



EARTHY ARTWORK

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Her earthy artwork is grown from the ground and it's these soft-shelled vessels that have perpetuated her passion for art. A unique medium for any New England artist, nature's pottery has helped Ceil Rossi of Agawam nurture her creativity. The gourd is her canvas and with them she creates one-of-a-kind, fine art pieces.

"We say the gourd has to talk to you, so when it talks to me, I know," says Ceil. Her love of gourds started over twenty-five years ago while living in Arizona. "My husband and I took a trip to California and visited a gourd farm. There were millions of gourds laying around - so I picked them up and brought a bunch home."

This trip helped plant the seed of what would become the Care-free Gourd Gallery in Carefree, Arizona. Ceil said, at first, her gourd artwork left much to be desired.

"It was horrible, just horrible," Ceil says shuddering. "I had paint, feathers, and material - I just pasted it all over the gourds. I thought, this isn't working for me, so I decided to take a couple

of lessons from gourd artists in Arizona."

She learned from the best, taking classes from well-known gourd artists in the Southwest. Using saws, drills, a variety of hand tools and a wood burner, she began to magnificently transform the buttery-skinned Neolithic plant into intricate sculptures. Throughout the process, Ceil became a respected member of the gourd artist community. She then opened her own gallery to share the craft of carving, painting, sand burning, dying, and polishing some of the world's most unusual fruits.

The world of gourds is diverse, offering an assortment of ornamental, hard-shelled and loofah varieties. Hard-shelled gourds are the best for her kind of artwork, which grow best in the Southwest. The New England climate produces softer shelled gourds that aren't desirable for Ceil's craft - she gets hers from a gourd farm in San Diego, California.

"The weather there is dry, a gourd needs a 180 day growing season," explains Ceil.

Ceil says the gourds are shipped clean and ready to be transformed into a vase, lamp or whatever strikes her fancy. Most importantly, she needs to look at the gourd first for her inspiration. The Gourd Family (Cucurbitaceae) includes hundreds of species that grow in a bewildering assortment of shapes and sizes. Their contours vary, taking on shapes that emulate a canteen, apple, pear, and birdhouse, to name a few. "Gourds have been around before 10-thousand years B.C.," says Ceil. "They started in Africa, bounced their way to South America and then to this country. In ancient times gourds were used for containers, bowls and musical instruments. Gourds are still here, that's why I love them!"

The paints that Ceil uses are very transparent so you can see the mottled skin of the gourd.

"You don't want to cover up the skin because it's part of the beauty of that gourd," says Ceil.

Polyurethane is used on the gourds to protect the finish; Ceil likes the sheen because it really makes them "pop." Time slips by when she's creating her works of art. She finds herself in a zone and once she is, Ceil likes to finish what she's started.

"This artwork surprises me," says Ceil. "I sit back and can't believe I did that, I actually did that. I can't draw and I can't do anything on canvas, but this I can do because it's so simple!"

Ceil tells her students that as well. She loves to see her students' faces after they realize, yes, I really did this! Ceil says this kind of art is not complicated - it's simple really. When it comes to painting, gourds are also very forgiving. If you don't like the colors, you can just wash the surface clean under a faucet and start all over again. Whereas with the wood-burned designs, Ceil makes sure to execute perfectly - that is forever.

Ceil says one thing she can never do is recreate a piece of art; each piece is one of a kind. She holds a deep connection with finished pieces and while she loves to share her passion, she's at a loss for words when selling a piece that she poured her heart into creating. But with the crack of a smile, she says "If people really like my art, I really feel great!"

Ceil Rossi displays and sells her artwork at local shows throughout Western Massachusetts and offers the opportunity to burn, paint, etch and emboss decorative gourds with coaching and encouragement in her Agawam studio. To learn more about Care-free Gourd Gallery, you can find Ceil's artwork at [facebook.com/carefreegourdgallery](https://www.facebook.com/carefreegourdgallery). She can also be reached at: tocarefree2@hotmail.com

