

# David Kenton Kring

For about 7 years now, I have been working as a full-time potter and ceramic artist. It wasn't a leap to become a professional. I was let go from my job, and it was the push I needed to go full time. At the time, I was becoming more comfortable in my work and was a month away from selling at a respected art fair in Lexington, Kentucky, where I live and where my studio is also located (in my garage). After building up a month's worth of finished pots to sell, I was able to make enough money to say, "I don't believe I need to get a part-time job." That market also helped me line up several commissions, which kept me working through the fall before winter markets started up. With the help of some local potters, I began to learn how to apply to other art fairs and markets in the region.

I also began to rely heavily on social media to promote myself as a ceramic artist and take on wholesale and commission requests.

## Making Connections and a Business

While in college, I mainly saw myself as a figurative sculptor. After college, I looked at the option of doing a post-baccalaureate program or pursuing an MFA, but I knew I needed a mental break from academic life. I had the opportunity to work at Kentucky Mudworks, which provided a small studio space and access to the kilns. Through that job, I began to focus more on pottery and learned from the other employees, instructors, and demonstrating artists who came through the studio. I also built up connections with staff members at Amaco/Brent, Shimpo, Skutt, and other companies and organizations. I attended the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts conference (NCECA) as a vendor and created relationships with the other distributors and vendors, learned how to have a good rapport with customers, and how to look at the business side of the ceramic world. The connections I made at my job at Kentucky Mudworks and NCECA are still some of the most valuable to my professional career as a potter.



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1 *Cactus Casey*, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, stoneware, underglaze, slip, terra sigillata, glaze, fired to cone 5, 2019. 2 *Skull tumblers*, 6 in. (15 cm) in height, stoneware, underglaze, slip, terra sigillata, glaze, fired to cone 5, 2021.



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3 David Kenton Kring in his studio. Photo: Sarah Jane Webb. 4 American Bison Yunomi, 3¾ in. (9 cm) in height, stoneware, underglaze, slip, terra sigillata, glaze, fired to cone 5, 2021.

While at Mudworks, I continued my pursuit of being a figurative ceramic artist, but was also honing my skills as a potter, something I really didn't focus on in college. By the time I went out on my own, I had developed a style that felt like mine. Being a full-time potter, I thought I would have more time to grow as an artist and experiment and grow my line. But, I soon found out how much time had to be devoted to my money maker: the mugs. It was hard to take a break from making mugs, as people were commissioning them and that's what everyone was buying at art fairs. Gradually, I found time to grow as a potter, to try and fail, but soon noticed that more hours of the day were taken away from the studio and the production to do what I call "The Job": the constant self-promotion; photography and image editing; maintaining the website; applying to shows; and constant communication—messaging on Facebook,

## CAREER SNAPSHOT

### YEARS AS A PROFESSIONAL POTTER

7

### NUMBER OF POTS MADE IN A YEAR

1500+

### EDUCATION

Bachelor of Arts from Transylvania University  
(Lexington, Kentucky)

### THE TIME IT TAKES (PERCENTAGES)

Making work (including firing): 50%

Promotions/selling: 40%

Office/bookkeeping: 10%

### FAVORITE TOOL

Bat with removable inserts and an Amaco rubber-tipped tool

### PROCESS

Image transfer with newsprint and underglaze

### WHERE IT GOES

Retail stores: 20%

Galleries: 5%

Online: 70%

Commissions: 5%

### LEARN MORE

Instagram: [@crockett](https://www.instagram.com/crockett)

Website: [www.davidkentonkring.com](http://www.davidkentonkring.com)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/davidkentonkring](https://www.facebook.com/davidkentonkring)



Instagram, Etsy, website email, personal email, and texts from family, friends, and acquaintances about how to purchase work.

### Selling and Promoting Work

One of the conflicts that came with selling my work was seeing how people responded to it on social media with delight, but when it came time to sell in person, I would see people eye roll or almost gasp at the prices. This duality of having people be excited to see my work yet not be willing to pay for it was one of the reasons I began to save more unique work for online sales or gallery shows. Even as you gain confidence in your work, it is sometimes the hardest thing to do to price your work accurately for the amount of time spent making and finishing it. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I was finally allowed to cancel out all those voices and negative thoughts

from art fairs and rely on the positive response from the people that follow me and my work on social media. This allowed me to experiment more, push myself as a potter, and also feel comfortable with raising my prices.

The pandemic has definitely changed my whole outlook on selling and promoting my work. In 2018, I traveled from Kentucky to Austin, Texas, for my first market of the year, only to have my booth tent destroyed by a wind storm that also broke a third of my pottery. I barely made more than three times my booth fee, which means I broke even. From there I went to art fairs in the following places every two weeks (on average) from spring until winter: Nashville, Indianapolis, Louisville, Nashville (again), Chicago, Lexington, Nashville (again), and Columbus. Some markets were rained out, some I was proud of what I brought in, others were spent reading my book and scrolling through social media as people walked into my booth, perused, and left with a business card. I was also still producing figurative work for gallery shows and pottery for wholesalers and commissions. That was my most financially successful year to date, but I felt I was always behind money and schedule wise, and that demand I put on myself left me feeling completely anxious and exhausted.

#### Changes and Producing Work

In 2019, I began to question how money was being spent for booth fees, especially when the art fairs and markets did not seem to make an effort to step into the modern era of social media to promote the show or showcase the makers accurately. I began limiting my participation at markets and took the time to change up my work and look more at online sales. I entered 2020 with the thought of limiting my outdoor markets even more, focusing on online sales, and scheduling additional periods set aside to experiment. Then in March, that decision was made for me. One of the biggest measures

for success has always been money, but I've discovered my measure has become time. In 2020, I was given the gift of time. I began to explore and push myself in the studio, take risks, and develop something that felt more like what was in my head. I focused on learning how to screenprint and create my own underglaze transfers, something I had never found the time to do before. The response from my online audience was incredible. By focusing on limited editions and limited quantities, I was having online sales that were selling out. This allowed me time to do things I love like gardening, fishing, hiking, and cooking.

Time away from the studio got me more excited about wanting to produce in the studio and let my mind wander to new ideas. Now, with the potential of art fairs and markets coming back in 2022, I am excited to be outside, having a craft beer and interacting with customers, but I will not burden myself to create a large amount of one product (mugs), or stress about a minimum amount of money I need to make to pay bills. One thing that I hope happens with these markets is that they stop making them larger for the sake of collecting a booth fee or gathering a crowd that isn't intent on purchasing from makers. Everyone who sets up a booth at an art fair is there because it is their job. They are there to pay for their mortgage, rent, healthcare, insurance, children, pets, food, supplies, and other everyday needs. In the future, I will limit participation in craft fairs to those that are in my region, last less than three days, have reasonable booth fees, and of course, are fun. But most importantly, I will seek out craft fairs that have a better understanding of how to promote themselves and the artists through social media, and represent themselves as venues for high-end craft.

With all that has happened in my seven-plus years as a full-time potter and ceramic artist, I like to let other artists and potters know that it truly is all about hard work, how you carry yourself as a person, and the investments you make in your community. I did not go a traditional route of earning a BFA/MFA, completing long-term residencies, or working as an apprentice, but I kept pushing myself and failing big time. I faced rejection, being fired, and other personal setbacks. But with hard work, networking, and putting myself out there, I've had the opportunity to demonstrate at NCECA, give lectures at major universities, get invited to gallery shows and short-term residencies, and, of course, live my life as a ceramic artist.

Now I am part of an amazing community of makers in Central Kentucky, and I firmly believe in promoting the hard work of those





5 Pair of scenic oil pourers, 8 in. (20 cm) in height, stoneware, underglaze, slip, terra sigillata, glaze, fired to cone 5, 2021. 6 Ramen bowls, 8 in. (20 cm) in width, stoneware, terra sigillata, glaze, fired to cone 5, 2021. 7-9 Working with image transfers. Photos: Sarah Jane Webb.

around you. I always go back to this quote by Kentucky author Wendell Berry, “A good community insures itself by trust, by good faith and good will, by mutual help. A good community, in other words, is a good local economy.” I believe in promoting the local makers, small business, and the arts where I live. If we all lift up our own communities, then we can all grow.

## A DAY IN THE LIFE

### Morning

- 7–7:30am: My dog Obi wakes me up by yawning and scratching his collar. I let him out, go out to my garage studio, and turn on heaters or the air conditioner depending on the time of the year. I uncover any pots and feel if they are to the dryness I like. If need be, I cut them off the bat and move them to drywall boards.
- 8am: Start coffee and put on a record or music to get into a good head space. Hang out with coffee either in the garden or inside depending on the season and weather.
- 9–10am: Answer emails, draw, and do design work. Pretend I will be done by 10, but it is between 10:30–11.
- Eat a quick breakfast. Spend too long looking at social media and trying to figure out the day’s music vibe.
- Put handles on 12–18 mugs until a 1pm lunch.

### Afternoon

- Following lunch, I do dishes from the previous night’s dinner and do any quick prep work for dinner.
- 2pm: Back in the studio and start design work for image-transfer products. Set up a screen-printing station to print a few pattern sheets for the yunomis or vases I hope to complete. I work on 3–6 image-transfer vessels a day.
- After printing sheets, I begin cutting out silhouettes and transfer sheets to the dimensions of the pieces.
- A little after 3pm, I begin the decorating process. Depending on how many pieces I want to finish that day, I also have to account for creating process shots or videos for social media. Especially if it is a new design.
- 4:30–5pm: I like to finish up with the hands-on creative work and move to brainless busy work.

### Evening

- 6–7pm: I wax off pieces for surface work or apply terra sigillata to a round of 10 mugs. Each round takes 30–40 minutes with dunking, brushing, and burnishing each piece. (Usually 1–2 rounds are done at a time.)
- Before this, Obi has come to the studio several times to head wag toward the outside to remind me it is time for a walk. Take him on a 30-minute walk.
- Come back, open a beer, and sit with it for a while or water the garden (depending on the time of year).
- 7:30–8:30pm: Start cooking dinner and fit in a shower while the oven or stove is simmering the food.
- 8:30–9:30pm: Hopefully eat dinner and promise that tomorrow I will eat earlier (but I won’t).
- 9:30–10:30pm: Fall asleep in my chair watching Netflix.
- 10:30–11pm: Off to bed and thinking about what needs to happen tomorrow so I can try to stay on schedule.