

Embrace These Qualities to Be Successful in Art

By **Cherie Dawn Haas**

One of my personal sayings is that I'm only comfortable when I'm outside my comfort zone. As I complete one project, I'm planning the next or at least being open to the unexpected possibilities that will surely present themselves.

When I discovered the contemporary sculptures of **Mark Yale Harris**, I was first intrigued by the graceful lines and figures he creates. What pulled me in even further was learning that, before committing to art as his true calling, he spent three decades with titles in real estate and hotel management.

How scary and yet thrilling it must have been to exit the relative safety and predictability of a traditional career in business! It's a leap many dream about daily, and so I invited him to share his experiences with us in the following exclusive interview.

Until next time,
Cherie

P.S.

Have you made the same leap? Share your experiences and advice by commenting on this blog post!

Crush, 2007, bronze, 61 x 80 x 20.5 in.

Artist Q&A with Contemporary Sculptor Mark Yale Harris

Cherie Dawn Haas: You must have had endless internal conversations about whether you were making the right decision to change careers. What were some of the things going through your mind? How did you finally come to the decision to leave the world of business for the more creative endeavor of making sculptures?

Mark Yale Harris: When young, my artistic skills were evident. But more importantly in my life story is that not only was I labeled as "artistically gifted," I loved creating! It provided great joy and I imagined that "when I grew up" I

would be an artist. As often happens, pragmatism stepped in and I began 30+ years in the realm of hospitality/urban development — specifically real estate and hotels.

I was enjoying the pursuit of excellence in business. Throughout my business career, I did get to exercise a degree of creativity within the scope of my field. **Creative people are curious; that curiosity helped me seek the untried, explore new ways of doing business.** I believe that some of my greatest commercial achievements stemmed from ingenuity and imagination. It was rewarding. However, after more than three decades of success in the business arena, I felt the need for something more, a more personal expression of my creativity, a yearning for my true destiny.

I sold my business in 1996 and, though I was confident with that decision, I was in limbo about my next steps, with what I was now going to do with my time. I voluntarily gave up my various titles: Chairman, President, Founder; yet I found myself a little lost. Long identified by monikers indicating my standing in the business world, I was now just Mark Yale Harris, not Mark Yale Harris, Chairman, etc.

As part of the process of selling my business, I hired a psychologist to assist key employees with the reality of losing their jobs as the result of the sale and their transition to other jobs. In conversation with the shrink, she asked me, “What about you?” My response: “I don’t need help. I can take care of myself.” Yet further discussion led to me entering into counseling. Through the process, I became comfortable with declaring to myself that my real interest lay in art. A lifelong art collector, I had been exploring my long-standing passion for making art in the later years of my business career by taking evening and weekend workshops. **I knew I could financially survive the gamble of pursuing art, if I was willing and prepared to take the personal risk.** I was weighing the options, back and forth: continue my career path or follow my passion; continue my career path or follow my passion.

I slowly made the shift, keeping one toe in the business world in Texas and making trips to Santa Fe to study with two established sculptors. I was fortunate to have excellent mentors who were very encouraging, and while diligently learning and experimenting, I happily discovered that I had talent! In 1999, I moved part-time to Santa Fe. I spent six months working in Doug Hyde’s studio and then found my own art studio and began devoting myself to sculpting full-time.

CDH: What was the biggest challenge you faced or overcame as you made the transition to becoming a full-time artist?

MYH: I traded the security of an extremely successful business career for the risky life of an artist. One of the toughest mental blocks I had to work to overcome was what people would say when I let my intentions be known. I received a number of negative remarks from my friends in the business world, such as “When are you going to get a real job? Have you joined the other team?”

It was a big adjustment, becoming a “nobody” in the art world. I was humbled. However, as a self-made man who began with nothing, I understood that this enormous pivot required starting all over, learning my craft, and earning my respect as an artist. Eventually, I could, with ease, introduce myself as Mark Yale Harris, artist.

Awakenings III, 2015, bronze, 72 in. tall

CDH: Tell us a little more about how you found your path as a sculptor. Did you experiment with other art forms, for example, or with other styles of sculpting?

MYH: As mentioned above, I took a number of evening and weekend workshops: oil painting, watercolor painting, drawing classes, and clay sculpture classes. One evening, I was leaving a drawing workshop and saw people in another class carving stone. It had never occurred to me to do that and I was intrigued, so I signed up for the class. Once the instructor put the pneumatic tools in my hands I could not put them down. I was captivated. I found the mental and physical challenge of creating sculptures from a block of stone emotionally gratifying.

Texas Toro, 2001, Utah alabaster, 28 x 14 x 16 in.

CDH: How did your experience in hotel management (or in any of your prior careers) help inform your decisions in the business side of being a sculptor?

MYH: I managed my transition into the art world by being thoughtful and deliberate, getting trained, and working tenaciously. In order to be a successful entrepreneur in the hospitality/urban development field, I had to be unafraid to take risks, be ambitious, possess the ability to take initiative, be a solid advocate for myself and my business, have good communication skills, always

be reliable and have a keen sense of integrity, always act fairly and responsibly. These qualities carried through to the business side of art.

I also understood that when you are an artist, art IS your business. Not only did I have to produce work, I had to see to the pragmatic aspect of marketing my work. My business background stood me in good stead. While success in the art world always involves a bit of luck, I at least made sure I entered the arena as prepared as I could be on my way to reinvention. That made the transition, the shift, the evolution of how I defined myself, that much less scary.

Recoil, 2003, bronze, 46 x 33 x 42 in.

CDH: What's the best advice you have for other artists who are just beginning their careers?

MYH: My best advice is to view your career as an artist as a professional business. For me this means that at least 50% of my time is spent on activities other than creating. It is not what I want to do, it is not the fun and interesting part, but in order to succeed it is necessary. You may be the most talented creative in the universe, but that alone will not facilitate success. To be "discovered" involves marketing, selling, accounting, and administration. You need to create a world that believes they have discovered you.

That said, an artist must also constantly create! Keep working through the failures, the experiments, the not-so-great work. Observe creations by the great masters in all art realms: music, painting, sculpture, performance, photography, and literature. Go back to school if that will provide creative stimulation and growth. And one thing that has always been important to me: I try never to allow a work to leave the studio if I am unsatisfied with it or feel it is incomplete. You must be your own best curator. Not everything you make will be a masterpiece!

Related: [A Risky Change: Spotlight on Mark Yale Harris](#)

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Cherie Dawn Haas is the Editor-in-Chief of Artists on Art, as well as the Online Content Manager for FineArtConnoisseur.com and OutdoorPainter.com (home of Plein Air Magazine). She is a "maker" who loves to write, dance, and explore various other forms of creative self-expression, including mixed media art.



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