

How to Choose the Right Craft Fair

A GUIDE FOR UK ARTISTS AND MAKERS

For many craftmakers and artists, exhibiting at craft fairs can be one of the best ways to get your work in front of new customers.

A good event can lead to sales, commissions, new followers, press coverage, mailing-list sign-ups and valuable connections with other makers. It can also help you understand what customers respond to when they see your work in person.

But not every craft fair is right for every maker.



A carefully curated contemporary craft fair is likely to attract a different audience from a general market or event.

With so many markets, fairs and exhibitions taking place across the UK, how do you decide which ones are worth the investment of your time, money and energy?

Start by deciding what you want from exhibiting

Think about what you want to achieve.

The answer isn't simply to look for the event with the biggest number of visitors or the cheapest stand.

Of course, making sales is likely to be high on the list, but it doesn't have to be the only measure of success.

You might also be looking to:

- introduce your work to a new audience
- build your reputation
- find customers outside your local area
- generate commissions or bespoke work
- meet galleries, interior designers or other potential contacts
- grow your mailing list
- test new products or collections
- build confidence in talking about and selling your work
- meet other professional makers
- create content for your website and social media
- encourage customers to visit your online shop after the event
- promote any craft based courses you may run

Thinking about your objectives first will make it much easier to decide whether a particular event is right for you.

For example, an event aimed primarily at inexpensive gifts may not be the best choice for a maker producing large-scale contemporary furniture. Equally, a prestigious fine-art event aimed at a smaller but wealthy audience may not be the right investment for a maker whose products are designed to be accessible, everyday purchases.

The important thing is to find your audience.



Look carefully at who actually visits

One of the biggest mistakes a maker can make it to choose an event purely on visitor numbers. A large footfall figure can sound impressive, but 100,000 visitors at say a county show who aren't interested in your work may be much less valuable than a smaller audience of 20,000 with a genuine interest in buying contemporary craft and art.



Craft in Focus has established itself at the upper end of the craft industry, presenting a diverse mix of high quality contemporary makers and artists, and as such now attract an affluent and appreciative audience, but also in high numbers; their event at Wisley boasts an attendance up to 45,000 and is rarely less than 35,000.

Quality of footfall matters more than quantity. If you get both - even better!

Look at the other exhibitors

Before applying, find out who has exhibited previously.

Look at:

- the standard of work
- the range of disciplines
- the price points
- the experience of the makers
- whether your work would sit comfortably alongside theirs
- whether there are lots of makers producing something very similar to you.

Would you be proud to display your work alongside these makers?

Understand whether the event is curated

There is a significant difference between an open market where anyone can book a pitch and a curated or selected craft fair. A selection process can help maintain the standard of an event. It also tells visitors that the organisers have taken care over who they bring together.

The reputation of the event becomes part of the context in which your work is seen. Ask yourself, would you be happy showing alongside bought in goods masquerading as handmade?

Craft In Focus has always placed considerable emphasis on their selection. Its events are aimed at UK-based designer makers and artists, and they do not accept imported, bought in or mass-produced work.



Check exactly what the stand fee includes

A cheaper stand which produces very few relevant sales may be considerably more expensive in real terms.

Conversely, a more established event with a high initial cost may make more sense if the audience and potential return are right for your work.

Find out:

- What size is the stand or are multiple options available?
- Are tables available to hire, or included as part of the stand?
- Are walls or a shell scheme available?
- Is lighting/ electricity available for the stand?



Investigate how the organiser promotes the event

The organiser should promote the event widely and this could include email marketing, social media, press and PR, local and national advertising, radio, direct mail, digital marketing, etc. But remember, the organiser's job is to attract people to the event but your job is to give your own customers and followers a reason to come and see you there too.

Look for an audience that values the maker



Consider the venue

The venue itself can have a surprisingly big influence on the experience but beware that some venues stage different styles of fairs by different organisers (check you're applying for the event you really want with the right organiser).

Think about whether the setting feels appropriate for your work and your customers.

A beautiful, well-chosen venue can help create an experience that feels very different from a standard exhibition hall.

For example, Craft In Focus stages mixed discipline events at distinctive venues including RHS Garden Wisley, RHS Garden Hyde Hall and Hever Castle as well as specialist events such as Celebrating Ceramics and Desire Jewellery & Silversmithing Fairs.

The venue isn't everything, of course. But when the setting, audience and quality of the work all complement one another, it can make a significant difference to how visitors experience an event.



Ask other makers

One of the best ways to research a craft fair is to ask someone who has exhibited there.

Ask them:

- What was the audience like?
- Did people buy?
- What was the organisation like?
- Was the event well attended?
- Was it worth the cost?
- Would you do it again?
- What did you wish you'd known beforehand?

Don't rely on one person's experience though - one maker may have a brilliant event because their price range and product were perfectly suited to the audience, while another may have found it disappointing. Try to speak to several exhibitors whose work and business are reasonably similar to yours.

Think Beyond The Sale On The Day

Don't judge a fair necessarily by what happens at the event.

Someone might need to think about your work, they might not want to carry it home, they might be looking for a present several months later or they might visit your website and place an order later.

Make sure visitors know how to find you afterwards.

So, what should you look for in a craft fair?

A good craft fair is about bringing together the right makers, the right audience and the right environment and then supporting that combination with professional organisation and effective promotion.

Look for:

- A clearly defined identity - you should be able to understand what an event is about and who it is for.
- A strong selection of exhibitors - the quality of the work around you matters.
- Returning exhibitors - if you find an event has a high turnover of makers, with too many new makers each year, ask yourself why makers don't return.
- A relevant audience - visitors should have a genuine interest in what you make.
- Professional organisation - clear information, good communication and sensible practical arrangements can make a huge difference.
- Effective promotion.
- A good venue and visitor experience - people are more likely to engage when an event feels like somewhere worth spending time.
- A genuine respect for handmade work - it matters that visitors understand they are buying direct from the people who design and make the work.

The best craft fair isn't necessarily the biggest, cheapest or closest one. It's the one where your work has the best chance of being seen, understood and valued by the right people.

Why Craft In Focus

These are the principles that have shaped Craft In Focus since its first event in 2000.

Now in its 26th year, Craft In Focus has spent more than two decades developing contemporary craft fairs designed specifically around professional UK artists and designer makers with a strict selection policy.

It's current calendar includes events at RHS Garden Wisley, RHS Garden Hyde Hall, Hever Castle & Gardens and Waterperry Gardens.

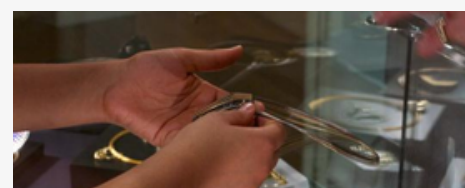
Craft In Focus has built its reputation around creating events where visitors can discover makers, talk about the work, understand the processes behind it and buy directly from the people who created it.



Is Craft In Focus right for you?

As with any event, it depends on your work, your customers and your objectives.

But if you're a UK-based artist or designer maker looking for a curated contemporary craft fair with a strong emphasis on original, professionally made work, Craft In Focus is probably worth investigating.



Beware of scams!

Unfortunately, scams targeting makers do occur including fake craft fair listings, fraudulent social media posts and emails pretending to be from event organisers.

If you're interested in an event, always make contact through the organiser's official website. Don't rely on a link or contact details provided in an unexpected social media post or email.

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