

A Life In Art

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

“To Be Of Use”
Marge Piercy

I come from a family of artists and artisans, musicians and masons, actors and film directors, chefs and builders, tinkerers and makers. I've been in the company of creative people since I was a very young child. My father was a mural artist who for most of his career worked in churches, public buildings, and private residences. Later in his career he did mostly studio work.

I think of myself as a sculptor whose works are functional art.

I set up my first shop at the age of 8 in the unused coal room of the basement of our home in Brooklyn. By the time I was 12 my carpentry skills were good enough to do odd repair jobs around the house as well as those of friends and neighbors. I always had money in my pocket. My first commission, at 7, was to build a radiator cover for our kitchen. Each time I finished a task, the satisfaction of a job well done was an exhilarating experience and added to my knowledge and ability. In my teenage years I built functional model aircraft. These were complex machines made of balsa, plywood and silk fabric, sometimes built from kits, and other times from plans. They used small but powerful engines that burned nitromethane as fuel. I built them to fly and compete in model aircraft events. At a meet in 1961 my prize for a 6' wingspan true to scale 4 engine B-29 was a 30 minute ride in an Air National Guard P-51 Mustang. I forged my mothers signature on the release, donned a pressure suit and had one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life. I had an after school job at a large midtown Manhattan hobby store building model planes and boats for display and sale.

I developed a sense of empirical engineering. I learned about structural design and integrity, about strength of materials and especially about the analytical engineering method of making things. At the same time I was drawn by the beauty of shapes and forms and ways to incorporate grace into whatever I made.

I put myself through 3 years of engineering school working as a finish carpenter with a flair, and after that, 3 years as an Officer in the Army Corps of Engineers. My military specialty was building things —roads, buildings, utility systems - even 60 hole latrines. I

was once tasked with building a 600 gallon wood fired cooker for a Vietnamese swine cooperative. They would cook and sterilize the edible waste that the co-op collected on the US Army base to feed their pigs.

Since then I have been able to make a living at something that I love to do. It is my business as well as my hobby. The thrill of creation gets stronger as I progress in experience and diversity.

In February of 1971 , I packed everything I owned into a new pickup truck and left the East Coast to become a Californian - my genes are Mediterranean and California is that.

For a few years I built and remodeled homes in Laguna Beach, CA. Before long I was doing more furniture and unusual architectural details in wood, metal, and stone. In 1973 I brought some of my work to an open jurying for the Laguna Beach Arts Festival. This was a well respected "Fine Arts" festival but at the time the difference between arts and crafts was blurring. I became the first furniture maker in this show. I sold well and received enough commission work to continue. My work was accepted as art, and that directed the arc of my career.

The Laguna Festival is a 7 week long show and exhibitors must live in the Laguna Beach local area. In 1978 I moved to Santa Barbara and had a more than adequate private clientele with a few gallery shows here and there. Furniture is a difficult medium

for galleries to sell well. In the early 1990s I felt I needed a wider audience and started doing arts and crafts shows nationally.

Every medium has its own marketing characteristics. For me, with furniture, shows are not as much a sales as an advertising event. I connect with clients who sometimes buy what I have on display, but more often provide future commissions. I enjoy the collaborative process of working with clients and designers and architects. I am still the final arbiter of the quality and essence of whatever I do. I do that not for ego but for the integrity of my oeuvre.

The odds against supporting oneself as an artist are daunting. There is a long learning curve to get to a point of viability. This kind of art/craft is not easy or quick. All of my pieces are unique , in essence each is a prototype, and there is little economy of scale. The specific techniques I use make each an exercise in virtuosity and not something that I can easily delegate to assistants or make amenable to large scale production. I try to do fewer commissions at higher prices. This allows me to put everything I have into each one. The best piece is always the next one. Along with that learning curve is an earning curve. For me , being an artist is a lifetime commitment. It involves blending the personal with the professional. This is not simply my job , it 's my life. Most of my creations will long outlive me and many will be around literally for centuries. It's ironic that many functional objects are sometimes treated as craft when they are made and high art when on display in a museum, 300 years later. The perception of my work as art changes the economic nature of it. I never expected to become a millionaire doing

what I do - I do this to feed my family. I do this for a kind of immortality. I do this because I really love doing it. It is what's in my soul.

Artists are entrepreneurs. Besides learning the skills we must learn how to find and adapt to the market. Being an artist is a business as well as a cultural expression, we have to live in both worlds. Most fail not because of lack of talent (although I have seen some awful work) but because of not being able to make what we make a part of the real world. Survival is a function of pragmatism. Fortunately the world provides what I need.

When I started doing shows I was struck by the skill and commitment of my fellow exhibitors. Over the years I have been in the company of hundreds of artists and have learned to appreciate the depth of that commitment and the people who embrace it.

I've been inspired by and have inspired many of my peers. I see them not as competitors but as other actors in this production that we put on. We entertain and educate the public about what art is, what it can do in our society, and who we are.

I see this as a higher function, but symbiotic with my livelihood. Hearing others' back stories has been enlightening and corroborative of my experiences.

I feel stronger as an artist because of my connection with the community of craftspeople. I think one of the reasons people collect the art of living artists is because

of the personal connection. Doing commissions is an exercise in trust in itself . In essence , clients buy it before they see it. Almost all of my work is done on a handshake and a promise.

Because of the scale of my work I drive to shows towing a trailer and I deliver most works personally. Doing this has taken me to every part of the country and a few foreign places as well. Each trip is an adventure . I've made thousands of pieces of furniture over the years and have met as many interesting, generous art lovers who have become friends.

I feely lucky to have been able to support myself and to contribute to our culture. I can envision some of my furniture in the 'Antiques Roadshow' of 2314 with my name on the bottom. I'll be smiling from somewhere.

Victor Di Novi