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## Art: So what's it worth to you?

**Ed Mahon** July 11, 2010 9:55am EDT

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STATE COLLEGE — Artists spend days, if not months, creating the pieces they bring to shows.



Craig Houtz

Musician/artist Preston Scott shows Greg Posteraro and Rachel Freed how to play a didgeridoo at his Gnarled Tree booth at the Central Pennsylvania Festival of the Arts on Saturday, July 10, 2010. CDT/Craig Houtz

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Figuring out what to put on the price tag can be just as tricky.

“That’s just so tough,” Marguerite Swope said her inside her booth along Fairmount Avenue, where she is selling hand-sewn scarves for \$20 and cowl tops for \$47. “And it’s hard because you know what effort you put into it, and you want to charge a really high price, and the market won’t bear it.”

The more than 300 artists who have been selling their work at the Central Pennsylvania Festival of the Arts are looking to do better than break even.

“To do a show like State College, an artist is probably going to lay out \$1,000 to \$1,500 in expenses, with no guarantee of selling anything,” said Tim Pollock, a Penn State professor of management and organization — and the husband of an exhibitor. “And that doesn’t include the risk of a storm

coming and blowing everything over.”

There are some general trends Pollock’s observed from his travel to shows: Works on canvas tend to sell for more than works on paper. Decorative items sell for more than ones that might be both decorative and functional, like a bowl or vase. Multiple reprints can hurt the value of an original. The best way to figure out a good price is to observe what peers are doing at other art shows. The booth space, the tables and cover for the booth itself, transportation, lodging, materials and insurance all go into the price.

But artists face plenty of ambiguity and room for compromise. And while the pricing problem boils down to the fact that a piece is only worth what someone’s willing to pay for it, figuring out that exact number isn’t easy — and has become particularly challenging during this recession.

“Making these little pieces that are affordable, they’ve really saved me at a couple shows,” said Bob Richey, a 60-year-old retired aerospace engineer and painter from Warminster.

At his booth this past week, he sold pastel landscapes with sharp colors. One of the most expensive pieces, the 18-by-18-inch framed “Out Of The Way Hillside,” went for \$900. But he also had dozens of unframed 4-by-4 miniatures that sold for \$65, pieces that he can often finish in a day or less.

“I learn a lot from them,” Richey said. “With the smaller ones you’re willing to take risks, try new colors. ... It just makes you loose.”

Those small ones can also build a customer base — Richey figures half of his sales are to repeat buyers.

### **Bargain backlash**

Artists are reluctant to reduce prices for fear of offending previous buyers, who often buy hoping their purchases will grow in value.

“If they come in and see art that they bought previously selling for less, that doesn’t make them feel good about the purchase,” said Pollock.

A professor in the Smeal College of Business, Pollock’s research focus on how value and price are determined in ambiguous circumstances, such as executive compensation.

He considers the market for emerging artists similar to the initial public offerings market, when privately owned companies enter the stock exchange. Those can be risky investments, driven in part by the reputation of those involved, because there’s little historical data on the company’s worth.

“What you’re really paying the bulk of the money for is things beyond the bricks and mortars. ... The intangible value is what you’re really buying. It’s the same with art. A lot of it is about the story you can tell about the piece.”

His wife, Sarah, included short stories — a little bit longer than a Twitter post — next to each of her paintings during Arts Fest.

She transitioned to full-time artist six years ago and focuses on two subjects: rural landscapes and cityscapes. “I find that the diversity helps bring people in,” she said, “and it keeps the work interesting to me.”

For Stephen Schiffer, tackling the business side of creating ceramics was a challenge when he began his full-time pottery career 38 years ago. On Thursday, a vase in the shape and

color of an oriole was priced at \$56. A penguin mug went for \$34. In the past, customers told him his prices were too low.

“I just was not willing to take what I thought was a risk in raising them,” said Schiffer, of Sunderland, Mass. “Because I’m dependent on making a living to pay all my bills.”

One booth over, Jack Hill’s work was much more expensive — and harder to lift.

His cast bronze sculptures weighed up to 130 pounds, and they all had witty anthropomorphic designs.

It takes three to four months to finish a piece and involves sending the sculpture to a foundry in Colorado to be cast in bronze.

Customers could pay \$950 for a sculpture of a snail, whose shell doubles as a tape dispenser; \$2,250 for a bitten-into apple that reveals the torsos of Adam and Eve in its core; and \$9,000 for three bananas, fighting for the top spot on a bowl of ice cream.

“What’s probably most challenging is being able to afford to do the casting, cause it’s such an expensive process,” said Hill, a former actor, magician, ventriloquist and wood carver from Beverly Hills, Fla. “That’s because it’s so labor intensive.”

Alan Holcombe has the market on his type of art close to cornered. He knows of only two other craftsmen who create large maps of the United States using license plates.

“One of them sells them for \$11,000. The other for \$4,000, and I’m \$1,600,” said Holcombe, who retired from the advertising department of a Delaware County newspaper in 1999 and started soldering license plates together shortly thereafter.

He says he hasn’t changed the price of those 50-inch-wide maps in 10 years.

“I’m retired. I don’t need any more money,” he said.

Still, it wouldn’t hurt. He knocked down the prices for his puzzles — based on the United Plates of America — from \$20 to \$15 for Arts Fest weekend.

“I want to sell a bunch of them. I want to be Walmart this weekend, with the puzzles,” Holcombe said. “I brought 600 of them. I thought with 100,000 people, all I’ve got to do get is one half of 1 percent, and that’s 500 buyers.

“That’s a lot of buyers.”

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