

Do You Want to Win a Blue Ribbon?

Terry Noxel, former AGS Judging Coordinator

Many AGS state chapters include a competition as a way of recognizing the talents within their gourd community. It is an enormous undertaking to conduct a competition and the competition committee and judges strive for fairness, but let's admit it some of the judging criteria are subjective. Creativity and Artistry are more subjective than Originality of Design and Quality of Craftsmanship, for example.

To increase your chances of winning a blue ribbon for one of your gourds you might want to critique your entry from the standpoint of a judge before you submit it. Like many of gourd artists you probably have several possible entries and thus you have to choose the best one to submit for a given category.

The first major criteria for you to consider in your critique is Originality of Design. Is your piece a variation of a design from a book, class or other work of art? Or is it similar to, but somewhat different from another gourd? How different does it need to be to be considered your original design? To answer that question (and the other judging criteria) I asked some of the original AGS judges, and here's what I learned.

ORIGINALITY OF DESIGN

Many festivals have classes which teach gourd work. Many books are written with instructions. That is a great way to learn — copying someone else's work or being supported by a good teacher. But that is not original design, and should not be entered into a show. One of the duties of judges is to do their best to distinguish between original and copied works and to award a higher score to the entries that are original.

A derivative design is similar to copying in that it is an imitation of the work of someone else, but it is not a copy. It could be one that applies the techniques from a class or book but used somewhat differently. For example, someone learned to inlay heishi beads to demarcate between two different treatments (perhaps carving vertical ridges below the beads and a sponge painted design above) to create a mountain and cave design. A derivative piece could be a gourd with two rows of heishi beads with carving, painting and woodburning each on a different row demarcated by the beads to create a shore design.

What is an inspired design? There is a huge difference between being inspired by great work and copying great work. If someone painted The Last Supper on a gourd, it would be copying. If it were woodburned, it would be inspired by the original work. Inspiration pays homage to the original without infringing upon it. Go to Gourd Art Enthusiasts to see many examples of original designs. Gourds hold many possibilities and all that is needed is a new idea.

QUALITY OF CRAFTSMANSHIP/GOURD

The workmanship and execution of the craft is the primary consideration to achieve high marks in these judging criteria. The execution of the painting, pyrography, carving, weaving would be closely judged, but there are more quality considerations. Are the holes clean? No paint or finish drips? Is the blossom end of the gourd tidy and the stem clean? Is the interior scraped clean and smooth? Attention to the little details will help the entry achieve a high score for quality of craftsmanship.

What about the gourd itself — does the quality of the raw gourd matter? Judges usually wouldn't consider the quality of the raw gourd unless it really stands out as good or bad. If someone did a wonderful job, but used a crappy gourd that takes away from the piece significantly, then we might consider this in the scoring. A really stunningly beautiful gourd that adds to the design (especially when the natural gourd shell is the focus of the piece) does deserve a bonus.

CREATIVITY AND ARTISTRY

This category is where gourders with fabulous imaginations and clever, original ideas or treatments that have been well executed are recognized.

Creativity is using things in new ways; clever new ideas that have been executed well. Creativity might be seeing the same old thing in a new way, a different presentation, the "painting inside the gourd", the beautifully carved or an illuminated piece that is not derivative. It could be using bark dyes, experimenting with color treatments or cutting a gourd into Lego pieces and creating a castle with it....not the same old thing

Artistry is something that is beautiful to look at and/or exceedingly well done. Artistry expands on the natural beauty of the gourd and many say we should step back and view the entry from many positions to judge the beauty of the piece. Artistry is probably more subjective.

COLOR &/OR FINISH, ACCESSORIES, DECORATION

The first “rule” in these criteria is **Gourds Must Predominate**. Other considerations are neatness and quality of the color and finish; balance, scale and overall appearance. You might remove all consideration of how clever the design is (or isn't) and look at some things that have nothing to do with the gourd itself...the accessories, the way it is displayed, and the proportions of the parts.

Is the overall color pleasing—appropriate/attractive/distracting? Was the color applied in a new and different way? Was it done well or are there blotches from uneven application? Is the chosen finish appropriate for the project? Do the embellishments add to the design or distract from it? Does it lean precariously to one side? When viewed from all sides do you feel there an "empty" area? Is there anything about the entry that "bothers" you?

Again, while these criteria are subjective remember the first rule — the Gourd Must Predominate.

APPROPRIATENESS FOR CATEGORY

Even though it is listed last in this article, it is actually the first criterion determined at a show. Contestants select the division, class and/or category that their entry rightfully belongs in. Some shows have Beginner, Youth, Adult, and Master Divisions along with various classes or categories. The contestant needs to read the criteria for the show's classes to ensure that their entry is placed in the correct category.

At some shows the proper placement is verified at the Entry Table. At other shows the judging team has to determine if the entries meet the stated criteria of the category. AGS encourages judges to move entries to correct category if there is an incorrect placement, rather than disqualify an entry. However, what often causes incorrect placement, is contestants who have too many entries in the same category. They simply place them in a similar category in hopes that no one notices that they don't qualify!

To illustrate this, an entry in the painting category is mainly woodburned and just used a tiny bit of paint for accents. If not moved or disqualified, it's going to score really low because in the painting category the painting must be the predominant technique. Often, the person is skilled at one technique and tries to find ways to put her 15 woodburned gourds into as many different categories as possible, even if they aren't really appropriate.

When judges try to move them to the correct category they end up with two entries from the same contestant in a given category/class, and thus the entry should be disqualified. It would be better if the contestant edited their submissions to those that belong in a given category; barring that the volunteers at the entry table bear the responsibility to assure accurate placement prior to judging.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

1. Create original work
2. Apply quality craftsmanship to all aspects of your entry — both the inside and outside of the gourd, and don't forget the stem and blossom ends of the gourd either
3. Push your creativity to the next level by experimenting with products and tools
4. Step back and critique your entry from every angle
5. Read the Show Book and make sure your entries are qualified for the categories/classes you are selecting

We wish to encourage all gourders to participate in competitions. Having a positive experience is what it is all about; hence this article. It should be noted that many shows create master's classes and beginner's classes within a competition. These different classes hold entries to different degrees of these criteria. For example it is inappropriate to enter a derivative piece into a master's class. So beginners and those of us who are still finding our creative abilities should not be afraid or hesitant to participate in competitions.

THANK YOU

Kathy James, Leigh Adams and Bonnie Gibson provided much insight to these criteria. Thank you ladies, this article was truly a team effort.