

Most of us who work with polymer clay have other sources of income. We sell at a show or two, or present our wares on the Internet through personal sites or auctions. We may even have our work featured in local galleries. Very few artists and crafters in the polymer clay universe make their living solely from working with clay.

This, to me, begs the question: Is crafting a viable business? Let's say you are going for a business loan to get started. What will you say to the loan officer when they ask you what proof you have that crafting is worth their risk? Perhaps a skeptical spouse or family member would need to be convinced. Well my dear reader, you have a statistical ally in making your case.

In 2001, for the very first time, a study was made to assess the economics of crafting as a business venture. The Craft Organization Directors Association released their Craft Industry Economic Impact Survey results last year. The information contained in this report is very enlightening to those who might be thinking of taking their hobby to the next level.

The loosely defined subset of American business known as the Craft Industry is a \$14 **billion**-a- year enterprise. That is a heck of a lot of scratch. It is also a very valuable number when dealing with those who need some convincing that you can actually make money at this effort.

For our purposes let us define who is responsible for that \$14 billion a year. The Craft Industry is made up of all those who create and market items that are made by hand.

The crafter and those who purchase the work will generally agree that the craft community contributes and has historically contributed to the richness of our American culture. One only has to look at the popularity of a place like Silver Dollar City, or visit a large craft fair, to see how we ooh and ahh at the abilities of those who make things with their hands. Whether rustic or highly polished, there is a mystique to the artisan's work. But beyond that impact to our heritage, what is the impact on the economics of the country?

Without some statistical information, we are hard pressed to show that crafting is an undertaking that is worthy of consideration for grants, loans, or other forms of investment. The nearly deceased concept of the "cottage industry" has been in an ever-growing resurgence for decades. Most students of the U.S. economy will say that small and home-based businesses are actually **growing** sectors while many others are waning. People begin to realize that there are ways to bring in additional income, other than taking on a second, traditional job. One of the most vibrant, and I think most effective, of these cottage industries is crafting.

Knowledge is power, my friends, and I think in this case it is encouraging power. To that end I am going to give you some of the economic statistics as reported in the survey *The Impact of Crafts on the National Economy*. I cite them as reported by the National Craft Association.

The Stats

- There are about 125,000 crafters working today in the U.S.
- The average gross revenue for each of these crafters is about \$76,000.
- The yearly economic impact is around \$14 billion. For reference, the Taxi Industry rates in at about \$3.5 billion.
- Over 50% of sales are direct retail sales. About half of that figure is done at craft fairs.

- 27% of yearly sales are wholesale and another 11% comes from galleries.
- Most of us, 64%, are women.
- The median age of American crafters is 49.
- Nearly 80% of us work in our home or in a home studio.
- About 80% of crafters are members of a guild or other craft organization.
- Most crafters work alone or with one partner, while 16% have paid employees.

The 70-page complete survey is available from Handmade in America for \$50.00. You can send an e-mail to wnccrafts@aol.com for more information.

I think it is very useful to know that there are many people who are really making money doing crafts. Personally, I think I exemplify most of us. I sculpt, and will continue to do so, simply because I love to do it. I don't make enough to even pay for my clay! But it is encouraging to know that with the proper dedication, one can make a decent living creating things with their hands.

A Few Tips

As a crafter and a consumer, there are some things I think we all should keep in mind when selling our work. These are things we all know, but it never hurts to take a moment and reflect.

- Your finished product is only as good as the raw materials. Sure, it's tempting to skimp and save, but inferior components will eventually show in the work. Always strive to use the best products available.
- Be realistic about your prices. Don't price yourself out of the market, but don't sell yourself short either. There are many theories on pricing your work. Find one that suits you.
- Establish relationships and network with other crafters and artists. You will get ideas, exposure and a lot of personal support.
- Market yourself well. No one will be able to buy your work, if they don't know about it. Try to make these efforts as professional as possible.
- Be kind and thoughtful to those who buy or showcase your work. Often in smaller markets, word of mouth and the goodwill of others will be your best advertisement.

Okay, gentle reader, no rant this month. I hope that in starting the New Year, this installment of PC, not too PC will be an encouragement to you. If what you really want to do is make a living at working with polymer clay, you can. If you want to just play, well at least you know you are part of a living tradition that not only compliments our unique culture, but also adds to the economic well being of the nation.

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