

MAKING AND MARKETING CRAFT

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A talk presented at "Symposium on Making and Marketing Art and Craft in the '90s," Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen, Berea, KY.

I have to express at the outset that my interest in crafts is based on their potential as art, that is their ability to express certain kinds of feelings that allow us to experience the world around us in ways we never thought possible. I know very little about the business of selling art and craft, but I have given a lot of thought to how the pressures of that activity might impact on my work and my survival as an artist.

Modern craftspeople, who approach craft in the same way I do, seem to be in a peculiar position. They are expected to not only make their work, but also market it – a situation common in business, perhaps, but an anomaly to art. The demand on craftspeople to be both maker and marketer has led them to falsely believe that this sort of schizophrenia is not only normal, but also necessary for their survival.

There are numerous reasons why I object to the craftspeople assuming the dual role of maker and marketer, the chief one, though, is that the dynamics of the marketplace cause the maker to mistakenly equate sales with artistic achievement. Subtly but inevitably the craftspeople is led to the premise that the making of successful art is somehow the result of clever marketing. I want to say in the strongest terms possible that the creation of art should not be thought of as merely an exercise in marketing.

All artists, of course, hope their work will sell, but it is not their rationale for engaging in the artistic process. Their reason for being is the exploration and expression of ideas and their success or failure is determined by how well they do this. When, for example, a critic is asked to judge an artist's work, that critic examines the quality of an artist's ideas and tries to determine how well the artist has succeeded in expressing and communicating those ideas. But what sort of criteria can the critic use to evaluate the work of a craftspeople whose rationale for making craft is predominately based on sales. There are, of course, aesthetic elements involved in this type of craft, but they are directed, more often than not, at pleasing a certain group of customers and are based on a financial response by those customers to work previously presented. The bottom line, so to speak, of the business-oriented craftspeople is making work that is financially viable and that will allow them to continue the self-employed lifestyle they have chosen. There is absolutely nothing wrong with this business approach, but it should not be confused with the craftspeople who is struggling to produce work that expands the realm of possibilities for the occurrence of art in our lives. The business-oriented craftspeople's work finds acceptance in the marketplace of popular culture. The work of the artist-craftspeople, on the other hand and, will probably never be accepted by a popular audience and it would be foolish for that person to expect that the popular marketplace would support his or her work.

Craftspeople have to examine their intentions and how they want their work to be seen by the public. Is their work going to be primarily a business that supports them, for example, or are they going to be artists and do whatever they have to – except compromise their work – in order to survive. These are entirely different propositions and culture, in general, views them as such and has different expectations

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for both. Craftspeople, if they are going to be successful – and by that I mean find the largest possible audience for their respective work – have to start clarifying their intentions and aims. They have to know who their audience is and develop strategies for getting their work before that audience. Our culture does not expect, for example, the business person to constantly operate at a loss, but accepts that possibility from the artist. It allows for the notion of seconds from a business person, but would find that a contradiction in an artist's work. I believe these two occupations – the maker and marketer – which craftspeople have tried to reconcile as one, are antithetical and that the craftsperson that tries to do both confuses the public about his or her intentions.

The late English potter Michael Cardew whom I first heard talk here at Berea almost twenty years ago and who has had a profound influence on my development as both a writer and a potter, wrote in his book *Pioneer Pottery* that: “the essential thing is that the potter does not merely follow what his public wants but leads it, so that in the end they want what he wants. He will often have to wait a long time before he is accepted. He makes life hard for himself at first, but later on his public will come to him because in his workshop the potter's art is alive.”