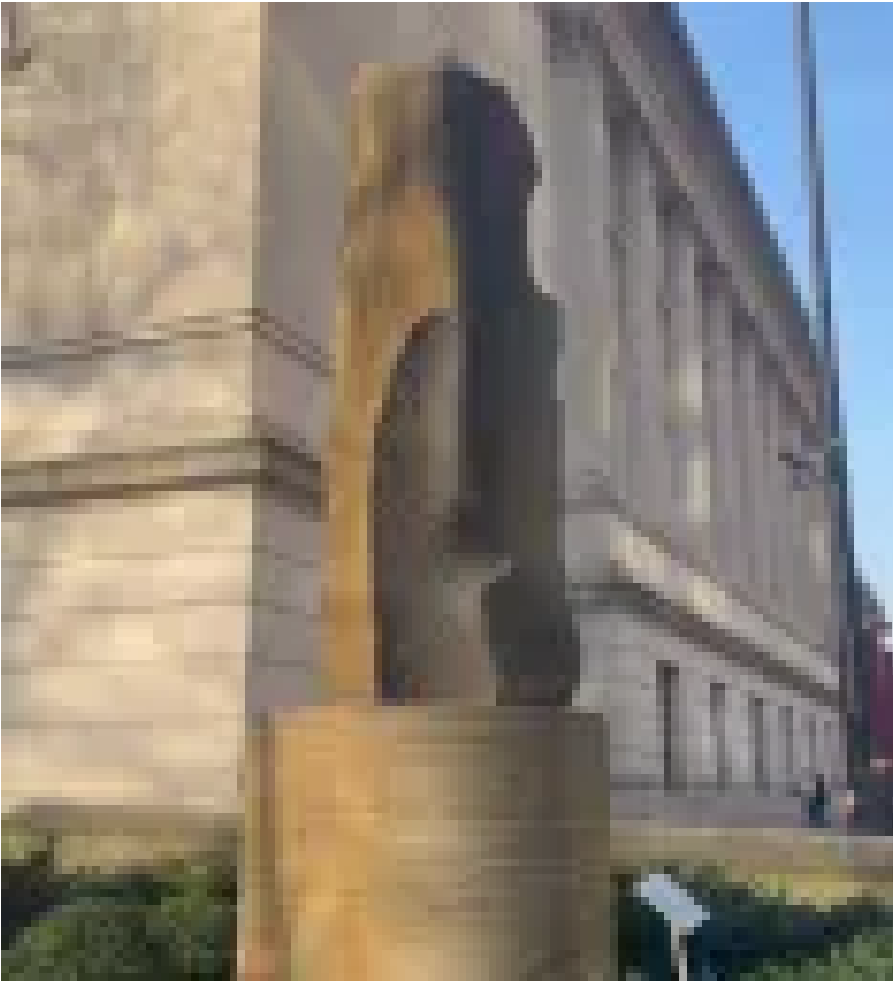
The Magnus app ponders the rods and reaches a conclusion. It is *Large Rod Series: Circle/Rectangle 5, 7, 9, 11, 13*. “This is wild!” Resch exclaims. “This never worked before!”



The work costs \$3.75 million, according to the app. It also shows the “price history”: that it was priced at \$200,000 at Christies, in 2005, then offered for \$4.25 million at Art Basel in Paris last year.

There is a temptation to bowl through [the Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), Magnusing everything in sight, and I do this after bidding goodbye to Resch. Naturally, it struggles in the antiquities section.

“A powerful bronze sculpture of a muscular figure exuding strength and confidence, embodying classical ideals of beauty,” is the best it can do with a statue from ancient Greece, though in fairness, the Met does not know the artist either. Magnus does identify various Picassos and Cezannes and an abstract sculpture by Isamu Noguchi that stands outside the Met, though as these pieces are gifts and bequests rather than artwork offered for sale in a gallery recently, it cannot give you a price.



Isamu Noguchi's sculpture

Why did Resch give the app his first name? He shrugs. “Larry Gagosian, David Zwirner, Peter Freeman, Nino Mien,” he says, mentioning galleries named after their owners. “Art requires a human exchange. I wanted it to be less abstract. Over the years, people have come to know me, Magnus, as the art guy.”

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In the galleries it is designed for, Resch believes his app could help to sell a lot more art. “You have 80,000 people going to Art Basel,” he says. “Less than a thousand people are buying. I would argue that 20,000 of them have the

financial means to buy a work for \$15,000.”

Perhaps they would if they could immediately see the prices, and what similar pieces sold for. “I want all of them to have it,” he says, pointing at a party of five we see stepping into one of the galleries. “I’m trying to make everything a lot more accessible.”