

Going Public – Tips on starting your career in public art

By Jill Turman, Oakland, CA

Metal is an ideal medium for many public art projects. It can be used in large or small scale projects; it is durable for interior or exterior applications and relatively maintenance free. Blacksmiths are often ideal candidates for public art projects where purely artistic work is called for, but we're also uniquely qualified for public projects which call for artistic gates, railing, fencing and signage. There are public art agencies across the United States which administer millions of public and private dollars for public art projects. All you have to do to get started is select a project and apply for it. Doing a public art project is rewarding, challenging and a great career building opportunity.

I have completed four public art projects and am currently working on my fifth. I was selected for three of these projects through design competitions. (I submitted my application, was interviewed and selected for each project by an artist selection committee.) I did not compete for two of my public art commissions; I was invited by the clients, based on my portfolio, to design and execute the projects. I have also been a paid consultant on another artist's project, and have had the enlightening experience of serving as a member of two artist selection committees. It hasn't all been positive; I have also been rejected for numerous public art commissions, which I applied for. While these experiences do not make me an expert in the field of public art, I have learned quite a bit which may be useful information for those who are interested in pursuing public projects. Here are some tips:

~ **Contact your local public art agency.** You can join their mailing list to receive current calls to artists for local and national projects. Some local projects are limited to local artists, and some national calls do give preference points to local artists in the selection process. Therefore, a local project may be easier to get for a first time public artist.

~ **Select a project which is suited to your skills, style and medium.** Public art projects come in all shapes and sizes. Remember that being a blacksmith gives you a leg up on most of the competition when the call is for outdoor or functional work, but don't feel limited to these types of projects.

~ **Schedule adequate time to assemble a high quality application package.** There are two types of calls to artists, a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) and a Request for Proposals. A typical RFQ will require you to provide the following: an artist statement outlining your qualifications and interest in the project, a resume, a list of references, 10 to 20 high quality images (digital or slide) of recent work, and an image identification sheet specifying the date, dimensions, medium and techniques used in the work presented in your images. A Request for Proposals will require the same information required in an RFQ, but will also require a written and/or graphic project proposal. Assembling this information in a professional quality presentation package takes time. Elizabeth Alley of the Urban Arts Commission says that most artists need a week to fully assemble a public art proposal package.

~ **Do your research.** A site visit will help you to create a proposal, which is well suited to the site physically, conceptually and aesthetically. Speak with users of the facility or members of the community who will be the audience for your piece. Many public art committees are looking for proposals, which will speak to a particular audience or create a specific sense of place.

~ **If you are asked to make a presentation to a selection committee, consider building a model.** A simple model can help to convey a three dimensional design to a large group of people. Many people have trouble reading and understanding drawings. A model is a great visual aid for your presentation.

~ **Be patient.** Artist selection is a slow process. A typical public art commission begins with a call to artists for submissions. A selection committee narrows the field to a few finalists and interviews are conducted. Once the artist is selected, approval by city officials may be required before contracts can be awarded to the artist. This process can take several months.

~ **Read and revise your contract before you sign.** Once you receive a public commission, review your contract carefully. (I recommend using a lawyer to review your first public contract.) Remember that you do not have to accept the conditions of the contract as they are presented to you. Reserve your right to obtain copyright, require reasonable compensation for change orders, limit your liability, etc. Your public art contract should state the scope of services you are providing and outline a schedule of completion and a payment schedule. It will also state insurance requirements for you, your employees and your vehicles. In your contract, specify who is responsible for transportation of the artwork, installation, site preparation and electrical work (as needed.) I also like to include a provision for storage of the artwork, in the event that the site is not prepared to accept the finished artwork on schedule. (You can't clog up your shop with a gigantic, finished sculpture while the contractor finishes the building!) I also recommend that your contract require your artwork to be properly maintained by the client.

~ **Once you receive a public art commission, there is a lot of work to be done before you can start building the piece.** Contracts must be negotiated and signed. Payment and completion schedules are set up. Designs are presented, reviewed and revised (sometimes multiple times.) A structural engineer may be required to stamp drawings and approval may be required from city structural and civil engineers to assure that the project meets applicable building codes. Many projects require multiple sub contractors to be lined up and union labor may be required as well. A full budget breakdown is often submitted before the physical work can begin.

~ **Do not start before you have a signed contract and a deposit check in hand.** Public art projects often do not get underway by the projected start date. Therefore, if you have purchased materials or cleared your calendar without getting the 100% ok to proceed, you may be left holding the bag with no check and no work to do for several months.

Your first public art project will probably be the most challenging. Putting together your resume, images and references for your first application takes some time, but the next application will be relatively easy to assemble. As you build a portfolio of public art, you establish a track record, and getting future commissions becomes easier as well.

Don't let a lack of public art experience deter you from applying for projects. I received my first public art commission, The Cooper-Young Trestle, because I had a winning concept. I received this commission (a 150' long, eight ton sculpture which is installed on a railroad trestle) without any previous experience in public art! My application included images of garden gates and furniture, but I applied, interviewed and got the job. You can too.

What can I say? The process may sound a bit arduous, but working on a public art project is the most fun I've ever had going to work. Knowing that the pieces I created, are being enjoyed by the public is incredibly rewarding. I have also received lots of free press from my public artwork. This recognition has really helped me to build my reputation as an artist and has led to many private commissions. Public art can be a great venue for professional blacksmiths to share their work and build their careers. Give it a try.



The Cooper-Young Trestle, Memphis, Tennessee. Jill Turman, 2000.