

Art Studio

Online Art Gallery

Collectors can peruse the work of hundreds of juried artists on GUILD.com

By Rosemary Knower



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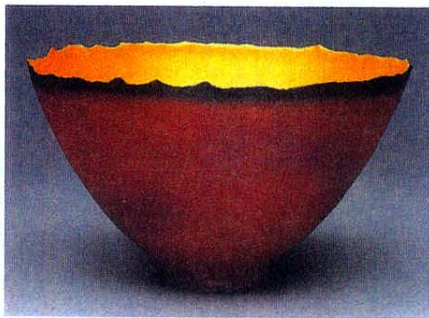
Have you ever found yourself wishing that you had the time and the energy to browse the galleries looking for just the right artist to make a sculpture for your home, or a set of hand-blown glasses for a gift? Thanks to Toni Sikes and Michael Monroe, you can find that perfect work of art without leaving your computer.

Monroe is the former Curator-in-Charge at the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery and was the moving force behind the White House Collection of American Crafts along with Hillary Rodham Clinton. When he first met Sikes in 1985, she had just launched GUILD, a publishing company with the mission of helping

artists market their work. "At that time," recalls Monroe, "the fine crafts market was still largely confined to a few shows each year, and to gallery displays. Even then, Toni was dedicated to seeing the work reach a larger audience."

By the mid-'90s, GUILD was well-known in the design trades, forging strong relationships with thousands of artists and building a reputation for quality and integrity with architects and interior designers who commissioned the works. GUILD.com, the Internet arm of the company, was launched four years ago as a response to founder Toni Sikes' dream of expanding GUILD's market beyond design professionals. "Very simply, the GUILD Internet 'gallery' frees artists to make a living creating their artwork, rather than spending time on marketing," says Sikes. "We offer consumers 24 - 7 access to over 8,000 original paintings, prints, photographs, sculptures, and

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The GUILD's Web site offers an array of home furnishings by the country's finest artists, from furniture like Blaise Gaston's spiral coffee table (right) to Nicholas Kekic's glass-blown bowl (top) and Cheryl Williams' wheel-thrown ceramic bowl airbrushed with gold acrylic (above).



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works in the fine craft media of glass, ceramics, fiber, metal and wood, created by artists all over North America.”

Consumers who log on to the site have access to literally hundreds of artists who are some of the best in the American Crafts movement. You can find everything from ceramic platters to hand-made cradles on the site; you can search by artist, by category of work, or by serendipity. Each work is described in detail, including dimensions, materials and price. The site also provides in-depth information on each artist and his or her philosophies and techniques, plus a glossary of artistic terms.

Michael Monroe heads the advisory panel that reviews every artist on the site. “The jurying process represents an iron-clad commitment to our customers that artwork offered through GUILD is of the highest quality and integrity,” says Monroe, who has seen private purchases

online. Hillary Rodham Clinton dedicated the collection at a ceremony shortly after the Oklahoma City bombings. I remember that she spoke of the positive values of setting these beautiful works against the atmosphere of destruction in the world.

On the Web site, we showed the artists who were creating the White House Collection working in their studios. People all over the world could log on, and see the progress on, say, a quilt. That’s how I became familiar with the Internet, and saw the value of it.”

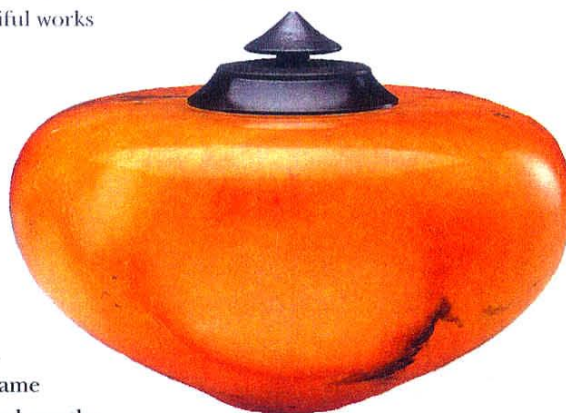
Monroe has been with GUILD.com from the beginning. “We’re now in the most technological age in the history of man,” he points out, “but the desire of people to connect with art is growing stronger all the time. Those of us who slide our fingers across a plastic keyboard daily have a desire to reach out and connect with people who are still making

things by hand. Art has no shortcuts, unlike the computer, where there are shortcuts to virtually everything. GUILD.com features works that provide a direct connection with the artists’ hands,

and the thrill of physical contact with essential materials.”

Monroe feels the enormous appeal of the works shown on the GUILD site has another, more elusive aspect: “Often people look at an avant-garde piece of art and may feel they don’t understand it. In crafts, there are often very advanced ideas, but the viewer always has a point of contact, because there is always a basic level of understanding through the function of the piece. For example, Peter Pierobon’s ‘Point of View’ desk trimmed in ebony and leather pushes the limits of

what can be done with wood, but it remains a desk as well as a work of art. Anyone can connect with its purpose as well as its beauty.”



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GUILD.com clients have embraced the opportunity to purchase everything from wedding and graduation presents to fine furniture, sculpture and ceramics for their homes. The Web site also features a Custom Design Center, which has proven enormously popular with clients who are searching for something unique. “The Custom Design center is my favorite part of GUILD.com,” Sikes says. “Interested clients can email a form detailing what they have in mind. We email that request to GUILD artists who accept commissions. We send the artists’ responses back to the client, who investigates their portfolios on the site, and chooses an artist. Then we begin the commission process.” Serving as a facilitator between client and artist, GUILD’s support staff guides the process from concept to shipping. Consumers are under no obligation until they actually commission a piece of artwork. (The GUILD offers full refunds, including shipping costs, on non-commissioned orders within 14 days of receipt.)

“One of my favorite examples of a recent commission,” says Sikes, “came from an attorney who specializes in adoption. She is passionate about what she does, and she commissioned a bronze sculpture of a mother and child for her office. I love that idea; that people would want a beautiful expression of what they do in the place where they work, where they can see it every day.” ❖

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Many of the GUILD artists push the envelope on traditional techniques. George Westbrook created this alabaster stone vessel (top) with a lathe, which is normally reserved for woodworking, while Dari Gordon and Bruce Pizzichillo applied their own methods of glassblowing to create these “sea urchin” vases (above).

of fine arts by ordinary consumers grow exponentially over the past four years. “Now, I’m not a tech person,” confesses Monroe. “My first involvement with the Internet was when the White House Collection of American Crafts went