

Notes of a Pattern Weaver

by Philis Alvic

SOMETIMES THINGS GO RIGHT. The witticisms on my Murphy's Law Calendar notwithstanding, occasionally something does work to my best advantage. For years I have read articles about successful artists which made it all sound so easy. All one needed to do was produce good quality work and the public would beat a path to your door carrying fists full of money. However, my experience in dealing with the marketplace tends to be complicated, even when things finally reach a satisfactory conclusion. In the following tale, the progression of events was very smooth, even though the gaps of time between each episode were quite long. With the eternal optimism that every artist must possess to keep going, I am eagerly looking forward to situations like the following becoming the normal pattern in negotiating the sale of my work.

It all began one winter morning when I received a phone call. The person on the other end of the wire introduced herself as the director of an art gallery and said, "I hear you're a weaver." After I admitted to this, she then expressed the need for a wall hanging and gave me the specifications. When she ended with ". . . and the client doesn't want to spend too much money," I immediately flinched. I have had my hopes raised before, and have spent considerable time trying to please a potential client only to find that I was never really in the running because of price, color, or some other reason. With this in mind, I gave a rather stark description of my work, pointing out major characteristics without using adjectives and concluding with ". . . and they are expensive." Much to my satisfaction, the conversation did continue,

with the gallery director asking to see some slides. That afternoon, I sent her my standard slide sheet and resume, knowing that this first encounter had established me on very comfortable ground from which to proceed.

The person who phoned was entirely unknown to me and she didn't have much information about me. She had never seen my work and only had a phone number passed on by some wonderful soul. I have never found out who suggested me or exactly how the contact was made. This seems to perfectly illustrate the theory that one can never have one's name in too many places—a system known as networking in current jargon.

I received another phone call from the gallery director about a month later, informing me that the interior designer involved in the project had given the nod to one of the pieces in the slide sheet and wanted to see it. The piece chosen was one of the most expensive of the group offered. Since I was afraid of being excluded on the basis of cost, I decided to send an additional piece for review along with the one requested. I then ironed, rolled, boxed and shipped the two hangings within the next 24 hours.

I am always eager to send my pieces when they are under consideration because I believe that the work speaks better for itself than a slide does. Most people have difficulty visualizing an object in a given space. (Consider the last time that you tried to rearrange furniture in a room.) When anticipating an addition, it is always better to have the exact item to try out in the space.

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It is even better to have two different items to try. One of them just might work to better advantage in the location. Also, I like people to have a choice. I think that a client prefers to feel that he or she is an active participant in the choice of an item.

After another month, I was informed that the interior designer liked both of the pieces and had taken them to try in the space. This was exactly the response I had hoped for. Each hanging would have the opportunity to stand on its own merits and be evaluated on location. Although I would have liked to point out some of the finer attributes of each, I knew that it was now up to others to promote them.



Wall hangings in Summer & Winter weave by Philis Alvic installed in the President's office, University of Louisville.

The working relationship with people who present one's work is so important. I try hard to impress them as being open and flexible but within defined limits. During phone conversations I call attention to certain qualities of my work or to aspects of my own background that I think might interest the client. I also reinforce the phone calls with letters to emphasize specific points. Living in a rural area, I feel that I have to try harder to be accessible since I can't drop into a gallery for friendly chats with the director. Building a solid relationship with those who represent me is important, not only for the impending transaction, but also to put myself in a position for more interaction in the future.

The interval between shipping and hearing about the fate of my work lasted several months. Despite the wait, the news was very good. The client liked both pieces and purchased them both. My work now hangs in the private office of Dr. Donald Swain, President

of the University of Louisville. During the photographing trip to Louisville, I was pleased to note that there were several other pieces of original art in the office complex. My pieces fit very comfortably into the space. It was nice to see my hangings in such a distinguished setting, and even nicer to hear praises from the people who work near them.

A wonderful result of this particular chain of events is that the hangings do fit into the space as though they had been commissioned and designed specifically for it. The pieces are the correct width for filling the niches between the windows. They provide a visual link with the very high ceilings and brighten and add interest to an office decorated primarily in white and naturals. The two pieces compliment each other well, which shouldn't be too surprising since I did them both, and a strong stylistic resemblance is to be expected in any artist's body of work. The design of one consists of very simple geometric shapes, while the other is comprised of shapes that are not distinctly defined. They both have a similar woven surface, using Summer and Winter as the common weave structure. The colors of the two are compatible and they share many of the same reds, blues and greens. The differences between the two hangings bring out the finer points of each. The one with the simple design is quilted and stands as a comparison of different textured yarns. The more complex piece comes across as a luminescent color study. The direct presentation, using only concealed boards in the top and bottom of each piece works very well in this space.

The gallery director and the interior designer had presented my work in a positive way that got results. I had the good fortune to have pieces available that fitted the requirements of the location. This experience reinforced my need to be continuously working, producing pieces with variety and exploring new ideas so that they continue to have vitality. As my pieces accumulate, I feel like a collector of my own work rather than an artist in the business of selling it, but in this instance, I would not have sold anything if I had not been able to ship work immediately from accessible stock. Clients want things to happen very fast even though they might keep you waiting on their decision for months. I have always, however, found it to be to my advantage to respond quickly.

My action in this tale consisted of making a few phone calls, shipping two woven pieces and opening an envelope containing a nice check. Luck and industry both played a part, my contacts did pay off (I just can't pinpoint the specific one) and I did have a sufficient quantity of pieces from which to choose items that fit the specifications of the space. So even though chance was a major factor, I had to be in a position to take advantage of it.