

The Gallery and the Craftsman: A Guide to the Perfect Symbiotic Relationship

The relationship between the retail gallery and the craftsmen of The Guild is one of mutual benefit, but it can certainly be argued that the gallery is of greater benefit to the craftsmen than vice versa. Information is the key to understanding and promoting cohesion in any group. In this article, we'll explore ways to facilitate a good working relationship between the two by discussing the gallery's policies, procedures and operations.

The Gallery at the Mississippi Craft Center

Selling fine American craft in the MS Craft Center Gallery is a privilege given to those who are members in good standing of The Craftsmen's Guild of Mississippi. The primary purpose of the gallery is to provide a retail outlet for craftsmen to sell and promote their craft. A secondary purpose is to provide operating income for The Craftsman's Guild of Mississippi, which also directly benefits the craftsmen. Even if a Guild member chooses not to sell their craft in the gallery, he/she still receives benefits in the form of gallery revenues and resources being used to promote the craftsmen of The Guild. While the gallery would not exist without the craftsmen, the craftsmen would also suffer greatly, both collectively and individually, if the gallery were nonexistent.

An appreciation of the gallery's operations by the craftsmen is paramount for its proper function. Offered here are the gallery's basic policies along with the reasons behind them to help ensure a successful relationship.

Gallery Staff

The individuals who work in the gallery are there because of a genuine interest in creating a successful environment. They see their work as having a benefit greater than simply having a successful business and truly understand how much the success of the gallery directly contributes to the personal and financial well-being of the craftsmen. Salaries are rarely the draw as non-profit employees' compensation is typically lower than in other job sectors. They choose to work there to serve others and because they believe in the mission of The Guild: to preserve and promote both contemporary and traditional crafts and encourage the highest standard of excellence in these crafts.

The gallery staff has experience in retail sales, marketing and management. Craftsmen have experience in creating their craft. While there are many cases where there may be overlap, the gallery's success depends on each of these groups doing what they do best; the craftsmen creating the finest craft they can, and the gallery staff creating an inviting, exciting, enticing and sale-promoting environment for its customers. While suggestions are always appreciated, thought should be given before attempting to dictate or direct either party in how the other one should do their job. The gallery staff should be mindful to not dictate to the craftsmen how to

create their craft, what techniques they should employ or how they could do it better. However, it would be okay, and hopefully encouraged by the craftsmen, for the staff to communicate to the craftsmen things like “these sell best in blue,” or “our customers like your work, but mention often that the price is too high” or “customers love this piece, but comment on how they wish it were a smaller size.” On the other hand, the craftsman can provide information to the staff which might facilitate sales, such a background information on the pieces they create or on themselves as an artist. They might even say “my pieces are best displayed like this.” But imagine if all 400+ Guild craftsmen came in and said exactly where they want their items to be displayed, or how much space they think should be devoted to their work. Decisions like these should be entrusted to the gallery staff. The gallery staff is there daily. They hear what customers say, they look at traffic patterns, and they make it a point to understand their customers and how best to market to them. “Front and center” is not necessarily the best place to be to facilitate sales, and the lower shelf may not be the worst place to be. Many times, front and center items are viewed as the customer walks in and are forgotten by the time they walk around. A bowl with beautiful designs on the inside might be overlooked if it were at eye level. The placement work in the gallery should never be seen as a reflection of the quality of the piece, only as a business decision made by those with experience and knowledge that is gained by “living” in the gallery. The craftsmen should let those who know the gallery make those decisions, just as the gallery staff should let the craftsmen flourish in creating their craft.

A gallery that looks fresh and new each time a customer walks in will typically do better than one and appears stagnant. Think about your own retail experiences. If you went into a store that never changed, you might become bored. The best way to do this is to move items around. Even when the inventory hasn't changed very much, new displays and new locations create excitement. Traffic patterns may stay the same, but if each time the same walk is taken, a customer sees something different, excitement is created. Over and over again, I hear stories of items that have been in the gallery for a prolonged period and as soon as they were moved to a different location, even if it is one that someone might consider less desirable, they sell.

Some reasons why...

Items sell:

- Customer preference
- Craftsmanship
- Manner in which displayed
- Price

Items don't sell:

- Customer preference
- Craftsmanship
- Manner in which displayed
- Price

Amazingly similar...aren't they? While we can't affect customer preference, there definitely is an art to selling which can influence the purchase of items. The craftsmanship and quality of an

item is in the control of the craftsmen. The display is in the control of the gallery staff. The price is in control of the artist mainly, but can be influenced by sales and marketing strategies, which brings us to an issue that is not without controversy.

Sales

Everyone wants a bargain! Having a sale is a great way to bring customers in. Ask yourself, “Do I ever buy an item that’s on sale?” or “Have I ever bought an item mainly because it was on sale, or because the bargain is too good to pass up?” Items are placed on sale for various reasons, including holiday sales and having a sale coincide with a particular event, such as, “10% off on all quilts” during a quilting event. Appealing to a customer’s sense of value is an art. As a craftsman, I can appreciate someone feeling offended if their items are placed on sale. But remember, the goal of the gallery is to sell merchandise. Items are not placed on sale because of a dislike of a particular piece or of a person individually. The decision to place items on sale is strictly business. As a craftsman, I would prefer my items to sell at a discount rather than not sell at all. Especially since the gallery’s policy is that the discount is applied to The Guild’s percentage of the price. When an item sells at a reduced price during a sale, the craftsman still receives the same amount as if it sold at full price.

Markdowns

The gallery acquires inventory in 3 main ways: consignment, donation, and by direct purchase. Occasionally, for business reasons only, items are marked down (which basically places them on permanent sale.) Most items that are marked down have been directly purchased or donated and are therefore owned by the gallery. Also, items that are marked down are typically items that have been in the gallery a year or longer and have not sold. It benefits no one to have items in a retail outlet that are not selling; money is tied up (both the craftsmen’s and the gallery’s) and precious gallery space is not used to its fullest. If an item is on consignment, the artist still owns the item. Rather than marking down a consigned item, the gallery would prefer that craftsmen come in and switch out merchandise that has been around for a while. Those of you who have experience selling your items in other retail markets probably know that if your items are purchased, they become someone else’s property, but if your items are consigned, you can change them out or change the price as you like. Help keep the gallery’s merchandise fresh and exciting by doing so. We’ll discuss guidelines for doing this later in this article.

Commission

The Guild receives 40% commission of the sales price of regularly priced items that are sold in the gallery. Too much? Too little? Each craftsman has to decide this for themselves. Here are some things to consider when making that decision. The gallery offers a state of the art facility, handles all aspects of marketing and selling, holds featured shows, receptions and events,

provides packaging materials, gift wrapping and shipping services, provides an avenue for special orders and commissions, maintains an internet presence, is open 8 hrs a day 361 days a year, stays open late for special functions, has a steady flow of customers with many repeat shoppers, and calculates and pays commissions on a regular and timely basis.

When figuring out the cost of selling your work on your own, don't forget to include things like booth fees, the cost of display pieces, transportation costs, hotel, lodging and food costs, and the value of your time spent traveling to and from the show, setting up and taking down as well as manning your booth. Even if you sell out of your studio, you should still consider things like the cost of the building including maintenance and utilities, insurance, bookkeeping, advertising, and the time that you spend with your customers. If you sell through a website, don't forget website development, upkeep and maintenance fees, photography services, packaging and shipping supplies and your time to do these things if you do them yourself. If you don't pay yourself for your time, you are doing it for free.

Special Orders and Commissions Received from the Gallery

Most galleries that represent artists will not give out direct contact information of the artist to customers that are interested in placing a special order. It makes good business sense that a gallery, or any retail store for that matter, not cut themselves out of sales. If a retail outlet like Best Buy or Wal-Mart told all of their customers where to go and get the items that they sell somewhere else, they would not be in business very long. Why would craftsmen expect that the galleries that represent, promote and advertise for them not receive something in return? It is customary that work sold as a result of a referral from the gallery to a craftsman either be sold through the gallery at the regular commission rate, or that a commission be paid to the gallery for the pieces sold as a result of that referral. Craftsmen should account for this when pricing their work, but it should go further than that. Craftsmen should also take care to not speak ill of their gallery to the customers saying things like, "Well, they make me pay them a commission", or undermine the gallery by saying, things like, "Well, I'll give you a special deal because I don't have to pay the gallery commission." These sentiments do nothing to build a good relationship with the galleries that represent us, and are destructive to the customer's opinion of The Guild.

Gallery Operations

The gallery staff has tremendous responsibilities that go beyond what may be evident to most. Some of these include merchandising the gallery, meeting with craftsmen in person, communication with craftsmen and other vendors via phone or email, handling scores of daily phone calls to The Guild, marking in and removing items from inventory including entering each item in the computer system, printing labels and attaching them to the pieces, taking in annual craft donations to fulfill membership requirements, keeping inventory straight, printing monthly commission reports for each craftsman, organizing and mailing monthly checks to craftsmen, photographing, writing descriptions, editing, and listing of items on the e-gallery, as well as

general maintenance and cleaning of the gallery, not to mention preparing for special events and late nights at the gallery as well as packing and shipping merchandise. Let us not forget catering to each visitor's needs as they shop, telling stories of The Guild, the individual craftsmen (our stories) and of individual pieces of work to facilitate sales as well as promoting other Guild events to its customers.

The gallery staff has two distinct groups of customers; the public (shoppers) and the craftsmen. Meeting the demands of both can be challenging. I'll leave it to you to decide which group you think can be more taxing. (ha! ha!) When craftsmen visit the gallery for business reasons, being concise and organized is extremely helpful.

As you can imagine, in order for the gallery to run smoothly, there are policies and procedures that must be kept in mind. It would be nice to be able to afford to have several staff to accommodate everyone at all times, but the Guild has never been in a position to have the luxury of being over-staffed. There is a small handful of staff working very hard to keep a few hundred craftsmen and thousands of customers happy. Please take a minute to review them.

Consignment Agreement:

Craftsmen who sell in the retail gallery are required to sign an agreement between the craftsmen and the gallery. Here are the basic principles of the agreement.

1. Work is consigned on a 60/40 basis, with the craftsmen retaining 60% of the retail figure for both the retail and E-galleries.
2. Craftsmen are requested to deliver work to the gallery only during preferred delivery times or by appointment. Preferred delivery times are from 10 am-12 pm and 2-4 pm Monday through Friday. Please call or email for an appointment outside of these times.
3. Deliveries must be accompanied by an inventory sheet that has been completed prior to arrival at the gallery. Inventory sheets are available for download on the Craftsmen Membership page of the website or at the gallery.
4. The gallery does not expect exclusive rights to the craftsman's work, but does expect that the retail prices in the gallery be the same as other retail outlets for the craftsman's work.
5. Tags on items should be 2" x 2" or smaller, professionally printed on cardstock and attached with black embroidery thread. Some exceptions may be allowed for items like jewelry or items requiring special care or directions. The gallery staff can be consulted for further assistance.

6. The gallery will make payment for amount due the craftsman by the 15th of the month following sale of work in the previous thirty (30) days.
7. The gallery will not permanently reduce the retail price of any consigned work unless advised to do so by the craftsman. If a sales price of consigned work is reduced at the request of the craftsman, the craftsman's commission will be 60% of the new price.
8. During a sales event at the gallery, the consignment percentage of the gallery will decrease, but the craftsman's percentage remains the same.
9. On occasion, craftsmen's work may be directly purchased at the rate of 50% of the retail price set by the craftsmen. Once purchased, the gallery owns the work and may raise or lower the retail price at its discretion.
10. The Guild gallery may return and/or rotate consigned works from the craftsmen at the discretion of the gallery.
11. Items cannot be removed from the gallery by craftsmen during the months of November and December without specific approval of the gallery manager. If items are removed from the floor during these months, there is no guarantee that those items or replacement items can be returned to or placed on the sales floor prior to Christmas.
12. Items are not to be brought to the gallery to be placed on the floor between the Monday after The Chimneyville Craft Festival and Jan 1st each year without specific approval by the gallery staff.
13. Occasionally, the craftsmen will be asked to increase the gallery's inventory to meet peak season periods. These works may be stored until the remaining shelf inventory is purchased. Other times, the gallery will endeavor to display the full inventory of the craftsmen's works.
14. Craftsmen who are demonstrating at the Craft Center will remit 20% of their total sales during the demonstration to The Guild.
15. Permission is given for the gallery to transfer and exhibit craftsmen's work to other secure exhibit or retail spaces for special events.
16. If a craftsman is contacted by the gallery to remove inventory, he/she must pick up or arrange for removal within 30 days. Active or inactive members will be responsible for any shipping and handling costs incurred for the return of their work. Any artwork that remains in the possession of the gallery for 60 days after the

craftsman is contacted to remove the pieces becomes property of the gallery.

17. Artwork sold in the gallery or at any Craftsmen's Guild of Mississippi sanctioned event must be in compliance with the craftsman's approved medium and category in which he/she has been juried.
18. The gallery gives out names and contact information of the craftsmen at the request of customers who wish to commission work. A customary referral fee of 20% is due to The Craftsmen's Guild for commissions that result from referral by The Guild.
19. The Gallery at the Mississippi Craft Center and all exhibits and shows by the Craftsmen's Guild of Mississippi, Inc. will handle and install members' work with the utmost care. However, the Guild cannot be responsible for any loss, damage, or theft to the undersigned's property while in the possession, supervision or auspices of The Craftsmen's Guild of Mississippi. The member will hold harmless the Guild, its agents, volunteers, representatives, employees or sponsors from all manner of legal action, suits, damages, claims and demands whatsoever in law or equity. The Guild recommends that each craftsman insure their work prior to submitting it to the gallery.
20. The Guild reserves the right to reproduce images of items submitted to the Guild or Gallery for promotional use in print or electronic format including, but not limited to newsletters, post cards, emails, advertisements and website use.

We will explore some of these principles in more detail below.

Item Tags

Most upscale galleries do not allow an artist to place their own tag on their work. Tags on items can work for or against sales of craft. Poorly designed tags can lessen the appearance and apparent value of a piece while nicely done ones can elevate them. As a guild, we want to share craftsmen's information with our customers, but we also want to project an image of elegance and professionalism. There have been issues raised from many angles regarding tags. In an effort to create a sense of uniformity among a diverse group of work, tag specifications were created to allow the craftsmen the freedom to communicate the information they feel necessary to buyers of their work while keeping an upscale gallery appearance. Tags are not required to be on your work. If you decide to tag your work, think about how you would feel if you were given a gift with one of your tags on it. A business card attached with tape or a piece of colored ribbon might not be as appealing as one that is professionally done and neatly tied. Printing tags does not have to be an expensive endeavor. One suggestion is to have them professionally printed on business card-sized cardstock, two to a card, and cut them in half. Many online printers allow you to easily design them with their software or you can upload your own images with a final cost of less than three cents a tag. It is also important to have your items tagged before bringing them to the gallery.

Dropping off items

The gallery loves to receive new work, but there must be a process to make it work smoothly.

- Items must be accompanied by an inventory list that has been completed prior to arrival at the gallery. You can use one of your own or, preferably, you can download one on the craftsman membership page at MSCrafts.org.
- Items must be brought into the receiving office and cannot be placed directly on the gallery floor for sale by the craftsman. Items will then be entered into the computer system, price tags printed and affixed to the item and then they will be placed on the gallery sales floor by the staff. Please be mindful of the staff's immense responsibilities and do not expect this to be done "while you wait."
- The gallery requests that items only be brought in during preferred delivery times or by appointment if they cannot be brought in during those times. Preferred delivery times are from 10 am to 12 noon and 2 to 4 pm Monday through Friday. If it is possible, please take a minute to call or email the gallery to let them know when you are coming. Please have your inventory sheet completed prior to drop off to expedite the process.
- Items cannot be brought to the gallery to be placed on the floor between the Monday after the Chimneyville Craft Show and Jan 1st each year unless specifically requested by the gallery staff. As a service to the craftsmen, a truck is usually provided to bring items from Chimneyville to the gallery for the upcoming year. Several thousand items are received at one time which requires many hours to unpack, enter into the computer, affix tags and merchandise on the sales floor, all at the busiest time of the retail year. The order in which items are entered is usually on a first-received basis, but other considerations including the craftsmen's current representation on the sales floor and the purchasing habits and requests of the customers come into play as well. Items delivered after Chimneyville will likely not make it to the sales floor in time for Christmas, and not every item on the truck is guaranteed to be on the floor before December 25th as well. The gallery encourages craftsmen to plan early for holiday shopping by bringing items to the gallery in September and October as the largest percentage of sales takes place in the last quarter of the year.
- In pricing your items, the sales price at all outlets should be the same, including in your own studio. Each craftsman should give thought to either being a wholesaler or a retailer. Instead of thinking that you are making less when the gallery sells one of your items, you might think about it as making more when you sell one from your studio or at a craft festival. If we sell at a lower price than the retail outlets that carry our merchandise, we are undermining the galleries that are spending time, money and effort promoting us as craftsmen.

Removing items from the gallery

- Items that have been donated or items that have been purchased may not be removed by a craftsman without specific permission and arrangements for replacement by the gallery manager. If you are not sure if one of your pieces is a purchased or donated item, please check with the gallery staff.
- A detailed list of the items removed along with the bar code sticker must be left with a gallery staff member to ensure that the item is removed from the electronic inventory system.
- You should not remove an item from the gallery to sell it to a private customer. Instead, refer the customer to the gallery to purchase the item. Please do not make an intentional effort to undermine the organization that proudly supports you as a Master Craftsman.
- Items cannot be removed from the gallery during the months of November and December for several reasons. First, the gallery should not be “wiped out” by the craftsmen at the busiest shopping time of the year. Secondly, when items are removed from The Gallery, each item must be individually removed from the computer system which takes a considerable amount of time. Each craftsman may remove only a few items, but remember the number of craftsmen in The Guild. Five or six items from one can easily translate into hundreds from the group, requiring manpower to facilitate this effort rather than productively selling on the sales floor. Then, if items are later returned by the craftsmen to the gallery, they must be re-entered into inventory as well. Removing items also leaves an open space that then must be re-merchandised.
- A time of particular concern for removing items is around The Chimneyville Crafts Festival. Some craftsmen come in and remove all of their items which must be removed from inventory and the space re-merchandised, then, after Chimneyville, they bring them back expecting them to be put right back on the floor immediately. Please realize the tremendous amount of work that must be done to accommodate this process and its negative impact on the active selling process in the gallery. All of this is done at the busiest time of the year as well, when the sales volume is the highest, and most of the purchases also need to be gift-wrapped. Also, remember that a truckload of items that needs to be marked in and merchandised comes in on the Sunday night of Chimneyville. It is simply unreasonable to expect that all of the items that a craftsman removes be re-entered back into the computer system and returned into the craftsman’s original space. Each craftsman can certainly remove their items for Chimneyville. The gallery only asks that craftsmen plan ahead when doing so and complete the process prior to November first.

Donating items

A requirement of Guild membership is that each craftsman demonstrate at the Craft Center or other event sanctioned by The Guild at least once a year. If this requirement cannot be fulfilled,

either a donation of \$100 in cash or \$200 in craft can be donated to the Guild. If you should choose to donate craft, it is asked that you bring several items for the gallery staff to choose which pieces would be the most marketable in the gallery. The pieces are chosen strictly from a business perspective. As a craftsman, every effort should be made to have your best work displayed for sale. Submitting “seconds” as a donation detracts from the overall level of fine craft, marketability and the impression that is made on the gallery’s customers. Donated pieces are still a reflection of the craftsmen’s work as an individual artist.

In accordance with our bylaws, the demonstration or donation requirement is to be met by November 1st of each year. Every effort needs to be made to do so. Once again, bringing in or asking the gallery staff to choose pieces of your work as your donation items during the holiday shopping season requires gallery staff to be off of the sales floor during the busiest time of the year.

Communication

The gallery staff is always interested in hearing from the craftsman. Stories that are told about their pieces help sell the items to customers. Background information about the artists helps as well. The gallery staff wants to get to know the craftsmen personally. Take a minute to get to know them. If you have a suggestion or an issue that concerns you, as we’ve all learned in kindergarten, it’s best to go directly to the person and talk with them rather than complaining about something behind someone’s back. If you need to have a discussion with the gallery staff that you think will take more than a few minutes, it is best to make an appointment to do so, and conversations of a controversial nature should be done out of earshot of the customers in the gallery and in a respectful manner.

We must remember that the gallery’s success is the craftsmen’s success, both individually and as a Guild. Everything that we can do to facilitate a good working relationship can only be of benefit to all. Take pride in everything you do, every relationship that you foster and every aspect of your life!

Craig Escude
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