



Promoting Individual Creativity, Excellence & Growth Through Education & Cooperative Spirit

**Oregon Potters Association**

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**The Oregon Potters Association**

**18 Years of Growth and Change**

by Janet Buskirk

As I stood in my booth during last year's Oregon Potters Association (OPA) annual "Ceramic Showcase" and looked at the long, long lines of customers, I could not help but think about all of the hours of work, late nights, camaraderie, risks and difficult decisions that have made the organization what it is today.

I joined OPA in 1986, when the group was six years old. Since then, I have made a lot of close friends while learning more than I thought I wanted to know about running a large cooperative and show.

In every organization, a few strong personalities get the ball rolling, take on the largest projects and steer the group through hard times. With almost 400 members, the OPA has been lucky to have included many such people. Serving a large membership is complicated, but OPA has always managed, and in the process, it has become a strong, tightly knit group.

It all began in 1979, when the Oregon School of Arts and Crafts sponsored a series of "Confabulations." These were intensive, inspiring conferences, workshops and social events for artists in various media, and they lit a fire under several local potters who discussed the possibility of forming a group for ongoing inspiration and direction. Tom Coleman, Ellen Currans and Bert McDowell called upon 18 other potters, organized an initial meeting and the fledgling organization was hatched.

The original name was the Oregon Potters Cooperative. In 1985, the name was changed to the Oregon Potters Association because we did not fit the legal description of a cooperative. The word "cooperative," though, is important, since cooperation was and still is the most important part of this group.

The founders wanted to accomplish five things 1. supply materials and equipment at low costs; 2. serve as an ombudsman and spokesman for Oregon potters to the public, galleries and national ceramics organizations; 3. share information and problems; 4. provide learning experiences, encourage growth and excellence in our craft; 5. provide social opportunities and mutual support.

In March 1980, the co-op had its first meeting; 56 potters paid dues. Oregon School of Arts and Crafts kindly allowed the co-op to use their address for mail, and also loaned their facilities for meetings and as a distribution point for chemicals during the group buys of materials.

For the first few years, the co-op was focused on purchasing and studying materials. Many members made their own clay, so the co-op arranged bimonthly purchases of dry materials. Group buying also resulted in discounted prices on glaze materials, kiln furniture, cones, moist clay, bricks, colorants and other items.

In addition, interested members held discussions on new materials, discontinued materials and their substitutions, kiln construction, glaze and body formulation, local clays, hydraulic pressing and other concerns. Research forums held prior to meetings sometimes spawned splinter groups (a "Cone 6 group" still meets occasionally to troubleshoot mid-range clay and glaze problems).

Meetings also featured speakers on other topics of interest effectively displaying work; bookkeeping for artists; marketing; panel discussions from gallery owners; art law; demonstrations of new techniques; and many other topics.

One of the co-op's strengths was and still is this information exchange, all documented in a newsletter that Ellen Currans started that first year. To this day, it remains a vital source of information for all members.

To put this in perspective, in 1980 the Northwest was in a tremendous economic recession. Jobs and money were scarce. There were not many places to sell work, especially higher-end pieces. Galleries and stores were unusually bad about paying for goods sold. The co-op responded by lobbying for the Oregon Consignment Law, as well as by consulting a lawyer and writing a model consignment contract, which many members still use. Another response was to develop their own sales venues; a gallery and an annual spring sale in Portland were planned.

"Showcase" was to accomplish two things educate the public and sell pots in the process. Demonstrations were arranged to show how work is made and fired. A collective gallery area was created to present the best work of every interested co-op member, regardless of whether he or she had a booth in the show, and the members voted on the best pieces in the gallery, with the co-op buying the three winners (now we only buy the first place winner) for the permanent collection. To finance the show, the co-op charged a booth fee of \$50 for an 8x8-foot booth, plus 15% commission; the commission on works sold from the gallery was 30%.

The first year, 35 people had booths; an additional 25 placed pieces in the gallery area. Everyone worked hard, and the sale grossed \$13,068. The show paid its bills and some money was set aside as seed money for the following year.

By 1984, the co-op had 150 members, but "Showcase" sales declined slightly. The board believed that more attention should be paid to publicity. The group persevered and decided to have a third show. The commission was raised to 20%, and "environment" displays were added to show ceramics in places where they might actually be used (as in customers' kitchens and gardens). Leslie Lee took over much of the publicity, and her committee spent many hours on the telephone, writing press releases and learning about publicity from the ground up. Sales went to \$28,378. Average sales were \$680 per booth, which looked great to the co-op members.

In 1986, when I had my first booth at "Showcase", there was so much interest in the show that there was not enough booth space for every applicant. The board decided everyone would get only half the space as before (4X8 feet). The people who made that decision were members who had worked hard to see the show grow, yet they gave up part of their own space in order to accommodate new participants.

Rather than resort to jurying the show, the board established "participation criteria", which were based on seniority, work done toward the show and work done for the organization as a whole. Thus, people who worked hardest would participate first.

At the same time, show chairman Dennis Meiners believed that we needed to buy ads and print a color poster. The advertising was a gamble for Dennis and for treasurer Pat Horsley, who sanctioned the use of every cent of the group's funds. Luckily for OPA and for Dennis, who was legally responsible, the gamble paid off. We grossed \$40,527, a 30% increase.

In 1988, "Showcase" was chaired by Catherine Wygant, a potter with extraordinary vision. She worked very hard, and expected the people around her to work as well. One of my first contacts

with her was when she telephoned me to ask if I was willing to work on the publicity committee. I agreed and, much to my surprise, discovered she had signed me up to be the chair of publicity. In retrospect, I think I was bamboozled. Although by then there were adequate funds to run the show, the advertising budget remained frugal. We stepped up our efforts to instigate free publicity, and Leslie Lee designed a new bold color poster.

Catherine wanted "Showcase" to become larger; however, not all members were comfortable with that idea. After much consideration and some heated debate, the show moved to a new location, allowing for 75 individual booths. A children's area was added, where kids could learn about clay while their parents shopped. Sales, at \$72,481, were the highest to date.

Yet 1988 and 1989 were difficult for OPA. The success of "Showcase" was making it the focus of the organization, and we often felt that the tail was wagging the dog. OPA group purchases were becoming difficult to coordinate and fewer people participated (this was in part because local suppliers had lowered their prices to compete with ours). In addition, membership had remained at 150 people for years. Those of us who had taken on the big jobs were tired, and there seemed to be no one to replace us. Sometimes only three or four people would attend a board meeting. Officers were not elected, but cajoled into leadership. Our successful show was draining the energy from the organization, leaving no time for other activities. Who could have imagined that success would bring such problems?

We began brainstorming. Twenty members held a two-day retreat to debate and plan the future. How could we sustain both "Showcase" and OPA? Ultimately, we decided to separate the finances and decision-making bodies of the two concerns. OPA would still be run by its board, but "Showcase", although accountable to the OPA board, would be run as a separate organization.

The OPA board was also concerned about a lack of newcomer involvement. Many of us who had worked closely for many years had become good friends. This tight-knit group seemed to intimidate newcomers, and made people reticent to volunteer. The problem, being somewhat intangible, was difficult to solve. The only solution we found was to increase communication with all members, both at meetings and through the newsletter, so that everyone would feel included and more people would step forward.

The board also wrote a mission statement for the OPA To promote individual creativity, excellence and growth through education and a cooperative spirit. There was talk of recreating the "Confabulations" of 1979, of having a retreat for potters to share ideas, demonstrate skills, socialize and get recharged. Everyone liked that idea, but all of the people who might have coordinated it were too busy promoting "Showcase."

By 1989, "Showcase" had expanded to 100 booths, and sales, at \$98,869, were continuing to improve. I still chaired the publicity committee, but was discovering that as sales went up and more people were involved, my responsibilities were much greater. For many of us, these increased responsibilities were a great strain. After doing the work for OPA, we often did not have much time left for our own studio work. (I remember one day when I counted the number of telephone calls I received regarding OPA and "Showcase." At 72, I stopped counting.) We were discovering that, with more membership and greater sales, we had to become more bureaucratic. The days of figuring things out as we went along were over.

At the same time, we wanted to maintain the camaraderie. For the annual picnic, we planned contests (throw the tallest pot, pull the longest handle, throw the longest slab, etc.), activities (pottery shot put and "smash-the-pot," a popular game where everyone brings old, ugly pots and we throw baseballs at them) and, best of all, an auction where people bring a good second, disguise it, and everyone bids on these anonymous pieces. The auction had an excellent auctioneer with a garish female assistant in a purple wig. Good times were had by all, outlooks improved, and the OPA was back on track.

In 1991, I was out of town for a week, and came back to discover that I had been elected president. I had been bamboozled again. By then, OPA was flush with new members, and with them came new vigor. According to a newsletter that year, it was no longer necessary to recruit board members by the "thumbscrew method"; instead, people volunteered to help because they wanted to and they saw opportunity for personal and professional growth. A five-person "steering committee" was organized to handle "Showcase" decision making.

The next year saw the group taking on new projects. We launched a project making mural tiles with homeless teenagers in Portland. We also began publishing a well-received annual map to potters' holiday studio sales in Oregon. By the end of the year, membership had soared to almost 300 people.

There was difficulty in securing a site for "Showcase" for the next two years, but in 1993 the show moved into the newly built Oregon Convention Center. With 130 booths, sales increased, profit increased and we even issued rebate checks to participants with the extra money we made. For the first time, we felt that we had some fiscal breathing room, so we voted to pay the "Showcase" chair and the publicity chair a small stipend. This was the first time we had paid any members for the huge amount of time they gave to the organization.

Back in 1987, Catherine Wygant had predicted that by 1994 "Showcase" could make one quarter of a million dollars. The 1994 total was \$254,858. The number of participants had grown to almost 200, as well as about 60 gallery participants. Many people joined the organization only to participate in "Showcase," then discovered that the "participation criteria" meant that members had to work on committees for a year (or a few years) before they had enough seniority to be in the show. Newer members wanted "Showcase" to expand to accommodate them. Longtime members felt that the show was already large enough to overwhelm our customers. In addition, with no central office or phone number, "Showcase" could not expand and have reasonable communication with the membership. Besides, there were no larger exhibit halls available.

Conflicts arose when a few newer members suggested that longtime members be rotated out of the show. Those of us who had nurtured the organization for many years remembered earlier days of immense work when our only rewards were camaraderie and more work (with very small financial reward). We worried that the cooperative spirit of OPA was being lost. Were members only concerned about whether they would get into the "money maker"? Our growing pains were the result of a longed-for, successful show.

The "Showcase" steering committee expanded to include more people, and we began the difficult task of coping with the growth. Many questions were asked: Who was our organization trying to serve? Professional potters? Up-and-coming potters? Students? Were "Showcase" and OPA serving the same people? Should the show be juried? Could a co-op show be juried and still have people willing to work on committees?

Again, we realized that communication was important. Many newer members had no idea how much effort it took to promote a large show, and they did not see the "behind-the-scenes" work that had been done for so many years. A mandatory meeting of "Showcase" participants was called to explain all the logistics and the current difficulties.

At the meeting, several suggestions were made. One was that "Showcase" add a group booth. This is an area where people who are not yet eligible for an individual booth can show a small body of work. The steering committee also began to rework the old participation criteria and turn them into a new points system. This system was more complex but less ambiguous than the old criteria. People are awarded a number of points when they take on a job for "Showcase" or the OPA. Points are totaled once per year, and members are ranked by these points to determine "Showcase" eligibility. This new system is a maze of bureaucracy, but is probably the only fair way to continue a co-op show.

In the meantime, the OPA began a new round of goal-setting. With the new, larger membership, there was the possibility of collecting enough money through dues to accomplish new projects. Annual dues were raised from \$25 to \$35, and the extra money was invested in sending each year's president to the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference, new computer equipment for the newsletter, subsidizing inexpensive workshops for members, establishing an OPA telephone number (after 14 years!) and, with help from other fund-raising efforts, paying members to go out into the community to teach art classes in areas where no art education had previously been offered. By 1996, OPA members were teaching in community centers, Head Start Programs, old-age homes and other places where there had been no clay education.

While the large purchases of the past are gone (few people still mix their own clay and local ceramics suppliers now offer reasonable prices), OPA continues to do discounted group buys on cobalt, tin, cones, kiln shelves and many other items. The newsletter has become a longer, even more informative publication. And the annual OPA picnic has become a really fun event. In 1996, for the first time, more people were nominated for board positions than could be elected.

The new enthusiasm for other OPA projects did not detract from "Showcase" The people who were in the show in 1983 are amazed at its success. "Showcase" has met the goal of providing potters with a new sales venue, and members are making enough money for it to be worth the long hours of work.

"Showcase" may be the only large, all-clay co-op show in the country. It is run entirely by the 200 participating potters with no paid staff. The show has succeeded because members are always willing to go the extra mile to finish a job. Also, the financial planning has been great. From the very early years, we have kept enough money in the bank to pay for the following year's show, thus ensuring that bills will be paid.

The most important ingredient in its success has been publicity. We spend as much money as we can afford on paid advertising, but free publicity (articles in newspapers, magazines, etc.) is more effective than advertising. We keep records of which publications have written articles, which stations have aired public service announcements and others who have helped us. We send thank-you notes. Most importantly, we have learned that for publicity you must be persistent. The rewards have been increased local and national coverage. Among the people responsible for our well-oiled publicity machine are Leslie Lee, Catherine Wygant, Nancy Hart, Lyn Sedlak-Ford, Ann Selberg and Audrey Graham. Everyone in the organization helps in some way, though. People add their mailing lists to the show promotion, we bring neighbors, we make some phone calls. The networking pays off.

A large part of the OPA's success can be attributed to the newsletter. It has kept the organization unified by dispersing information and communicating with members over a large geographic area. Another aspect of our success is the large number of people who are willing to "get on the phone" to find a free service, good advice or whatever else is needed. Members are willing to drive long distances to attend our meetings and network, and this networking has been responsible for starting the seasonal cooperative gallery Essence of Fire (see the May 1997 CM), as well as the artist-run Portland festival "Art in the Pearl."

OPA is a relatively large organization, especially considering that it is run exclusively by volunteers. (Four positions currently receive stipends, but these are quite low and the money is a "thank you", rather than fair compensation.) Necessarily bureaucratic systems are in place for the organization and "Showcase", yet somehow decisions are made magnanimously. Board members often vote against things that would benefit themselves because they do not feel that others would benefit. Members call each other and say, "You don't know me, but I am an OPA member. Could you give me advice on my clay-glaze fit problem?. Advice is happily given.

Somehow, although the road has sometimes been bumpy, and large amounts of money have become involved, the spirit of the original Oregon Potters Cooperative remains with us. Potters,

sculptors and everyone else associated with clay in this area have benefited from the shared information, mutual support and hard work that have come from this generous group.

The word "potter" in our name is meant to include anyone who works with clay. Membership in the Oregon Potters Association is open to any serious studio potter in Oregon or southwest Washington. Dues are \$40 per calendar year; the amount is not prorated. People who live over 100 miles from Portland and do not plan to use any of the other membership benefits may subscribe to the newsletter for \$10 per calendar year. Inquiries may be directed to Post Office Box 14614, Portland, Oregon 97293.