**Questions You Don't Have to Answer: Why Does This One Cost More Than That One? (Fine Art Views – March 29, 2012)**  
**by Luann Udell**

Dear Subscriber,

[*This post*](http://link.faso.com/c/142/f0d1502f019868dddd5e04ba9f75909f3c27c453ebbc3c262e8185b1a1e50fb5) *is by*[***Luann Udell***](http://link.faso.com/c/142/f0d1502f019868dddd5e04ba9f75909f3c27c453ebbc3c260530a9a3acb639c0)*, regular contributing author for FineArtViews.  Luann also writes a column ("Craft Matters") for The Crafts Report magazine (a monthly business resource for the crafts professional) where she explores the funnier side of her life in craft.  She's a double-juried member of the prestigious League of New Hampshire Craftsmen (fiber & art jewelry).  Her work has appeared in books, magazines and newspapers across the country and she is a published writer.  She's blogged since 2002 about the business side--and the spiritual inside--of art.  She says, "I share my experiences so you won't have to make ALL the same mistakes I did.*

It happens all the time.  A customer picks up an item in your booth, then realizes it’s more than another similar item.  One that looks exactly the same to the customer.  
  
“Why does this widget cost more than that one?” they exclaim. Sometimes there’s an easily-understood reason for our pricing.   
  
Size is often a factor, of course.  Bigger often means more materials.  More materials can mean more cost, especially for jewelers working in precious metals, or painters dealing with larger frames.  
  
Time is a factor.  Obviously, if one widget takes us an hour to make, and another takes us three days to make, the price will reflect that.  
  
Some 2-D artists charge by the square inch, because both more materials and more time are involved.  It’s a straightforward formula, and makes pricing simpler.  
  
Sometimes our process and techniques are harder for us than other ones.  Some of the artifacts I make take less work than others.  Others take much more work to get ‘just right’.  So thought, and problem-solving, and energy have an impact on my prices.  
  
But sometimes those pricing decisions have nothing to do with time, or cost of product sold.  Sometimes more intangible factors are at work. In justifying the *tangibles*, and explaining *those intangibles* are where we artists can get in trouble.  
  
You may remember my example of someone using a pair of manicure scissors to cut my grass.  Do I really believe I should pay more for them to mow my lawn, just because it takes them longer?   ‘More time’ is not always ‘better.’ Maybe it just means you’re slow.  Time is not always an acceptable factor in pricing.  
  
Sometimes materials are….well, immaterial.  My synthetic clay costs a lot more per pound than earth clay.  On the other hand, it’s still not as expensive as a lot of other art materials.  If one object weighs one ounce, and another weighs five ounces, though my costs are increased by a factor of five, we’re still talking only a difference of a few dollars between the two.  And I rarely lose work to faulty kiln firings, glaze mishaps or breakage, either.   
  
On the other hand, even slight cost variances between two pieces will be multiplied over the production of hundreds of artifacts.  And even a $10 difference in time and materials will more than double when I calculate my wholesale cost, and more than double again for a gallery’s retail price.  The difference between a $1,400 painting and a $1,500 painting may seem moot.  But the difference between a $140 item and a $1,400 seems more formidable.  
  
Even more confusing are the emotional and judgmental decisions we make when pricing.  Maybe a new concept or design takes hours of research and practice to finesse.  It’s tempting to make that new item’s price account for that extra time, straight out of the box.  
  
Or maybe one item as a tiny flaw, or imperfection, or just doesn’t seem as nicely done as that other item.  Here, too, it’s tempting to charge less, thinking it’s not quite our best work.  (More on this below.)  
  
Sometimes we just don’t like that piece.  It’s a color combination we don’t like, there’s something off about the tree on the left, or that composition just didn’t work out the way we thought it would.  We price it lower, hoping to move it faster.  
  
Then again….  Maybe we think it’s spectacular, our best work so far.  We’re so in love with how successful it’s going to be, we actually price it more than our other, older work that actually has more time and energy invested.   
  
Or it’s simply our favorite piece, and we’re not ready to part with it.  So we stick a big price tag on it, figuring it will never sell. None of these pricing decisions are necessarily right or wrong.  And as fairly as I try to price my work, I fall prey to some of the thinking from time to time.   
  
So when someone is in your booth, looking at two items, asking for the rationale behind your pricing, how do you respond?  
  
For this question, and all the previous questions, think about the INTENT behind the question.  ***What does the customer really want to know?***  
  
Human nature being what it is, I’m rarely asked, “Why is this piece I love so much CHEAPER than these other ones?”  No, it’s always the other way around:  “Why is this piece I love MORE expensive than those other ones?”  
  
So what do people want to know?  
  
**Is the pricing discrepancy a mistake?** If I were a customer, I’d ask, hoping there was some mistake!  “Oops, you’re right, they should all be the same.  Let me mark it down for you!”  Woo hoo!  It never hurts to ask, right?  
  
**Are you crazy?**  When the pricing in your work seems totally haphazard, it looks unprofessional, unethical and suspicious.   It can look like you have no idea what you’re doing, like your perception of your work and your place in the art world is built totally on fantasy.  
  
**Is the extra time/energy/cost worth it?**  You must make sure the customer sees *and accepts* that the more labor-intensive item is worth the extra cost.  Be clear on the advantages, and know what matters to experienced collectors.    
  
**Is something wrong with it?** I’ve found this reason is often the case in a lower-priced item.  There’s a dent in the frame, there’s a flaw in the finish, a tiny crack in the pot.  Usually minor, often barely noticeable.  For bargain hunters, this may not be a deterrent.  For them, it’s a selling point!  
  
But over the years, I try not to use this explanation for my work.  It simply feels like bad energy all the way around.  
  
First, because sometimes when I’ve actually settled for imperfection for a better price, something happens:  ***Years later, all I can see in that item is the flaw.***   
  
Secondly, I’ve noticed ***many artists and craftspeople are quick to point out the flaws in their own work***.  We are aiming for perfection, and we grouse when we don’t achieve it.  Most of the time, people never see the almost-invisible flaws in our work that look obvious and harsh to us.  Yes, it’s good to stay humble and grounded.  Yes, it’s good to have high standards for ourselves.  But it’s not good for us to constantly judge our work, nor to fret about standards set so high, no one could ever achieve them.  
  
Third, I try **not** to sell the work I’m not proud of.  I constantly debate about “seconds sales” (even though they’re a great way to move on slightly-sub-standard work.)  Why? ***Because I don’t like the idea of slightly-sub-standard work representing me in the world.***  (There’s a difference, to me, between work we sell that we think is great (that we then outgrown), and work we sell that we know is not-quite-right to begin with.)  (I know, you may have to read that a couple times.)  
  
So how do we respond to this question? As always, briefly, and leading into your story.  
  
If the answer is as simple as bigger = more materials/time= more money, that’s fine.  People get that.  But don’t stop there.  
  
If the answer is about more expensive materials (gold instead of sterling silver, museum-quality framing, one-of-a-kind monoprints vs. a traditional print series, etc.) that’s easily understood, too.  But keep going.  
  
Look for a way to tell the story about that particular piece.  A wonderful story, an engaging story, something that makes you light up when you tell it.  (Remember, not a story about “having fun”, but a story about creating meaning and purpose.)  
  
If the answer is something that communicates serendipity, or uniqueness, or a happy accident, that’s always a good reason for a higher price—AND it’s a good story.  I remember artists telling me why that one item was so special, and could never be recreated—an unusual gemstone, an elegant glaze effect that refuses to be recreated, an image captured in a split second by a patient photographer.  I remember thinking, “I HAVE to have it!  And this is my only chance!”  
  
Stay focused in what we’ve learned.  Explore the prospective buyer’s intent.  Ascertain what’s important to them:  
  
Price? Or your best work?  ------- A bargain?  Or uniqueness?  ------ A deal? Or something that will give them joy for a lifetime?