

## London Potters Newsletter article - Exhibiting Ceramics By Leslie Parrott

The invitation from the LP Newsletter editors to write an article on my personal experience of exhibiting ceramics came as something of a surprise, albeit a pleasant one, and in accepting it there was a chance to reflect upon a recent change of lifestyle. Many LP members already have extensive exhibiting credentials so my apologies to them if I seem to be stating the obvious; the aim here is to provide thoughts on what I have learned and thereby encourage the less experienced to take the plunge.

I took a major plunge five years ago when the “*regular income job*” was abandoned and full-time ceramics commenced. The regular job started as research on the performance of construction materials and involved collaborating with engineers, physicists, chemists, environmental analysts and material scientists. This was ideal training for a budding self-employed ceramist. The funding for research tends to follow the financial ups and downs of the parent sector and, over the years, as practical research changed into desk research, administration of external research projects, liaising with government departments and committee representation my original intentions regarding a “hands-on” career were slowly diluted to the extent that a change was needed. The ceramics courses and evening classes that had been a hobby offered a potentially satisfying route out.

Some technical and environmental consulting work helped to finance the initial phase of building a studio, constructing a small propane kiln and purchasing ceramic materials. I decided to focus on one-off, cone 12 porcelain and stoneware functional pots, but non-functional items persistently creep under the commercial radar. Fear of intellectual stagnation steered me towards making plenty of one-off pots and including glaze and clay body experiments in every firing. To minimise accumulation of pots the prices are kept at a level that covers all expenditure and generates a small income. The main items of expenditure apart from those for material and fuel costs are mileage and exhibiting. Exhibiting charges often include a large administration component and, unless one can command high prices and copious sales, direct hire of exhibition space, either personally or with a non-profit group, is preferable.

Solo exhibitions offer an opportunity to show my sculptures and pictures whilst providing a more interesting backdrop for the ceramics. I hold two or three such exhibitions each year with one just before Christmas and advertise through announcements in the press, local posters and mail shots. The posters need to be carefully designed and include the minimum of information regarding dates, opening times and location, especially the post code. Pot sales are always exceeded by the number of business cards & future venues leaflets taken but I like to assume that this home produced advertising pays off. I also display an artist's statement and a single A4 sheet showing the sequence of steps involved in making ceramics; many people genuinely welcome these and they are often a prelude to an interesting discussion. I usually display pots in colour groups and this is in line with a recent article by a gallery owner in Crafts (October 2008) indicating that many people like to consider how a purchase might fit into its domestic setting.

Stewarding of solo exhibitions can be onerous and ceramic or mixed media exhibitions with other artists can reduce this load. In addition there are the advantages of a broader invitation and advertising profile, shared exhibition costs, useful gossip and a chance to find out more about fellow artists. In addition I organise an annual charity ceramic exhibition in Langley, Berkshire with about 15 other potters. This has a good mailing database, low participation costs, a raffle of the pots provided by each potter and a preview with refreshments. It is a Saturday event and the raffle and sale commission raise several hundred pounds for the designated charity plus a similar amount for the potters. If any LP members would like to participate in February 2009 (probably in support of Cancer Research) please contact me. Membership of many arts groups is dominated by painters, who are almost as companionable as potters and they will often welcome ceramists to co-exhibit in order to broaden the appeal of their exhibition and create a more stimulating gallery space.

At the end of an exhibition a dispassionate analysis of the attendance, sales, commissions and promotional benefits in relation to total costs is always salutary and is useful in planning the diary for next year and deciding the best bids for space.

Exhibitions allow an artist time to reflect on their recent work and see if an alteration in course is needed. If any members of London Potters would like to meet the author and see an example of his approach they would be most welcome at “Les Parrott Ceramics and Images”, The Cow Byre, Ruislip HA4 7QL between 14 and 20 December 2008

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