

Clay Fest

So You Want To Be a Clay Fest Poster Child...

After nearly 20 years of designing and producing the Clay Fest poster, postcards and print advertising, I think I've heard every possible variation of the question: "Why isn't my piece on the poster?" I take this to mean why it's not the big image - the "master shot" - rather than one of the smaller images that fill in the space. While I can't address the question as it regards to each and every one of your publicity submissions, I can take a little time to tell you what I look for, not just for the poster, but for publicity purposes in general. Some of this is obvious; some will be obvious in retrospect. Some may be surprising. Who knows? Some of it may be dead wrong. But here it goes.

Quality of the pot This one seems obvious. We want the best looking work out there representing our show. How your best work compares to someone else's best work gets into thorny problems of aesthetics that I hope to address below, but we should at least be starting with pictures of our best efforts.

Quality of the photograph This is every bit as important as the quality of the pot itself. I've been on show juries where we gave a dark or otherwise eccentric image the benefit of the doubt, but I can't do that here. The photograph needs to be well lit, in focus, with good contrast (range of light and dark tones) and depth of field (parts at different distances from the camera are equally sharp). If the photograph wasn't taken by a professional - and there are a number of them around who shoot jury images for artists - it should at least look like it was.

Resolution of the image If you're not firmly ensconced in the digital age, bear with me. The going might get a little bumpy here. I need to explain resolution. If you know what that is, skip to the last paragraph of this section, unless you want to laugh and point at my explanations.

Resolution is the measure of how much information is in your scan. It's measured in what printers call "dots per inch" (dpi), though computer geeks (and Adobe PhotoShop) use "pixels per inch". The more dots per inch, the bigger you can enlarge the image without loss of detail. The computer monitor shows only 72 dpi, so a lot of scans made for web sites use that as their default. For printing, we need more than four times the resolution, at least 300 dpi, or else the pictures will look blurred or blocky ("pixilated"). I can resize large low-resolution images to something crisper, but in the process, I lose size: a 15x20" picture at 72 dpi winds up less than 4x5" at 300 dpi. And you can't just use "Image Size" in PhotoShop to change the resolution. You can change the resolution to 300 dpi, but unless you fix the image size at 100%, the program just interpolates pixels by averaging what's on either side, and this doesn't make the image crisper. Sorry.

So what I need for the poster is an image at least 10x15 inches with resolution of 300 dpi. Postcard images can be smaller, around 5x8". Bigger is okay; scaling down is easy.

Background The stories I could tell you. I've gotten pictures of pots shot on doorsteps. Nestled in leaves. Hanging on the garage wall. Sitting on drapery of blue, or red, or a velvet so black that shadowed parts of the pot simply disappear.

I highly recommend either a neutral gray seamless backdrop big enough to show some "fall-off" (darkening with distance from the lens) or a graduated backdrop that's light gray in the foreground bottom and dark gray to black at the top (my choice).

Neutral backgrounds don't detract from the pot in the foreground, and make it much easier to fit together pictures of different pots on the same poster or card. We're not distracted by clashing backgrounds.

If the background is not patterned or textured, I can create the appearance of a graduated backdrop in PhotoShop, but it helps if I'm not trying to overprint a background that's super dark, bright, or strongly colored, as reflections on the pottery are an issue.

Cropping Here's where a good publicity picture differs from a jury image. When you're trying to get into a show, you want the pot to pop out at the jury. You want it big, you want it cropped as close to the edges as possible. This drives me nuts.

I need some neutral background showing all the way around the slide. I sometimes have to fit the image into a space it wasn't designed for. I sometimes need extra background on which to overprint the headline or inset smaller pictures or place a sponsor logo. With a little extra breathing space around the edges of the pot, I can

copy and clone background to suit, and you'd need a plate-maker's magnifier to catch me at it.

Format and Contents What do I need? A tall thin pot? A short wide one? Solo or in groups? Yes.

Tall pots are easy to make into posters. Short wide ones seem to work well as master shot for the postcard. Exceptions abound: my favorite poster is actually the 2003 horizontal format with a grouping of Joe Davis pots. The 2000 poster also uses a group of pots, as does the 2004 postcard. Groups are tricky to shoot, though. You need to be sure the pots are visually related to each other, and the shot is composed as carefully as a still life.

So don't worry what I need; give me good stuff and I'll find a use for it. Which leads us to that thorny definition.

Aesthetics How do I define "good stuff?" Admittedly, that's hard to pin down. Something to bear in mind, though, is what we want the images for.

This isn't a beauty contest, or a merit award. We're choosing pictures to publicize Clay Fest. So I'm trying to find a balance. I want the pot to be broadly representative of the show. I want it to be striking, attention getting. But I need it to be accessible. I want the non-potters looking at our poster to say "ooh", not "huh"? Our primary audience is the general public, not all of whom are as well trained in ceramic aesthetics as we'd like. Or as they will be after attending Clay Fest. I also want non-pots: sculpture, tile, garden art. I try to represent the broad spectrum of our work on publicity materials, so am happy to see whatever it is you're making.

Quantity and Submissions How many pictures is enough? At least one, of course; two is better. Half a dozen would be great. More than that, unless they're all substantially different in format or style, is probably overkill. Pick your best images of your best work.

There are several ways you can send me images. Simplest is email; now that high-bandwidth, high-speed internet is a thing, it's easy to attach a couple of pix to an email and send it off. Two or three attachments per email is ideal. If you have more, send a separate message. It used to be that cell phones would automatically downsize an image when they sent it, leaving me with postage-stamp sized pictures, but I haven't seen this problem lately, and it may no longer be an issue.

I can also transfer images from online storage sites: so far, I've worked with DropBox and Google Docs. If you have another possibility, email me first and we'll see if we can make it work.

If all else fails, there's physical media: CD-R or thumb drives. I'd rather not deal with these unless you've no other way to get me pix, as I'm as likely to lose your drive as to get it back to you.

Questions? If after reading all this you have specific questions, you can email me, your Poster/Graphics Chairperson at graphics@clayfest.org.