

how to sell your ceramic artwork through galleries



a guide for
ceramic artists

How to Sell Your Ceramic Artwork Through Galleries

A Guide for Ceramic Artists

If you are at a point in your ceramic art career where you'd like to start selling your work, **How to Sell Your Ceramic Artwork Through Galleries: A Guide for Ceramic Artists** will help take the fear out of approaching galleries. It's all about knowledge, and understanding that a gallery and a ceramic artist must work together in order for either to be successful. **How to Sell Your Ceramic Artwork Through Galleries** includes the gallery perspective, so that you hear directly from the source what they want and how they approach a relationship with an artist.

Ceramic Gallery Owners on Marketing, Pricing, Selling, and Working Together

By Marilyn Anthony

It takes two to make a successful relationship, whether personal or professional, and selling ceramic artwork is no exception. Insights from the ceramic art gallery side of this relationship can help you make better decisions from your side as a ceramic artist.



Approaching Ceramic Arts Galleries: The Right Kind at the Right Time

By Frank James Fisher

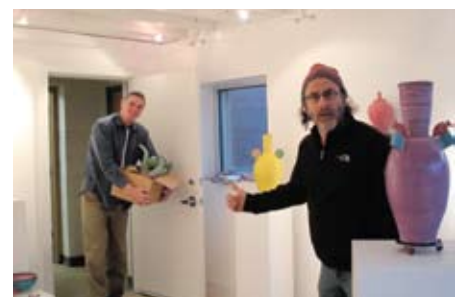
When it comes to selling your ceramic artwork, there are more facets than just having good work. Ceramic artists need a gallery that is a good fit for the kind of work they make. Conceptual sculpture probably wouldn't be the best fit for a pottery gallery. You also need to treat a gallery as you would expect to be treated—as a partner on equal footing.



What Galleries Want from Ceramic Artists

By Annie Chrietberg

Sometimes, you just don't know what you don't know. What you believe to be a novel and interesting way to promote your ceramic artwork could very well spoil your chances of gaining gallery representation. But if you keep a few simple rules of etiquette in mind and let them guide your approach to a gallery, you stand a good chance of avoiding pitfalls and ensuring the best possible outcome.



Ceramic Gallery Owners on Marketing, Pricing, Selling, and Working Together

by Marilyn Anthony

Functional potters increasingly sell their work directly through group studio sales, kiln openings, and websites. Has this altered the relationship between galleries and ceramists? We asked some notable crafts galleries and nonprofit exhibition spaces to discuss their roles and goals in relation to functional clay artists.

All the gallerists praised potters' direct sales for promoting both revenue and understanding. Former gallery owner Betty Bryden (Endless Mountains Council of the Arts [EMCA], Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania) says she recognizes the need for artists to cultivate their own retail options, since there are fewer galleries than ever before.

For Leslie Ferrin (Ferrin Gallery, Pittsfield, Massachusetts), the benefits go beyond financial transactions. "Direct sales from the potter are a very good thing for collectors to experience," she explains. "It creates the context and brings home what the work is about by seeing the studio, the kiln, and the artist's process."

Gallerists acknowledge that participation in a show requires unpaid work for the potters (packing, shipping, providing collateral materials) and that gallery sales may yield craftspeople less profit per item. "I know it's hard to send me 25 pots and make half the money, but if you ship me pots and get paid in 30 days,

AKAR, (taken from the Sanskrit language meaning "Form, Shape, Image") in Iowa City, Iowa, recently moved to a bigger location, www.akardesign.com.





Though the Endless Mountains Council of the Arts (EMCA) in Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania, started in 1995, it wasn't until 1999 that the gallery was able to open, <http://emca.emcs.net>.

that can't be a bad thing," says Tracy Cass (Vessel Gallery, Huntingdon, Pennsylvania).

However, there are limits to what a craftsperson can achieve if they only do direct sales; and there are advantages to nurturing a gallery connection. Ferrin frames this as a fundamental decision about a potter's career. "You have to define what your goals are—to create a living in the simplest way, or to develop a national reputation by placing your work in major collections," she says. "By selling locally on your own, you are not likely to achieve the goal of inclusion in public and private collections."

Having a show can build name recognition, enhance reputation and touch a new audience. But breaking into the gallery scene is often quite difficult. Gallerists agree that a group show lowers the risk while the gallery gets acquainted with a new artist and tests audience response to their work. Emerging artists gain credibility by having their work placed alongside pots from established artists. Sanjay Jani (AKAR, Iowa City, Iowa) especially likes the group dynamic, observing, "Having lots of good artists reinforces each other's work and demonstrates the power of the human imagination. It is amazing to see how many crazy things people can do with just clay, glazing, and firing."



Earth and Fire, Herndon, Virginia, opened in 2001, and then in 2003 moved to a larger, more central location in Vienna, Virginia, www.earthandfiregallery.com.

David Cohen (former director of Contemporary Crafts Museum & Gallery, Portland, Oregon) uses exhibitions to “build community around the arts and artist by creating a time to get together, to celebrate and to recognize excellence.”

Bryden says, “In the nonprofit world, we can mount an exhibition for exposure and not have to make money from it. You can stick your neck out more when the purpose is to promote the arts and artists without worrying if they will sell . . . our message is to identify this work as important.”

Unlike nonprofits, selling is essential to a for-profit gallery’s existence. Ferrin says, “Selling out helps—and it’s nice to come out of a show with a waiting list for pieces.”

Beth Wiley (Earth and Fire, Vienna, Virginia) further explains that, “I’m not saying I’m doing this for the money any more than the potters are, but the gallery has to be commercially viable and that means selling pots.”

AKAR provides a stunning example of how a gallery can build new audiences. AKAR now sells only 5–10% of its display pots in the gallery and 90–95% over the website, where sales have increased twenty-fold in recent years. Jani attributes AKAR’s phenomenal web sales to “old-fashioned marketing,” noting that his customers feel comfortable buying from a photo because they are already familiar with the artists.

Part of the benefit galleries bring to artists is advice on pricing. Ferrin cautions that by “selling work themselves and keeping the prices low, artists can create a self-perpetuating

problem. An artist has to ask themselves how committed they are to producing utilitarian work. It may not be realistic over a 30–40-year career. Each person answers this in a different way. We have to set prices high enough to service the business side of the gallery.”

Wiley sees the pottery pricing challenge in comparison to other crafts. “Functional pottery is the Rodney Dangerfield of ceramics,” she says. “When people ask why is a mug \$20, I say the real question is, why isn’t it \$200?”

Jani makes a compelling argument for higher prices, explaining to buyers that, “What you are paying for in a Dick Lehman or Peter Pinnell pot is not just the pot—it’s for the leadership they’ve shown, in perfecting technique and influencing their peers.”

Jani recounts that three years ago he thought it was “normal” to sell a cup for \$30. Recently, AKAR sold a Don Reitz cup for \$600. But he says success is less about the money and more about “pushing the limits in all directions . . . the joy of watching artists push form and function; [It’s about] our chance to educate and to succeed in developing an audience for great pots.” Still, he respects the preference of some potters, like Iowa City potter Clary Illian, to maintain deliberately low prices. “I would not tell these potters to increase their prices. What we all try to do is be happy with what we do.”

The gallerists suggested different levels of artist involvement to make a show successful. Everyone wants a great image for mailings and a strong body of work for display.

The Contemporary Crafts Museum & Gallery in Portland, Oregon, began its career as a ceramics studio in 1937.



Ferrin feels that handling the business side for the artists is one of the benefits a gallery provides, by “. . . preserving the artists’ time for creative purposes. We try to spare them anything that isn’t in the creative realm.”

Bryden, Cass, and Wiley feel that the artists’ presence contributes to a show’s success. “Talking to the artist can make a difference to people in how they see the work and understand it,” says Bryden.

All of the gallerists—a few of whom are former potters—have ambitions that transcend revenue generation. They want to spread their passion for clay by creating a welcoming place that brings people together with great pots. Patience is important along with the recognition that the gallery must be there for customers until they are ready to participate. “It takes time for people to come in to see the work, learn about it, absorb it and have a reason to buy,” says Cass. Without artists, galleries couldn’t exist, but without an interested audience, they wouldn’t exist either.

Cultivating the next generation of collectors is on everyone’s mind. Believing that collecting begins with understanding, Cohen feels education is central to the success of nonprofits and galleries. “Commercial galleries are really good at customer service; namely sharing information about the artists, their materials, and processes. . . . The more people can identify with the artist, the more connected they’re going to be.” He wants to challenge our cultural habit of “. . . buying off the shelf without ever wondering how the object got on the shelf.”

Cass assures first-time customers new to functional pots, “If you buy that you’ll have it your whole life. Anything you’d buy from a department store you’ll just get rid of at some point.”

While galleries and nonprofits have differing missions, they share a concern for advancing the future of the arts and artists. Bryden works with EMCA to “expose the community to the arts, do interesting things throughout



Top: Founded by potters, Ferrin Gallery opened its doors in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1979. From 1999–2002, they were an online-only gallery with plans to relocate in 2002. In 2004, the gallery moved to a larger space in Lenox, Massachusetts, www.ferringallery.com.

Bottom: Vessel Gallery, Huntingdon, Pennsylvania.

the region, and draw attention to the talent that is at work here,” while Cohen asks his organization “to dream about what we could and should be, and what Portland wants and needs . . . while we work to raise the prominence of artists in our culture, because that is the way to change the world.”

AKAR’s Jani wistfully looks for the day when presidential debates include a discussion of art, and observes, “As a culture we don’t do nearly enough to educate our children about the importance of art in everyday life.”

Still Ferrin is hopeful. “Many collectors are aging and deaccessioning their collections, but we don’t see collecting coming to an end. We’re selling to new clients and many are filling in their collections with early works from private collections, so I’m optimistic.”

Approaching Galleries: The Right Kind at the Right Time

by Frank James Fisher

When an artist is ready to begin selling his or her art, approaching a gallery is a logical first step. But establishing the first gallery relationship can be both mysterious and intimidating. The possibility of rejection by a gallery director can be emotionally terrifying, if not paralyzing. Fortunately, the review and judgment process is not as daunting a challenge if you think of it as a business transaction. It can even be a process that you can somewhat predict and control.

It's Just Business

As artists, we believe that art is a higher calling, that art has the power to move people's souls, that art is a window to the human spirit, and so on. I too believe all these are true. But if you are going to try to make a living from selling your work, you must also look at it as a product to be sold. That is exactly how a gallery will be considering new art. If a gallery feels their patrons will purchase your product, then the gallery will feature it.

Each gallery has studied their marketplace and has an understanding of why consumers come to them to purchase art. When a consumer visits that gallery, they expect to view artwork that meets a level of aesthetic beauty and artistic craftsmanship, and is within a certain price range.



Whenever possible, I bring examples of my work to the gallery rather than slides or photographs.

You are an artist. You manufacture artistic products for the consumer. The gallery is your sales force and retail store front. Your challenge is to find a gallery that is in contact with a consumer who will want to buy your product. It's all just business.

Gallery Types

Galleries fall into two basic categories: the nonprofit and the commercial retail gallery. Within these two main categories are a variety of different business models.

Nonprofit galleries generally aim to promote the arts in the community, but they don't all operate in the same way. Some nonprofit galleries are associated with member-based guilds or co-ops. At some of these organizations, paying membership dues earns artists a place in member exhibitions or a spot on the shelves if the organization has a storefront. Other member-based organizations have a more competitive process for participation in exhibitions, so your membership fee is not a guarantee that you will be featured in gallery shows. While these types of nonprofit galleries may not "represent" or promote you as an individual artist, they do promote the exhibitions and community shows in which your art can be seen and purchased.

The commercial retail gallery operates differently. It is a symbiotic business relationship. Once you are accepted as a "represented artist," you have made a commitment to provide that gallery with your artwork on a regular basis. They have also made a commitment to promote and sell your artwork through their gallery.

Getting in

Getting representation by a commercial gallery is the real challenge an artist faces. The first step is to find the appropriate gallery for your work: a gallery that matches your artistic style. The best way to evaluate whether a gallery is right for your artwork is to visit it as a consumer. Stroll through to compare the quality and style of art on display. Does the gallery sell ceramics? How does your pricing fit in? Would your prices be too high? Or too low? Keep in mind that standard gallery pricing dictates that half the

retail price goes to the gallery and half to the artist. This is actually a fair split considering the overhead a gallery must pay regardless of how sales have been.

If your work appears to fit in nicely with the gallery's list of artists, it could be a potential candidate for you. If you throw beautiful functional tea sets, but the gallery only exhibits nonfunctional abstract sculpture, you are probably in the wrong place. On the other hand, if the gallery already has an artist who produces from a specific creative vein, they might not want another similar artist.

The Tête à Tête

After researching galleries and finding one that has potential, it is time to talk with the gallery. I always make first contact in person. I like to measure the staff's reaction, and I can't accomplish this over the phone or email. I pick a quiet time of the day so I don't keep the staff from performing their jobs. I begin by introducing myself as a ceramist who would like to sell my work through their gallery. I ask who I should contact at the gallery and when is the best time to call to arrange a meeting. Typically you'll need to meet with the owner. During the initial conversation, I evaluate how helpful the staff is with my inquiry. A warm reception from the staff and an established protocol for inquiries such as mine are positive signs that the gallery operates in a businesslike manner. If your inquiry receives an off-hand answer or you are told that they are not interested in adding artists, then politely head for the door.

After your visit, call to set up an appointment when it is convenient for the gallery owner. Meeting in the gallery is preferred over meeting at your studio. It would take me two weeks to whip my studio into shape and even then, it is still a clay studio. If you can, bring the artwork you plan to sell and let it sell itself in the gallery setting. The gallery owner will be able to evaluate the work and how well it fits in with other artists' work.

Sometimes the owner/director may not want to meet face to face. His or her schedule (or preference) forces them to review your work privately. I prefer to leave a few pieces of my work for review instead of slides or digital images. I like to let them see and evaluate the real thing.

To accompany my work, I prepare several documents. First, a concise and straightforward artist statement. This is the information the staff will repeat to interested patrons, so describe your art in real terms that people can remember and repeat. I also bring my resumé and a list of the artwork I've brought to review with anticipated retail prices. When I drop work off I bring two copies of the inventory list. The second copy will be signed by the gallery as a receipt of the goods I left behind.

The Verdict

The gallery may or may not select your work, but even a No can be a good experience. You've made new contacts and established yourself as a local artist. Be sure to ask why the gallery declined; it may not be your artwork. They may even recommend another gallery or make a call on your behalf. Either way, it is important to connect with a gallery that fits you as an artist and a business person. A few bumps in the road, are just part of expanding your art network.



Attending local exhibitions is a great way to check out local galleries and fellow artists, but openings are not the time to approach a gallery about selling your work.



Before approaching a gallery, it is a good idea to visit as a consumer to see if it is the right fit for you and your work.

I asked representatives of two noteworthy galleries in Michigan what advice they would give aspiring artists when approaching galleries. They kindly offered the following.

DAN GRASCHUCK, DETROIT ARTISTS MARKET
www.detroitartistsmarket.org

A community gallery has a lot to offer an artist. There are resources and support for new and experienced artists. You can become active in the gallery, meet other artists and even have a say in how the gallery operates. I recommend to any new artist that they volunteer to work an event and see first-hand what is selling. This gives them an idea of how the public views art. Artists need to be aware of pricing too. This can be a difficult decision, but it may also be the critical difference to a browsing customer. You may even want to price a little lower and establish yourself in an event.

GARY GALVIN, CHELSEA GALLERY
www.chelsea-gallery.com

Artists should spend time reviewing their art before coming into the gallery. Bring in only a few pieces, maybe six or seven at the most. Be sure it is recent work, of professional quality and the type of work you will be producing. The work should be finished and ready to display. We look at each artist as an investment. We provide the location, a relaxed gallery environment, a sales force, and our reputation as a quality art dealer. In return we would like the best quality work on a regular basis, information updates, occasional visits, and, of course, loyalty. If we are having an opening, we hope all our artists will be present. We believe the gallery and the artist should be a dedicated team.

What Galleries Want from Ceramic Artists

by Annie Chrietberg

Once your skills are developed, your work is conveying the intended ideas, and you've got a good body of work, how do you find a venue to sell what you've made? The place where art and money meet is a strange one indeed, and of the many places and ways to sell pots and sculpture, the gallery relationship can seem the most mysterious. Approaching a gallery can be tricky for both new and established artists, and since gallery owners are people too, their preferences for interaction can be as diverse as their tastes. Not knowing all the answers, I asked some respected gallery owners to pass on a little guidance for the uninitiated about the artist/gallery relationship.

Scoping It Out

Get out and attend galleries and receptions to see what is being shown. That doesn't mean emulate someone else's work, but what you should notice is how work in a show relates to and presents itself, then imagine your work in a similar setting. Are your pieces ready to expose themselves on pedestals? Can they hold their own?

If you think so, and you've identified a gallery you would like to have display your work, do some basic research. Some galleries include preferred submission information on their websites. Follow the instructions, and try to go that extra step to make your submission interesting.

The Best Pitch

If the gallery asks for a hard copy submission, make it nice. Throw in some eye candy, such as colorful show announcements, and consider the details, such as the paper you use, the print quality, and how your presentation is put together—perhaps even how it emerges from the envelope. All the gallery owners I spoke with are happy to get a packet from an artist in the mail. If a gallery's website doesn't cover application specifics, put together a nice package containing printed images with title, dimensions, materials, and price, an artist statement, bio and a cover letter to introduce yourself and state your intentions. If you're having trouble with writing an artist statement, bio, or resume, look at other artists' websites for inspiration and to see how they have handled each of these tasks.

You can include a CD or DVD with digital images of your work, but to grab a gallery owner or director's attention and encourage them to actually stick the disk into their computer and open the files, include some high-quality printed images of your best pieces.



A surprise visit to a gallery with your work can be a major problem!

First Impressions

Never approach a gallery owner during business hours looking for representation. Terry McGrath Craig from the Hibberd McGrath gallery in Breckenridge, Colorado, said, "We really don't like it when artists approach us in the gallery. It's not fair to the artist because we can't give their work the consideration it deserves and it's not fair to us because it puts us in an awkward spot."

But the worst way to approach a gallery is to come through the door with a box full of pots. Terry told me, "Some people have even come in after having had another show in town, with the pieces that didn't sell, wanting us to buy the leftovers sight unseen. Even if someone has phoned ahead and made an appointment, they really need to send some visuals to us ahead of time. We don't like aggressive presentations."

Charlie Cummings of Charlie Cummings Gallery calls bringing work into a gallery unannounced "the ambush." He says, "If someone comes in unannounced with a box of pots, the only thing they really want to hear is 'yes.' I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings, but they are putting me in a position where I have to say 'no.'" And he adds, "As artists, we really don't want people to make split second decisions about our work."

The Worst Time

The worst time to approach a gallery owner is during an opening reception. Gallery owners are extremely busy both

before and during events. The reception is for the artist and the work currently installed, so it's not the right time to address your own agenda. It might be okay to introduce yourself to the gallery owner and leave a card, but you may make a better impression by expressing appreciation of the work at hand.

First Steps

Anthony Schaller, gallery director of the Red Lodge Clay Center, says of approaching a gallery director, "It's all about developing relationships." He likens it to dating, stating "You don't just jump into bed, you've got to create that bit of mystery that makes the gallery director want to see more." He thinks a business card or postcard is a great way to introduce yourself. "A beautiful business card is a good teaser, it makes me want to see the rest of the work. A black and white plain old business card does not." A pocket full of slides or images on an iPod is not the way to go either, according to Schaller. "Showing someone images on an iPod reeks of desperation, and no one wants to work with desperate people."

The Envelope Please

Cummings can tell a lot about what it will be like to work with an artist from his or her packet. "If the packet is thrown together, then that's how they work. If they don't have their act together to do something simple, imagine them trying to send forty or fifty pots on a deadline." He also emphasized that if you make first contact with a gallery by e-mail, it better be professional. "Consider that e-mail carefully, as you would a cover letter, and use the same professional standards. This is a first contact and the impression you make with that e-mail is going to make or break whether that person will get back to you." Schaller mentioned that "Including a link to a personal website is fine. Including a link to another gallery's website is not. To me that seems like taking the easy way out or looking for a short cut," he said.

Packing As Presentation

Packing is also part of your presentation. Recycled packing materials are acceptable, as long as they are clean (but never use newspaper). Don't allow your stored packing materials to get dusty in your studio, and don't use anything that smells bad. Think about pleasing the person who is going to unpack your work, and pack it neatly as well as safely to the industry standard. (See Dee Schaad's "Packing Pots for Shipping," PMI March/April 2007.)

While talking about what makes an artist nice to work with, Schaller told me something lovely about Mary Briggs. When she sends a box of work to the Red Lodge Clay Center, she includes a little surprise like a sprig of lavender or a couple of bags of tea. "Those are the types of gestures that create ongoing relationships between gallery owners and artists," he said. There is something so fun, kind and wonderful about that simple gesture.



Above: When submitting a CD or DVD of images, an eye-catching postcard encourages the gallery owner to take a look. **Above right:** Your business card speaks volumes about you and your work.

Cummings has also received pieces so inadequately wrapped from a ceramist that he stopped working with them altogether. Broken things cause a lot of extra work for the gallery owner. There are phone calls to make and forms to fill out, and if something isn't packed correctly and it breaks, the shipper is not liable.

The Relationship

Everyone I interviewed talked about the interactions between the artist and gallery owner in terms of relationship. McGrath Craig told me, "There's a partnership between the gallery and the artist. Everyone has to feel comfortable in that relationship. It's a one-on-one kind of business and what makes it fun and has kept us going for twenty-five years are the relationships we have with our artists." But once you get accepted into a gallery you are not home-free. Every single time you make contact you are presenting yourself, through emails, letters, visits, and deliveries or shipments of work.

Keys to Success

Basically, you have to both make good work and be a great person to work with. Every contact with the gallery needs to be delightful and formal, from an initial email or hard copy inquiry to the delivery of the work. Check the gallery's website for preferred submission information, otherwise send a standard packet, printed nicely and put together well, including nice printed materials. Introduce yourself to the gallery owner, but do not ambush him or her in their gallery. A creative, respectful and pleasing submission will be more likely to get you in the door than a casual and sloppy one.

Annie Christzberg lives and works in Denver, CO. For questions or comments, you can contact her on her website at www.earthtoannie.com.