

Artists Interview

Behind the Scenes with Jewelry Artists Maureen & Rebecca Worth

When Rebecca Worth was preparing for her own wedding on August 1999, she couldn't find a suitable headpiece. "We can do better than this," she remembered thinking about everything she saw or tried on. The result: she created the first in what is now her Heirloom Tiara Collection, introduced in 2001.

Maureen Worth had been dabbling in ceramic jewelry and pottery since the '60s, but never thought she could make a living at it. Nearly 30 years later, she decided to pursue her dream. After positive feedback at some local retail shows and a local gallery, and being joined by her daughter Rebecca, the former psychology professor and academic dean, has turned her passion for art into a successful business. The Lexington, Va.-based mother-daughter team did their first wholesale show two years ago, and are finding their place in the crafts field.

Their business, Sylvan Spirit, is growing quickly, bringing Maureen closer to another dream: to provide employment opportunities to talented women struggling to find work in a rural community with limited career options.

TCR: Maureen, how did you first get involved with clay?



Maureen: My first memories of clay are of living on a small farm in mid-Missouri right in the middle of it! (Gasconade County, Missouri, is the heart of the Missouri fire clay deposits. (Fire clay is used in objects, such as firebricks -- often found in chimneys -- which are exposed to intense heat.) Our farm had several of them, and two of my uncles owned a clay mining business.) I played in it ... and even got stuck in it when I was five, while walking through a very muddy field in early spring.

The farm and the people in my family and community had significant influences on my craft life. I grew up in an extended family, and have many memories of relatives making things with their hands. My grandmother, mother and aunts quilted, sewed, made rag rugs, cooked homemade soap, crocheted, knitted and canned fruits and vegetables. My father, brothers, grandfather and uncles were carpenters, bricklayers, welders, whittlers, and banjo and fiddle players.

The two-room school I attended had a basement full of wood scraps and coping saws. When we finished our lessons, we cut out our favorite magazine photos, glued them to the wood and made jigsaw puzzles. We etched aluminum discs to make trays. We made papier-mâché projects, painted or drew pictures. In short, crafts were a daily part of my life both at home and at school.

I left for college in the early '60s. One of my first classes was art craft fundamentals, and I loved it. It never occurred to me, though, that I could make a living doing crafts, so I majored in education, thinking that teaching would provide a more steady income. Of course, following my family tradition, I continued to make things with my hands. One year it would be needlepoint, the next crochet. I graduated from college, married Jim Worth, moved to Colorado, taught elementary school, and took a pottery course at the YMCA. We moved to Indiana in the early '70s, and had our two children, Ben and Rebecca. Soon after Rebecca was born, we moved to Virginia. I began graduate work in counseling and received my doctorate in counseling in 1979. After graduation, I taught psychology at a local college and co-authored two books on counseling: "Adulthood in the Life Cycle" and "Counseling Adults: a Developmental Approach."

TCR: When did you begin selling your work?

Maureen: I worked at pottery as a hobby for a number of years, and then created my own line of ceramic jewelry, before beginning to sell it. I first sold my work through a local cooperative gallery, called Artists in Cahoots (see box) and at very small, local retail shows.

TCR: Rebecca, what was the draw for you to work with Maureen in the studio?



Rebecca: Mostly I have gotten my inspiration for this work from my mother. She began dabbling in clay when I was 13 or 14. I used to help her in the studio and also in the gallery or at craft shows (usually very small outdoor shows). At the time, she was teaching psychology at a women's college. We were working with ceramics mostly as a hobby.

During my senior year in high school I took my last class [of the day] as an independent study in ceramics. I would leave school early and work with mom in her basement studio. We worked on mainly making beads, jewelry and wheel-thrown pottery pieces. Even my friends would help out as an after-school job, loading and unloading kilns, gluing earring backs, applying clear glazes to jewelry pieces, etc. It would get pretty crazy, but we had a great time. I sometimes wonder how mom kept sane with all of us running around and eating all the food in the house.

After high school, I went to Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass., as a cultural anthropology major and did a study of Pueblo pottery as my senior thesis. For a semester during my second year at Hampshire I lived in Japan as part of an independent study. I had such a great experience there that after college I moved back. I worked and lived for a year and a half in Karatsu, a city famous for its ceramics.

Japan was a wonderful experience for me. On a personal level I was meeting truly wonderful people, and I felt independent for the first time. In addition, the pottery

was exquisite! Mom came to visit me for about a month, and we went to every pottery kiln possible. We took lessons with some potters and learned about their profession. The thing that struck me the most is how revered potters are in this area. It is not just that they could easily charge \$100 for a tea-cup size bowl, but that the town really looked up to them as great artists who were keeping the pottery styles of Karatsu alive.

Living in Japan gave me some insight on ceramic art that I had never understood before: that one could make a respectable living doing something you really loved. It was not just a pastime, it was an entire way of life which shaped their lives on a career level and on a spiritual level. When Japanese people asked me about my mother, I was so proud to say, "My mom is a potter." It sounded so much better than, "My mom is the academic dean of a college."

When I returned from Japan, I went back to Virginia to help mom with Sylvan Spirit. That first year was all about discovering how to build the business. Lots of time and money went into display, studio supplies, show fees and travel, and into creating our jewelry line.

We would find ourselves in strange little shows looking at each other thinking, "Why are we here?" The business did not make much money. But mom had read all these books on starting businesses, and she kept explaining that this was the "build-up phase." It made sense, but I know that if I had been by myself I would have had a tough time keeping up with the financial burden as well as the emotional strain. It helped that my father was very supportive of our endeavors. He tried to help whenever possible, but mostly his patience and encouragement gave us incentive. It seems that with every month that goes by and every new show we do we learn some little tip or gain a new perspective that helps us grow. So, after just a few years, I can already look back and see how much we have progressed. I have even tried to keep a journal of the business just so I can keep my own perspective of where we are now and where we are heading. If nothing else, it is fun to laugh about all the times we learned the hard way.

TCR: Maureen, when did you leave your academic career to pursue your business full time?

Maureen: Because of our success at Artists in Cahoots, Rebecca and I realized that there was indeed a market for our jewelry and pottery. This validation made it possible for me in 1995 to, finally, with my husband's support and blessing, quit my academic job and become a full-time craft artist. The experience of being members of Artists in Cahoots has been of great value to us in learning about the arts and crafts business.

By working in the gallery, we are confronted with the same issues that all gallery owners face: how to assemble a creative group of arts and crafts and how to market them. We can say with confidence that certain items have an appeal to certain customers -- e.g., professional women who want a new way of expressing their individuality by wearing innovative designs, or retired women who want to depart from their already extensive collection of traditional jewelry.

TCR: When did you first go beyond the small local shows?

Maureen: In 1997, we began to apply to both wholesale and retail craft shows, and are now in the process of finding our place in both markets.

This venture has been a new challenge for us, and we are gratified to encounter many supportive colleagues. For example, at one of our first wholesale shows, we

were across the aisle from John Whitney, a wonderful person with years of experience and a willingness to share ideas. By the end of the show, he had thoroughly redesigned our very busy and complicated booth. He suggested more effective display options and even gave us the name of one of his sales representatives who he thought might be able to help us. At the next show he congratulated us on finally being able to see our jewelry instead of all the "fluff." At the same show, Doe Cross and Gail Goldin were likewise quite willing to share their tips on marketing. Greg Sandage, our "Cahoots" colleague, has been helpful from the very beginning with information on which shows might be good for us. Books also have been very helpful. Wendy Rosen's first edition of "Crafting as a Business" is completely "dog-eared" and battered by now, and her second edition is quickly becoming well worn. What we particularly like are her outlines and lists of what to do and when to do it.

TCR: Who are your primary customers?

Rebecca: Usually our customers are women, 35 years of age and older. They already have diamonds and gold, and are looking for something a little different. They can be conservative, but they are looking for a little flair to add to their wardrobe.

TCR: How much of the business is dedicated to jewelry and how much to pottery?

Rebecca: In the gallery and at retail shows we sell about 50/50 of each. However we really don't wholesale the pottery except to a few select shops, as it is difficult to produce in larger quantities.

TCR: When did you put up your Web site?

Rebecca: We had set a goal to get a Web site up and running by the Buyers Market of American Craft in Philadelphia this past February. I got a lot of guidance from a friend of mine who does computer work for a living. I wanted to try to do the entire Web page myself, but with limited time (and very little Web experience), we decided to hire a high school student to help us out. He was trying to get some Web pages together for his college portfolio, so he was willing to work with us at a reasonable rate.

TCR: How has your Web site affected your business?

Rebecca: For starters, it gives us the wide audience of computer folks. It also gives our customers a constantly updated catalog. My guess is that most of the gallery owners will still want to chat on the phone to talk about what is best for their store. However, with our Web page they can preview our styles and read about us before they call. It gives them another way to organize their thoughts and look at our work on their own time. We're always trying to think of ways to make their task of buying and running a gallery a little bit easier.

TCR: What challenges do you encounter in working together as a mother-daughter team? How do you deal with them?

Rebecca: When I first moved back to Virginia, I lived in my old room at my parents' house. At first this was great. I had the convenience of not having to find a place to live, I could wake up and go right to work, and mom and dad treated me like a house mate rather than a child. However, it was hard to really feel you could get away from the studio. The challenge became separating work from home. Mom

and I were becoming workaholics because the business had moved too far into our living space.

Eventually I moved out into the country, where I live alone (except for Maggie, the cat). At my parents' house, we moved the business to the attic and the basement, each with a door to shut at the end of the day.

The biggest issue then came in communicating. We have found it vital to be exceedingly clear about accounts, expectations of our assistants, and most importantly, about who is doing what. We quickly have learned to delegate authority in different areas of the business. That way, neither of us ever gets overwhelmed by the feeling we are running an entire business single-handedly. We work in the same house but don't get a chance to really talk business until we are trapped in our truck for six hours on the way to a show. Our best business plans, budgets and scheduling have been done in the front of our pickup truck. I really see the benefits of working with my mother more than the challenges. Not only do we have the same goals, but I really feel that we respect one another. If I'm at a show and I see that mom is getting worn down, it gives me more energy to keep going. Likewise, it always seems that she is right there to pick up for me when I am dragging.

I think that we are lucky that our personalities complement one another. She is the introvert, and I am the extrovert. She knows how to make box corners with the display fabric, and I know that our e-mail address is not our Web site address! Mostly we just try to make everything fun. We used to really try to cut corners to save money, but we quickly learned when to cut and when to splurge. You simply have to take some time and money to make the business fun. When traveling, we always have a nice dinner, we stay at moderate-to-nice hotels, and we try to give each other breaks. Back in the studio, we have lunch out at least once a month to touch base with each other. Either of us can take off for a day or so and know the other is handling things at home. Our relationship is a combination of respect, confidence and free spirit.

TCR: Where do you expect your business to go from here?

Rebecca: There will soon be some fairly significant changes in the business. In the summer, I will be getting married and moving to Richmond, Va., about two hours from Lexington. We intend for this to be an expansion rather than a division, but it will certainly take some work. I will probably be commuting back to Lexington several times each month to meet with mom, work at the gallery, and go over jewelry designs. We also anticipate having a lot of travel time together since we will continue to do shows.

We do hope we can build up the wholesale side of the jewelry business so that we can cut back a little on the shows. However, we will always do some retail shows. We feel it is important to keep up with our retail customers.

I know everybody says this, and I know it sounds so utterly trite, but making money is really not our top priority. Sure, we are in business, and we have to make some money to survive in society. But we really are aiming to create a lifestyle where we both find confidence, productivity, freedom and enjoyment. We've both taken a lot of risks, it has been a lot of work, and sometimes we are completely exhausted. Yet having made all this effort really adds to the satisfaction of seeing people happy with their pottery or jewelry.

Noelle Backer is the senior editor of *The Crafts Report*.