



# The Ins and Outs of **EXHIBITIONS**

John Beaver

If you apply to shows, you've probably received a letter like this at least once in your life. So why didn't you get in? I interviewed a number of jurors and show directors to see if I could get some insight into the jury process and a better understanding of why some people get accepted and some get rejected. To gain honest, candid answers, I agreed to keep my sources confidential.

There are two main types of shows to which we apply. The first are craft or art shows, where we are applying to sell our work in a booth. The second are gallery or themed shows, where we submit one or two pieces to be in a show—similar to the themed exhibitions at the AAW's Annual Symposium.

## Art and craft shows

Let's take a look at art and craft shows first. Most likely, you will be asked to submit four to five photos of your work, an artist's statement, and sometimes a booth shot. For the large national shows, there could be hundreds of people applying for a very limited number of spaces, so right away the odds are challenging. For small local shows, the odds go up, to the point that sometimes they are trying to fill spots and will take pretty much any applicant. If you are just starting to do shows, small venues can provide a good opportunity to gain experience, but beware that they can be lesser quality shows and therefore bring in fewer attendees and buyers.



Within the shows, there are usually multiple mediums: wood, ceramics, glass, fabric, jewelry, etc. The show director is trying to find artists that will sell, give the audience a variety of objects to shop for, provide a realistic range in prices, and create a look for the show. Let's say the show has 100 spaces available. If you split that among all the mediums, there may be only ten to fifteen spaces for woodworkers, and if you consider non-turned items, there may be only six or seven spaces left for turners. From those turners, they are only going to want one or two from

each category, leaving, for example, only one space available for a segmented turner or hollow-form maker or natural-edge artist. Heavy competition increases the need for excellence in design and presentation, so make sure your application is well prepared. Over the years, some shows get a reputation for certain categories; if you've heard, "that's a good glass show," then you can assume they will choose more glass makers. Do your homework and find shows that are appropriate for you.

What happens after you submit your application? Anywhere from one to

five jurors will look at your submission photos and rank them on a scale—usually 1-7. The jurors often do this individually, but it may be in a group session. With hundreds of submissions, the jurors do this very quickly, so it is paramount to have decent photos. Most often all of your images will appear on a screen together, so consider the look of the grouping, and try to make each piece a similar genre. Shows want each booth to have its own look and be unique, so don't mix rustic with contemporary or solid wood salad bowls with segmented pieces. The jurors give one score for your entire application, and it is the total combined points that matter. I have been told by numerous jurors that the most important factor in a submission is good quality photos. A juror from a recent event said, "You would be amazed at how many images were out of focus, dust on image sensor, too dark to see the object, backdrops full of distracting things (small pieces of bark, wrinkled backdrops, etc.)." I asked another judge if he had any other insights I could convey to artists, and he replied, "Image quality, image quality, image quality."

After each individual judge has ranked the submissions, the judges may get together and discuss the submission, or the results might go directly to the show director. If you have two or three low scores, you are probably out. It's possible for some jurors to give you a high score and one to give you a low score. They now have to discuss your submission, and this is when your artist statement comes into play. The statement and individual piece descriptions are often used for marketing purposes after the judging, but they can be looked at by the jurors for further clarification regarding technique, scale, or materials, so it's good to be thorough and accurate. Unfortunately, you will never really know why the one judge ranked you

## THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR IN A SUBMISSION IS GOOD QUALITY PHOTOS.

low, but remember, this is a subjective process and you can't please everyone all the time. If you want to learn more, many shows will give you your score if you ask. Some will even give you feedback; I recommend asking.

Getting all high marks still doesn't guarantee acceptance, although your odds go up dramatically. If there are several similar artists all getting high marks, some of them will not be accepted. Remember, the show director is going for "a look" and variety and sometimes they have to turn down great artists. I once received a commendation letter from a top national show, saying I juried very highly but they just

couldn't fit me in. That definitely plays with your emotions.

Keep in mind jurors are human with different aesthetics, and sometimes your work just doesn't appeal to them. And while the judging is supposed to be blind, often a judge will recognize someone's work and that can play for or against you. Some shows try to find judges who don't know the artists, while others look for experts in their medium. Most shows will also directly invite a limited number of artists. The show director may really want a particular artist in the show—because she knows that the artist tends to sell well or because she is a local who will bring in more visitors. Most shows are also looking for new or emerging artists, so don't be afraid to apply, even if you think the competition will be stiff. You never know when luck will come your way; if a show only has a couple of woodturners applying, your odds just went way up.

Whatever the reason for a rejection, don't take it personally; there ▶



A spare but elegant outdoor art show booth featuring work by the author. Booth photos are often required for application to art and craft shows.

Photo: John Beaver



A well-organized indoor craft show booth featuring work by Steve Doerr. Slatted shelving lends a themed “feel” to the display and provides varying heights for product placement.

Photo: Steve Doerr

are many variables that can effect your result. But don't forget, the next show will have different jurors and a different director (many shows have a new director and jury each year), so the outcome can change completely for you. As long as your work is good, your application is complete, and your photographs are decent, you will have a chance.

### Gallery shows

Now let's look at gallery shows, which are often themed. The number one factor here is the number of artists you are competing against, but that's not all. Similar to craft shows, there will be a jury with different tastes and aesthetics, and you just never know who will like your submission. I once submitted three pieces to a themed show. The marketing people chose one of the pieces for the cover of the show's brochure, but the jurors picked the other



The Collectors of Wood Art exhibition, “Why Wood? Contemporary Practice in a Timeless Material,” SOFA Chicago, 2016. Getting your work accepted into a gallery show involves several factors, including good quality photos and perseverance.

Photo: John Beaver

two for inclusion in the show. Stories like this are familiar to many artists and show how people’s tastes vary.

The jury process here generally works the same as it does for a craft show. Jurors rate the submissions and either get together to discuss them or pass the results to the show director. Each juror will see each submission differently. Does the piece fit the criteria and audience for the show? Does it fit the theme? Is the piece high enough quality? Is the photo decent? It is a very subjective process and one that shouldn’t be taken too personally by the artist. The show director also has the show’s needs to fulfill. Do we have enough variety? Are there big name artists that can help bring in buyers? Are we telling the story we want to tell? Do we have a good range in prices? Do we have work we think will sell to our clientele? Are we providing the right opportunities for our artists? There are many boxes that need to be checked for a show to be successful, so sometimes the director will invite artists to make sure the show’s needs are met.

### Inside a POP exhibition

I had the opportunity to speak with the jurors of the upcoming Professional Outreach Program (POP) show, *The Sphere – Second Round*. The POP exhibition’s primary goal is to represent the AAW’s professional woodturning artists—but it also seeks to discover untapped talent within the AAW’s general membership. To accomplish these broad goals, the show invites a certain percentage of artists (decided by the POP committee) and has an open call for the rest.

One POP juror noted, “We worked together for the invited portion, with guidelines in terms of percentage of foreign and women invitees. Additionally, we worked hard to include people who were not ‘regulars.’ There were a couple of exceptions for turners who were also featured presenters in Kansas City.”

There have been times in the past when the open call did not provide enough pieces to complete the show (in the past two years, there were less than thirty-five submissions). This year, the submission pool was strong and required careful consideration. The jurors were not shown the applicants’ names and ranked the work strictly on quality of work, originality of ideas, and image quality. They then worked with the show director to pick the finalists. *(See By the Numbers sidebar.)*

This is a perfect example of a show that had to fill certain needs beyond just selecting from the submissions. At the end of the day, about sixteen percent of the submissions were selected and quite a few good pieces were left out (including my own).

My final piece of advice is to keep applying. You may get turned down occasionally, but you never know when you will be the perfect fit for a particular show. ■

*John Beaver will be presenting a panel on craft shows at the AAW International Symposium this June in Kansas City, Missouri.*

## Tips for Getting Into Shows

- Provide good, clear, in-focus, and well-exposed images that make it obvious what your work looks like.
- Research the shows to see if they are looking for the kind of work you do.
- Follow the application guidelines and fill out your application carefully and on time.
- Present a consistent body of work.
- Keep applying, despite previous rejections.

## A POP SHOW—BY THE NUMBERS

This year’s POP exhibition is called *The Sphere – Second Round*. It will be on view at the AAW’s Gallery of Wood Art in Saint Paul, Minnesota, March 5 to June 4 and subsequently at the AAW Symposium in Kansas City, Missouri. Here is an inside look at the numbers.

**TARGET: 45 TOTAL PIECES**

### INVITED ARTISTS:

100 artists suggested by POP committee

35 actually invited

34%  First-time exhibitors

27%  Female

34%  International

66%  Participated in three or fewer past POP shows

### OPEN CALL SUBMISSIONS, BLIND SELECTION:

70 Submissions

10 Accepted

10%  Women (15% applied)

30%  International

### PAST 5-YEAR AVERAGES:

28%  First Time Exhibitors

27%  Female

34%  International

18%  Open call submissions