

Art Festival Guide

The Artist's Guide to Selling in Art Festivals

*“Each is given a bag of tools,
A shapeless mass and a book of rules.
And each must make, ere life is flown,
A stumbling block or a stepping stone”*
-R.L. Sharpe

Introduction

Who I am

I am nobody, really, but this first section will let you get to know me a bit better. I make woodcut prints, which makes me a printmaking artist. Sometimes I bind them in books, which would make me a book artist. Yet some other times I like to sell my original carved blocks and make sculptures out of them, which doesn't make me a sculptor. I like to just call myself an artist, although if I were to choose my specialty I would say that I am a printmaker. Why is that important? I guess you should probably know where I'm coming from since if I were a jeweler or a monumental work sculptor this book might be written differently, but perhaps not so much. I have no pretenses about my art, other than I think it has reached the point where I feel comfortable enough with the art I make and people seem to like it. You can see my work on the web at <http://1000woodcuts.com> and learn all about woodcuts and some about me.

A while ago I found that art festivals are a perfect fit for me. This was an important revelation because I never before had *really fit in* whatever venue I chose. I went to school and found myself standing alone as someone who actually *liked* to learn. I did the corporate thing and found that people will bite at your heels just because they like biting (and not working much). I finally decided to be an artist, a life long love, and

only when I started doing art festivals I came to the conclusion that all those management jobs and all that love for traveling and camping and all that self-drive and energy and desire to work myself to the bone had finally met a perfect match. I do art festivals and will continue to do them probably for as long as I hold up, because I have finally found my true fit.

Other than art festivals, I faithfully send my work to competitions and exhibitions and have had good fortune with getting my work exhibited in museums and galleries across the country. I have shown in various galleries in the Southwest. As an artist, I am always learning and growing. I like to experiment. I'm not famous, I'm not rich, and I don't really think very often about those things. I firmly believe that if you put your entire soul into your work good things will happen. If they don't at least you can say you put your entire soul in your work. I tend to do things on my own rather than farm them out. I let my mom help me in the studio from time to time and think about hiring an assistant but I really enjoy working by myself. I enjoy doing menial things and I'm so short I don't think there are any tasks that are beneath me; they would have to be awfully small tasks. I have a lot of energy (everybody tells me so) and recommend that if you want to do art festivals, you get some energy too. I want my epitaph to read: "Dang! She worked *hard*." Work is everything to me, I love to get things done but there is also something very special about the act—the process—of working. When I'm not working I'm hiking or kayaking down the river or doing stuff around the house or taking a long drive. There, now you know me.

What I am that is important to this book is *very observant*. I am a scientist at heart, having a couple of university degrees to show for it, and enjoy analyzing situations and observing things and people. In Psychology we would say that I'm trying to perceive the world in a way that will allow me to predict future events. Sure, as long as things are predictable. In the art festival world, things are not always predictable, but gaining control over what I *can* predict has made me more successful than not, more often than not. The fact that people that have been doing this for much longer than I have don't realize some basic things that I realize, surprises me. I am also a realist and have a good grasp of how things really are. I tend to be very practical and inefficiency bothers me, especially my own. I hate wasting time on stuff that could be done more efficiently without compromising quality or results. So I wanted to jot down some thoughts about fine tuning the art festival life mostly for my own benefit and peace of mind—and suddenly, there was a book.

When I first started this festival life I had no guidelines, nobody to ask, no way of knowing what would work and not. I asked and people told me things, not because they knew, but because they wanted to say something. That was not good! I learn by reading a lot, and there was hardly anything to read on how to do this art festival thing. That

bothered me. I also learn by doing, jumping in head first while others test the waters for a while. Other than a few bumps in the head, this particular method of learning usually produces an accelerated learning curve. I observe and learn, but I already said that, so let's move on to the task at hand, and that is to prevent you from getting bumps on the head, even if you do decide to dive in head first.

About the book

I had been mulling over the idea of writing a guide for artists who want to embark on the awesome adventure of entering the art festival circuit. Mulling didn't get it done, so I planned to start during those rare lulls in this business (Lesson 1: Art Festivals are addicting), perhaps during the summer months. Then it occurred to me that the best time to get this done was during the time when I am most engaged in these wonderful events, right in the thick of things, so to speak.

So I jotted down some notes on a scrap of paper between customers, then I proceeded to wash the scrap of paper in the laundry along with a rare two-dollar bill also residing in my jeans pocket, probably since 1978. Undaunted by such minute obstacles (Lesson 2: Every obstacle is minute and surmountable) I rewrote the notes subsequently between festivals and this time I was able to hold on to that little piece of paper. Loosely organized and flexible, the outline itself became an analogy for how these festivals go most of the time and also the best basic advice I can possibly give someone, that is, loosely organized and flexible.

Consequently, this book is a loosely organized and flexible guideline of how to *successfully* (key word) launch a career as an art festival artist. Although everyone will do different art, the basics covered in the coming chapters should be a good solid blueprint on how to go about taking the first step. Once you learn the basics and get a couple of festivals under your belt, you will be able to come up with your own strategies and follow your own lead. I should also say that I don't do everything that I talk about, but I have seen other successful artists who do. I still learn something new every festival, and hopefully I also teach someone new a few tricks of the trade.

You will note from time to time that there is an artist-bias to the book (that's as opposed to crafter, much more on that later). Right you are. I am an artist and I consider everyone I have ever met in art festival *artists*. I think many so-called craftspeople of all kinds are artists (although some are not) and so I will call everyone "artist," just to be all inclusive and efficient. We will get to the matter of diversity of art shows and diversity of art and craft, but for now know that when I say artists and art I also mean craftspeople and craft. My own woodcut printmaking is a hybrid of the two as I design, carve, and print from blocks of wood, and I consider the artist/crafter division a bit silly. My own experience is neither with very high end nor very low end products but somewhere in the middle. I have talked to hundreds of artists and craftspeople and the guidelines in this book can loosely apply to all, as they were learned by observing and listening to all.

This book is *not* a step-by-step exact procedural methodology. It is merely a guide, a helping hand that will guide you through an art festival, before, during and after. There are a thousands variations of any one of the guidelines I offer and I will try to point those out as I go along. Take some of them to heart, discard what doesn't suit you and, most of all, learn by doing on your own— and by observing. I am certainly not claiming this is the *only*, let alone the *right* way to do things. As I have learned through the years, there are many ways to approach the business of selling art in art festivals. And for goodness sakes, take it all in good humor, because you will need plenty of that to get through your first art festival and every festival after that.

Before embarking on the great art festival adventure, do visit some. This is a must do, not a loose guideline. Get out there and look at actual artists, show up early and watch the artists set up if you can, talk to some of them without asking them if they make a lot of money. If you sculpt, look at a sculptor's display and check out their prices and quality of work. If you are a printmaker or a jeweler or a paper artist or a metal artist or a potter, find one and look at their set-up and ask a few polite questions *without* blocking their display from real customers and preventing a sale. Don't just walk around like a customer (well, do but just a little), but keep your artist eye on the overall appearance of booths, check out what you like and what you don't. Make a mental note of good ideas to try and bad ones to avoid. Take it all in because it gets harder to observe once you are knee-deep in tent poles and cable ties trying to set up your own booth for the first time.

I don't know about you, but lengthy introductions tend to make me skip ahead, so without further fanfare, I will start with a diary of sorts I wrote last fall during an adventure in the Bay Area in California. Then we will proceed with all the gory details. I'm hoping to bait you into reading on, at the same time giving a prospective artist a glimpse into the world of art festivals.

How to Use This Book

Never cut what you can untie
— Joseph Joubert

I personally would start by reading the whole thing cover to cover, after all I tried like heck to make it entertaining and useful. This approach will answer 90% of the questions that I have been asked by those artists that wander into my booth curiously inquiring about the art festival life. After that, how useful the book can be really depends on who you are. I think everyone just starting out might benefit from reading the first two chapters to get the “feel” of the business. These chapters cover the good and the bad of art festivals, sort of an up close look at art festival artists and the traveling life.

If you have never done or even visited an art festival, the best next step might be to then focus on the chapters that are a guide to “how to get started”, Chapters 3, 4 & 5. These will be more in depth coverage of all the things you might think about and others that you will absolutely need in order to get going. Once you have a festival or two under your belt (poor thing), then refining marketing and sales deserves a really good look because your back is going to demand by now that every festival better be worth your while. Chapters 6 and 7 will serve to fine tune those skills.

After a few more shows, the rest of the book, from Chapter 8 to the end, will come in handy to streamline, set goals and generally refine your approach to the whole business, as well as figure out plans for the future and how to tell your family you are now a full fledged gypsy. Wait, I think I left that last part out; I will let that be entirely up to you.

Finally, keep the Appendices handy for definitions and humor and a bunch of useful stuff like possible configurations for displaying your wares, checklists so that you only forget a few things rather than a whole bunch of things, and the all important list of

sources and resources for spending all your recently earned money on more art festival stuff.

Disclaimer

I have faithfully tried to guide the new artist onto the world of art festivals. This book is not a step-by-step guide, a self-proclaimed “bible”, nor is it certainly the last word on how to approach this nutsy business.

The book contains my experience and that of other artists, close observations of the business, and principles and suggestions that have guided me and many others through the treacherous waters ahead. This is not to say that I have weathered every storm or sailed every sea, or that I have ultimate and complete knowledge of all aspects of the business.

Simply, I wrote the book as a guide because a lot of artists have asked me a lot of questions, which leads me to believe that something like this is needed and will hopefully be useful to many artists.

I will say this later but repeat it here: I am not an accountant, I am not a business manager, I am not a tax attorney. I am an artist, with good years of management experience and about twelve years in the business of being an artist as a sole means of support. I stand by my good eyes and ears, a fair dose of common sense and will stand proud behind every word in the book.

As in hiking, I highly recommend experience as the best guide, although hiking is safer and much more fun when you have a sketchy map, a good compass, and the guiding words of someone who has been on the trail before. As a good guide should, I hope to either enlighten you a little on the virtues and perils of this particular trail or to scare the bejabbers out of you; either way I will have done my job.