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ONE-OF-A-KIND MARKETING

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Studio jewelry finds an enthusiastic audience among knowledgeable buyers, but it still takes marketing to reach that market.

by

Sharon Elaine Thompson

The term “jewelry manufacturer” many bring to mind an image of a production line spawning jewelry pieces in large numbers. But there is another type of manufacturer who makes jewelry one piece at a time, and whose pieces often emphasize art over the intrinsic value of the metal and stones involved. This is the studio jeweler.

Most studio jewelry is one-of-a-kind. Although it often incorporates precious materials, studio jewelry also features various non-traditional materials, including non-precious metals such as brass, bronze, and copper, as well as found objects of all kinds: beach pebbles, fossils, plastic toys and paper ephemera. Despite the uniqueness of these jewelry pieces, they are usually very affordable. On average, pieces sell for \$200 to \$500; earrings can start as low as \$30. Time- and labor-intensive pieces can cost as much as \$3000 to \$7000. (For more on the distinctions between studio jewelry, designer jewelry and art jewelry, see “What’s in a Name?” below.)

Because of its combined uniqueness and affordability, studio jewelry finds an enthusiastic market among well-educated professionals, usually women 30 to 65 years old, who may not be able to spend a lot of money for jewelry but still crave something unusual. However, the very attributes that make studio jewelry intriguing to these customers—the unusual materials, the uniqueness of each piece, the artistic focus—have made it difficult to sell through “traditional” retail jewelers, although there are a few

traditional stores that have made names for themselves by selling studio jewelry. Such retailers often find it difficult to explain to a customer, who is used to connecting jewelry price with the intrinsic value of the gemstones and metal, that the artists' intent, the individual design, and the labor involved in a studio jewelry piece may be worth more than the actual value of the materials.

For many studio jewelers, the solution to this dilemma has been to sell their work at art and craft shows. Many artists do three to four shows a year; some exhibit at as many as 15. Craft shows offer studio jewelers a ready audience, since attendees are already primed to buy the unusual or artists, regardless of the intrinsic value of the materials.

But craft shows have their risks, too. Ferocious competition can make getting into shows difficult—and not getting into a show can hurt the business, says Betty Helen Longhi of Fluid Expressions in Metal in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Longhi exhibits regularly at the American Craft Council show in Baltimore, but, she says, “if I don't get into Baltimore, half my income is shot.” In addition, time spent on the road, setting up, and working the show is time lost from the studio.

This downside to craft shows has led many studio jewelers to seek representation in galleries. These galleries may carry paintings, glass, pottery, furniture, and fiber art as well as jewelry. “Galleries are real nice for bread and butter,” says Maggie Dunakin of Jim Dunakin Design in south-central Montana. Her husband, Jim, has his work in about 50 galleries across the country. “[Galleries] provide fairly consistent money without us having to pay a lot of attention to them,” Maggie says.

The tradeoff is that while galleries provide regular income, they also pay wholesale prices. Artists such as Longhi, who are used to getting retail at craft shows, may find that by selling a labor-intensive piece at wholesale they may not even be breaking even. As a

result, many artists still prefer to sell directly to the consumer at craft shows where the profit is better.

One compromise is for an artist to choose consignment galleries, which exhibit an artist's work but only pay for that work when it is sold. If a good show comes up and the gallery hasn't sold a piece, the artist can pull the piece and perhaps sell it at full retail at the show, thereby increasing his or her profit. But when there are no shows, if the gallery sells the piece, the artist will have received some income, although it might be less than what he or she could have earned at a show. In addition, Longhi likes consignment because, she says, "I can send what I want to them. They're a good way to test market a design."

Some artists choose consignment because they understand that most jewelry stores buy only what they know will sell. Because "what will sell" may be difficult to determine with studio jewelry, Seattle artist/jeweler Andy Cooperman expects to consign work. "I don't expect anybody to buy my art brooches except for a customer," says Cooperman. "That's just too risky [for the retailer]."

Other artists insist on outright purchase by a gallery. "Consignment is too expensive for us," says Maggie Dunakin. "The demand for Jim's work is so high, it doesn't pay for us to have work just sitting out there." And, says artist/jeweler Lee Rumsey-Haga of Portland, Oregon, "Galleries that buy outright have a vested interest in selling my work."

Most artists, says Seattle artist/jeweler, Micki Lippe, accept a combination of consignment and purchase terms. The trick is finding a gallery whose payment policies either coincide with yours or can be negotiated.

At Carl Greve Jewelers in Portland, Oregon, a store known nationwide for its selection of high-end platinum and karat gold designer and limited-edition pieces, the terms offered designers vary. If someone is very aggressive and assertive about getting

into the store, says operations manager John Blythe, “we are going to ask for terms that are more generous to us. But if someone has a high-end line or good skills and a wonderful product, we’re going to be more lenient about what we would accept.”

Having worked as textile designers themselves, JoAnn and Anna Williams, owners of Ragazzi’s Flying Shuttle, a fiber art and jewelry gallery in Seattle, are very sensitive to the payment issue. “We tend to purchase outright,” says JoAnn. “It’s very hard to figure out your finances [working with consignment].” However, if the sisters have spent their budget for the year, and an artist they want is strongly interested in the gallery, they might work out a consignment arrangement.

Consignment makes some artists queasy because not all galleries are ethical about payment. “The worst gossip [at shows and conferences] is who doesn’t pay their artists on time,” says Karen Lorene, owner of Facère Art jewelry, a consignment jewelry gallery in Seattle. “I can’t believe that artists have to call and inquire. We try to really take care of that because we know that some artists truly need the money.”

If you’re approaching a gallery new to you, ask other jewelry artists about the gallery. And check references, reminds Lippe, who teaches workshops on marketing to new craftspersons and artists. “You have to remember that you are your own entity,” she says. “You have rights. You can get credit references on people. You can check them. And you can say no.”

Be aware of state laws regarding consignment, advises Lorene. In Washington state, for example, the law says that galleries must pay within 30 days of the sale. “I’m sure that has to be true in other states,” she adds. “I don’t know if other galleries realize that.”

Once they’ve resolved the consignment-versus-purchase issue, what should studio jewelers expect from a gallery?

Good display is crucial. Artists need room to display their work so a customer can see what makes their style unique. A good gallery will dedicate a case or half a case to display an individual's work. The gallery should also take enough of the artist's pieces to make a statement. "Galleries that can't meet the minimum are wasting their time and money and my time to fill the order," says Longhi.

Cooperman says a good gallery is worth its weight in gold, relieving the artist of many worries. "My job is to provide them with up-to-date work and any photography materials I can give them. Their job is to sell my work and [to] promote my and promote my career."

One way galleries promote their artists' work is by holding shows. Ragazzi's Flying Shuttle, for example, does approximately four shows a year showcasing established artists. Goldman's Jewelers in Seattle, which has successfully focused on studio and designer work for 17 years, holds about two shows a year to introduce artists new to the store. And Facère Jewelry Art frequently focuses on the work of one or two artists or showcases several artists working in a theme. Last fall, for example, Facère featured work in metal and glass, as well as a selection of bead artists.

The turnout for the events can vary. "We usually have 100 to 150 people at an opening," says Lorene. "For a tiny store of 450 square feet, that's wonderful support." A few blocks away at Goldman's, co-manager Peter D. Davis says initial show turnout is often low, but the store tends to sell the work of the featured artist steadily throughout the duration of the show.

At Carl Greve Jewelers, shows serve to test a designer's work in the marketplace. "You can be the best buyer in the world and still make mistakes," Blythe says. Work that gets a good response from customers at a show may get the designer an invitation to exhibit at the store.

Blythe also notes that artist can use the feedback from shows to determine if their work is appropriate in that market. “Most creative people know what they’re doing and what they’re trying to say,” he says. “But if the customer doesn’t get it, it’s not going to work in the marketplace.”

On the other side of the equation, what does a gallery expect from an artist?

The line “needs to be complete,” including earrings, neckpieces, brooches, and rings,” says JoAnn Williams. Artists should “aggressively pursue building a collection,” says Blythe. A collection gives customers more options and opportunities to buy the work. A broader selection of pieces also makes a greater impact in a display case and increases the chances a piece of work will sell.

Numbers of pieces and breadth of the line is not enough, however. “The craftsmanship absolutely has to be there, and originality,” says Williams. Lippe counsels that artists should have a “recognizable look,” something that sets them apart from others.

Davis says Goldman’s looks for coherence of style. “Technique or metals or appearance can hold the line together,” he says. “For example, the work of Julie Rauschenberger varies as to the style of her pieces, but the technique [detailed granulation] holds the styles together.”

In addition, be sure that you can meet the demand for your work, cautions Cooperman. According to him, studio jewelers can land in two bad situations: “Worst case scenario, I’m not going to get any orders. Worst case scenario, I’m going to get millions of orders.” If you are not prepared, you can begin to dread every order that comes in—or damage your reputation by being unable to fill an order.

Knowing exactly what will strike the public’s fancy is a problem in any retail situation, and has led retailers in the traditional jewelry markets to demand buy-back programs from manufacturers. This can also be part of an agreement between a studio

jeweler and a store such as Goldman's, which usually purchases jewelry outright. "Most artists have a policy where they'll trade back at least two for one," says Davis. "So if some of the work isn't selling, we can trade it for something that is."

Not all artists agree with this kind of policy, however. Cooperman for example, calls buy-back policies "absurd." He believes galleries that claim to know their clientele should accept responsibility for their purchases. "Even selling outright is not selling outright, it seems," he says. "[That piece may still] be coming back at a later date. I don't want that."

One reason for the opposition to buy-back, unique to studio artists, is that the artists' styles may change after they sell a piece. Art and design is fluid, and an artist who makes a quantum leap in his or her style may not want to—or be able to—sell the older pieces. Sometimes they may no longer be able to sell to the same galleries.

Another thorny topic for artists is geographic exclusivity. Although some artists resist, many galleries require that they be given the exclusive right to sell the work in their individual areas. For example, Lorene, who expends a considerable budget in advertising her artists, asks for exclusivity in the greater Seattle area. She also requires that if Facèré artists show their work anywhere else in the immediate area, a sign will note the work is there "courtesy of Facèré." "I'm making a time investment and a financial investment; [the artists'] part of the agreement is their loyalty to Facèré in my area," says Lorene. "[We agree to] do everything to promote each other, that we're fair with each other."

Once you know you have a unique style, are ready to deliver on time, and have determined what your sales policies will be, you'll need to prepare your presentation. When Cooperman first started calling on galleries, he says, he spent a lot of time on his portfolio making everything as professional as possible. He even wore a suit to his meetings.

Lorene urges artists to have a professional take photos of their work. Photos not only introduce your work to a gallery, they make all the difference in getting the exposure you want from a gallery show. “Artists all think [photo selection] is some kind of mysterious process,” says Lorene. But in fact, so few artists get their show photos to a gallery on time that the artists who are timely can dominate the show brochure. “Finish up that very first [show] piece, get it photographed, and send it in,” she recommends.

A good presentation at the wrong place, however, can be a waste of time. Before you approach a gallery, do your homework, cautions Blythe. “Designers need to know who their customers are [and] who they want to be represented by, and aggressively go after them,” he says.

To find galleries initially, Cooperman says he looked at gallery ads in magazines, such as Metalsmith and American Craft. Based on photos of the work the galleries carried, he decided which galleries would complement his work. “I wrote them queries and sent them slides,” he says. “I got about two positive responses out of 10, which I expected.”

Both gallery representatives and artists have seen a growth in the studio jewelry market. Some of the increased appreciation of this unusual work is due to artists who are persistent about upgrading their quality and design. “American jewelers have done a lot to promote themselves and make themselves very valid in the marketplace,” says Williams.

Dunakin says that in the beginning, customers resisted what they considered a high price for jewelry containing non-precious metals and materials. Lately, though, “the understanding of craftsmanship and the design has increased,” she says. People are not only willing to pay for the design, but often go out of their way to look for it.

Probably the greatest advertisement comes from enthusiastic customers who wear the pieces. Once customers discover that studio jewelry is affordable, says Williams, “they’re hooked. They get a lot of joy out of it. And they get a lot of compliments.”

What’s in a Name?

During our conversations with gallery representatives and artists, three terms came up that need some distinction: designer jeweler, studio jeweler, and art jeweler.

Designer jewelry is generally considered to be that which is connected with a “name,” such as Jose Hess, who may or may not be involved in the hands-on production of the pieces. Often manufactured in volume and usually designed to appeal to a broad audience, designer pieces are most often made of karat gold and/or platinum and set with precious stones.

At the other end of the spectrum is art jewelry. These pieces are made with highly unconventional materials, such as neon, boar’s bristle, steel or wool. The meaning and concept of a piece of art jewelry are paramount. The entire value of the piece—which may be very difficult to wear or even unwearable—is based on its artistic and design qualities not the intrinsic worth of the materials.

Covering the generous middle ground between the two—and overlapping either end—is studio jewelry. If you are a studio jeweler, you may incorporate non-precious metals, such as brass, bronze, and copper, as well as gold or silver into your work. You may use laminates, such as gold and silver bi-metals and mokume gane (wood-grained metal) or unusual alloys such as shibuichi (copper alloyed with 15 to 26 percent silver) and shakudo (copper mixed with 4 percent gold). Although your pieces may contain diamonds, sapphires, pearls, or opals, they may—and often do—include other materials such as fossils, sea urchin spines, glass beads, porcelain fragments, carved bone, beach

pebbles and agates. You will use traditional metalworking techniques and do all or most of your own work on the pieces you design.

Like art jewelry, most studio jewelry is one-of-a-kind; the artist having worked out a design idea or concept, wants to go onto another challenge. However, to make a living, many studio jewelers make limited editions of a piece or have a production line. These artists usually continue to make one-of-a-kind pieces to maintain their reputation and retain their creative edge.

In this article, we use the term studio jewelry for artists who use traditional jewelry materials as well as unusual ones, who produce one-of-a-kind works whether or not they also have a production line, and whose usually well-crafted work is eminently wearable as well as artistic.