

Newsletter

MAINE CRAFTS ASSOCIATION

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MCA INTERVIEW: SAM SHAW, JEWELER

When did you join MCA? 1979.

Why? To be part of a new arts organization started by like minded people.

What is your current medium/interest in craft?

Jewelry. Gallery director. To support myself and family by doing what I do best. I simply must make things, and I enjoy making jewelry above all else. I work on the bench every day that I am at work despite the other pulls I am faced with; employees, family, gallery, etc. My jewelry is more important to me than the gallery, however the gallery is a work in progress and can easily be viewed as a creative endeavor which has the marks of my hands all over it.

Please describe the route your life has taken to get you to this medium/interest?

Once I decided that I would make my life as a jeweler, I went to Rhode Island School of Design to get my masters degree in light metals (jewelry).

I also decided to open up my own retail store as a response to the bizzare world (unpredictable and few) of craft shows, especially as they were in 1980. Both these decisions were fundamental to the measure of success that I enjoy today. My first store was 105 ft sq, or the size of a craft show booth, and I sold \$17,000 my first year. It is now 2,500 ft sq with 1.5 million of jewelry sales.

Why did you decide to join the Board when you did? It was a great honor to be asked, and I instantly said yes. I loved the informality of it, very much of a family. There was no reason not to, it was fun, things

were happening, and it was a logical extension of what I was doing as a studio jeweler. People talk of giving back; well I was too much of a novice to give back. I saw the Board as a way for me to expand my knowledge, skills and contacts. I am sure I contributed later, but in the first year or two, I was on the steep side of the learning curve. It was exciting and stimulating, who wouldn't want to be part of such an organization?



Beach Stone Ring w/ diamonds, 22 karat gold
photo: Robert Diamonte

What do you see as the function of the Board? In the early days, we perhaps played the role of indian rather than chief. Carolyn Hecker had a clear vision of what the organization could become. It was clear that she was at the helm, and she was very charismatic in her leadership. This was very comforting at the initial stages of the organization. However in the mid-80s some Board members felt the need to shift some of the leadership from the Executive Director to the Board. This was during my term as President, and I

remember many long phone calls searching for middle ground.

I rather liked Carolyn's top down methodology. The function of the MCA Board, like most boards, is to try to guess what the membership wants, and to fulfill that with very little money. The truth is that most boards act with very little input from the membership, which can be a blessing and a curse. Thus they must rely on their instincts when embarking on a project such as the Portland Craft Show. Missions such as education, communication, advocacy, are cornerstones of MCA and many non-profits. These can be fulfilled by the Board as much as the personnel and monetary resources allow.

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Most board members do the best they can, which is probably the most concise way to answer this question.

Over the years, MCA as an organization has spent a lot of time questioning its existence and purpose.

How do you feel about this self-exploration? I think this is a horrendous waste of time and is one of the true cesspools of boards. Self flagellation of the lowest order. There are many clear truths out there, and one is that you can never please all the people, all the time. So don't even try. But do try to do the best you can, which is always enough. If people complain, invite them on the board because they will probably make excellent board members.

What do you think MCA's function/goal is for the craft-making community? Having said that it is impossible to please all, it also seems clear that here are many things that most people can see as a good thing for craftspeople in Maine. Such include the newsletter which has at times been one of the best state guild publications in the country. Really! Marketing events, such as exhibitions, craft shows, museum shows, a retail shop, etc. Educational programs such as workshops, technical articles in the newsletter, slide portfolio, or scholarships to Haystack. Advocacy, which would include acting as a liaison to the state arts organization or national crafts organizations, as well as encouraging membership to mobilize for relevant legislative actions. Social events and parties to keep us all silly.

These are all things that MCA has done over the years, and continues to do on intermittent levels. What can be done is obvious, how to do it is harder. The inclinations of the current Board and Director will set the priorities and where the resources of time and money will be spent. It is logical that it be driven by the top. We elect our board to make these decisions for us, and I am willing to let them. I know they have our best interest at heart.

For the larger audience? There has been a maturation of the general audience which now mostly understands what we do and why it is more desirable than some other products. Our products (the larger "we") have become mainstream. One can buy the products we make in most malls in the country. Thus, MCA should ignore the task of educating the public en masse, because it has already happened to a large degree. The critical mass of customers has been reached. Ignore the others because they will never get it.

How do you think we can meet these goals? The goal of MCA should focus on the membership. MCA has already done many of the things that any crafts organization does. MCA has an excellent history and is venerable by most states standards. However, many of MCA's proudest achievements have been abandoned. It is far harder than merely stating, but we need only revive the worthy projects that the MCA Board feels are attainable and sustainable. Such might include the Portland Craft Show, major workshop weekends and annual or semi-annual regional meetings in 8 to 10 locations throughout the state. They need not be reinvented, just resuscitated.

Where do you see MCA in 5 to 10 years? Is it possible that we can increase the membership threefold to what it was in 1989? That would be something. MCA seems to be in a bit of a rut. It is hard to attract new faces. It is all up to the Board.

Where do you see yourself in ten years? Total bliss.