

Running the gallery is a fine balancing act, requiring many and varied skills and talents

A Gallery in **Perfect**

Phoebe Wainwright and Jan Arditti believe they have found the perfect formula for success, a balanced approach to running a gallery, which is proving not only successful, but also extremely rewarding for them both.

The Arc Gallery is a gem; hiding just off Bridge Street, one of Chester's main shopping streets, it was established by Phoebe Wainwright in 1993. Phoebe's Oxford University education was followed by marriage, motherhood and a hectic family life combined with working for the environmental charity, Groundwork Trust. Over many years Phoebe had cultivated a real interest in studio ceramics, craftsmanship and design, amassing a broad knowledge and understanding of the processes involved in producing ceramics. Eventually this interest developed into a passion, which with the family grown up, allowed new opportunities to present themselves.

"I had arrived at a point in my life when I could start to put my own interests and ambitions first," says Phoebe. The idea she had nurtured for some time, of creating a business from her interest, was now a real possibility and slowly the idea formed in her head of opening a craft gallery. There then followed a long search for the ideal premises plus several seminars and business workshops before finally, on 1st October 1993, the Arc opened its doors for the first time.

Phoebe had found a beautiful 18th century brick and timber warehouse, which is a delight to visit in itself, lovingly and appropriately restored by Phoebe and her husband Peter. This atmospheric space with its stunning beamed ceiling and exposed brick walls creates an ideal backdrop for the varied contemporary work on display; ceramics, glass, textiles, jewellery, leather, metalwork and wood, all by British designers and makers and displayed over two floors.

In 1999 Jan Arditti joined The Arc, working on a part-time basis. Jan says, "my twin boys were quite young and The Arc provided a wonderfully stimulating extra dimension to my life, together with Phoebe's pragmatic approach to combining work and family life, we developed a firm friendship." Jan also brought with her a formal textile design training, which she gained at Manchester Metropolitan University, and vital business experience obtained whilst running her own knitwear design company called Wild Woolies,

which she formed after leaving college in the mid 1980s. This was followed by a five year period working as a buyer for Coats Viyella, resulting in a wealth of practical marketing expertise. All of this preceded the arrival of her twin boys, whom by a remarkable coincidence arrived on 1st October 1993.

The gallery is extremely welcoming and many customers return again and again, for an unusual present, or to treat themselves, or simply to browse and chat. "We find new converts all the time, people enjoy the relaxed friendly atmosphere away from the predictable hub of mass market retailing and are genuinely delighted and surprised to find us here," Jan tells me. "We always make a point of having a conversation with customers if possible and we ask them to pass on our leaflet to any friends who may not have discovered us yet. People are pleased to be asked and the power of word of mouth, especially coming from an enthusiastic friend, should never be underestimated." From time to time The Arc features the work of selected makers. "By giving them an exhibition of their work here, we are bringing something fresh and new to the gallery and also helping artists to show their new work to a wider audience," explains Jan.

Running the gallery is a fine balancing act, requiring many and varied skills and talents. "Selecting and displaying the work is the fun creative aspect, whilst the day to day running of the shop, combined with finance, cash flow and marketing is both stimulating and time consuming," says Jan. "However, learning to juggle these different aspects of running the gallery can be a steep learning curve, the vagaries of ebbs and flows in sales can be unpredictable and at times unnerving." Nevertheless, Phoebe succeeded and the mere fact that the shop has survived over 14 years without any grant support, where so many independent retailers have failed, is testimony to her drive and determination.

"By 2004 we were both ready to make more changes," recalls Phoebe. "With the gallery well established, I felt that I would relish a little more free time and less of a full time commitment to the gallery, whilst Jan found that with her boys growing up, she was ready for a new challenge."

The Arc is now run jointly by Jan and Phoebe and, although it has the appearance of being one gallery – a co-ordinated display of work from across the

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Balance



Lesley Strickland



Matt Fothergill



Mirka Golden Hann



Jan and Phoebe outside the Arc, Bridge Street, Chester

All photos andrew@arditti.co.uk

craft disciplines - it is in fact two entirely separate businesses sitting comfortably together inside one gallery; with one premises, one till point and one name, The Arc. "This unusual arrangement allows us both to concentrate on our own areas of interest and expertise in a combined effort to support British crafts and designers, whilst sharing all the associated general overheads, and marketing costs," explains Jan. "Another big plus for both of us is that we can share the highs and lows. We both lead busy lives and both have other commitments outside of the business - but having someone else to share the daily pressures with and deal with any pressing matters in your absence is a real bonus; it's a key factor in our ability to maintain a vibrant and fresh gallery which is continually evolving."

Jan concentrates on textiles, jewellery, leather and paper goods, which includes cards and gift wrap. This allows Phoebe to focus on ceramics, glass, wood and metal. "It always amazes us both how complementary our tastes can be to one another," says Phoebe "We can both visit Origin or Top Drawer separately (while the other is back at the gallery) and surprisingly, when the stock arrives and

is displayed, we often find that we have co-ordinated colour schemes, complementary pieces of work and a cohesion which regularly surprises."

The roots of their success are grounded on a good friendship, mutual respect and appreciation of each other's businesses. "We are both keen to sell each other's stock, after all every sale will help towards the overheads we have to meet.

We have found a system for dividing these costs fairly, which is based upon a proportion of our respective turnovers," says Jan.

The latest venture for The Arc has been the launch last year of the gallery's website, a project that has been driven by Jan and her husband Andrew. "We are very excited by the response we have received through the website. We've had orders from Canada and the USA as well as enquiries from Australia - and we've had a large number of additional sales from customers in the UK, too, it's been like putting an extra Saturday in the month," Jan tells me.

"We've also found that a lot more makers are finding us online and making contact. It works well for everyone involved - we form a relationship with the people whose work we feature on the site; we have personal contact and dialogue with our customers, as we're not fully e-commerce and they have to contact us to place an order; this all helps to generate sales and generally increase the profile of crafts."

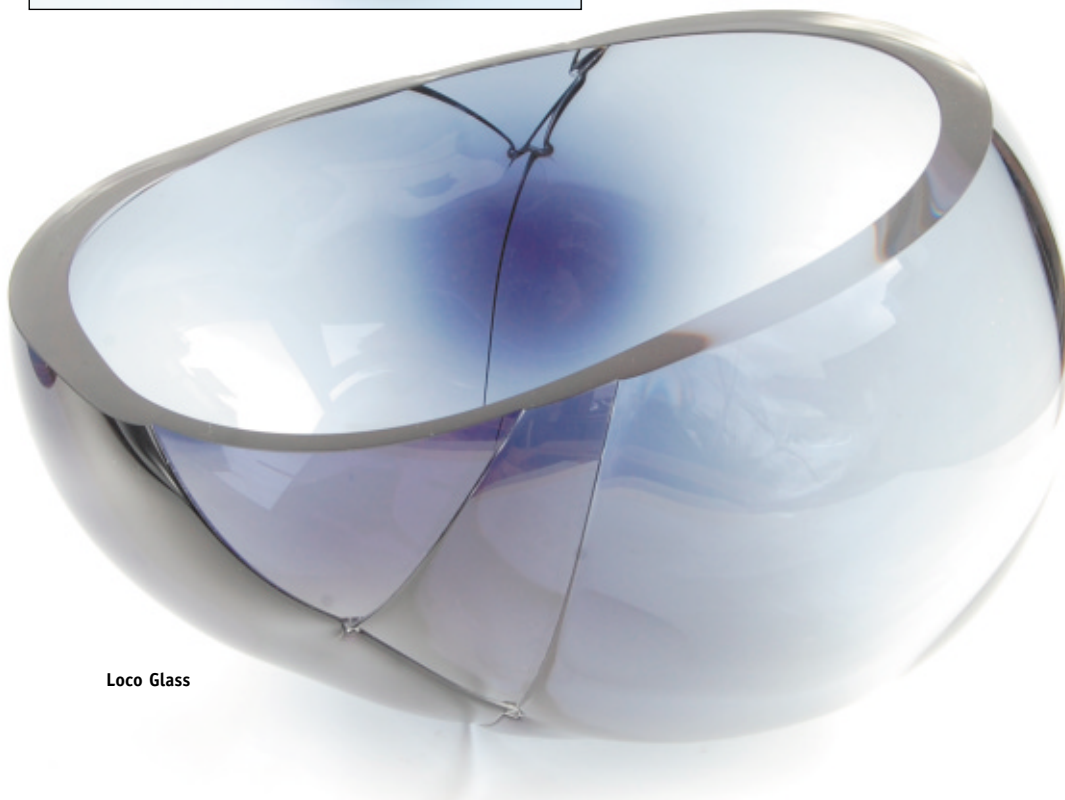
Although Jan admits, "it has been a huge help to us that Andrew is a design consultant and photographer and is able to provide us with some really great quality images. I would recommend other galleries to investigate the potential of the web, it's rather like having another shop window only this one is for the world to look at. It can also give us the flexibility, if we wish, to sell higher priced work that we would not ordinarily stock in the gallery."

The unique balance of skills and expertise perfected by Phoebe and Jan, combining the best of the old and the new and, importantly, not being afraid to evolve, creates successful and enjoyable businesses for them both and a bright future to look forward to at The Arc.

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Gail Klevan



Loco Glass



Wallace and Sewell