

# Business of the Studio



*Sister Studio:*  
**Lisa Pisani and  
Danielle Kugler**  
Curated by Jen O'Connor

After years of crafting in their homes and selling their creations at semi-annual open houses, sisters **Lisa Pisani** and **Danielle Kugler** decided to pool their funds and create a joint, open studio and retail shop. But at SJ Vintage 1923, they've built much more than a place to create and offer their art and the creations of other local artists; they've found a blossoming role in educating fellow crafters. Their drop-in crafting sessions and weekly workshops at "the big table" have become crucial components in catapulting their success. Here they share how they've grown their business by cultivating the dynamic crafting community in the Hudson River Valley.



**Growing up,** our love of creativity, our sense of independence and our can-do spirits came from our mom and our grandmother. We crafted with grandma, taking apart her cast-off costume jewelry to bedazzle everything (before bedazzling was cool), and we glittered everything humanly possible. We watched our mom as she did home improvements all by herself and painted ceramics, and we helped her make those burlap flowers until our fingers fell off!

As far back as we can recall, we each insisted, no matter the occasion, on gifting handmade items. Family and friends would show off our handmade gifts, and soon we had requests for custom orders and commissions for our handmade boxes, mixed-media fairies and felt follies.

We started with open houses twice a year in 2008 and called our business Sentimental Journeys. (That's the "SJ" in our current business name, SJ Vintage 1923. The 1923 comes from the year our grandma was born). Our Spring Soiree and Winter Gala were events we'd work toward for months and months, creating inventory and amassing vintage finds to refresh. With such a tremendous outpouring of support for these home shows, we expanded our event offerings to include the creations of other local artists and began to build the relationships we call on now as retailers.



*Lisa*

*Danielle*

## Wise Words

*Danielle*

"Wherever you are,  
be all there."

—Jim Elliot



## P.S. I Love This!

*Danielle*

This silver teapot was a gift from Lisa. It's engraved and reads, "Because I have a sister, I will always have a friend."

*Lisa*

A shadowbox made by Danielle for me as a birthday gift. It shows us as little girls. We're lifelong best friends, and I am so grateful.



## Choose Success

- 1 Know your customers' names. Don't just know their needs and wants; know and remember who they are! Cultivating a relationship takes effort, but it speaks volumes of your good intentions. And if you forget someone's name, tell him or her honestly so you can get it right the next time!
- 2 Nothing is worth more than word of mouth. It's the best form of advertising! When your customers are happy enough to pass you along, they've had great customer service and a positive experience.
- 3 Do not build your business on debt. Too many retailers try to justify a purchase, and the bills add up quickly. Be conservative in your inventory purchasing. If an opening order is \$300, spend the minimum to see how the products are received before jumping in with a huge monetary commitment.
- 4 Network with neighboring small businesses. Small considerations like where your customers park in shared lots, where you suggest they go for lunch, and where you buy your own coffee impact your neighbor businesses. It's a good thing to extend support and have good manners.
- 5 Ask for feedback from return customers. Ask them what's bringing them back, and let them know you've noticed and that you're working hard to have something new for them to see or learn each time they visit.

### Outgrowing Our Original Plan

As our open houses grew, we needed more room to produce and store goods, as well as the space to host shoppers. While we were totally thrilled with our success in handmade and our events, we still had our regular jobs and were in a constant juggle to balance our existing careers with this emerging opportunity! The idea of combining our personal studios and attaching a shop that focused on handmade to pay expenses took shape in our minds.

After years of musing, we decided it was time to take a leap of faith. It was now or never. We were unfulfilled in our corporate careers, we had a following and experience in making and selling, and we knew we had other artists and crafters that would support our new journey. So in 2015, the hunt for the perfect studio and retail space began.

### "The Big Table"

We know having a creative outlet is critical for your mental health and well-being. Having time to decompress and do something that makes you happy in this fast-paced life is so important to each of us. We wanted our customers and followers to have a creative space too, so we decided to make weekly workshops and crafting kits a part of our business. We also needed ample space to present enough artist-made creations, our own art and vintage goods to pay the rent.

We searched for a large, affordable space where we could create a comfortably sized studio area—one large enough to share with our customers. When we found our



space in Newburgh, New York, it was a match at first sight. It was large and bright, with a wonderful open plan, and we knew at least a third of it could be used as studio space.

We've used props and fixtures to earmark the creative space, with a huge wall of shelves for supplies. We know it helps crafters to see what's available to them when working on a project, and we know flat tabletop space is a must. We had a friend create our massive 6-by-12-foot table. Every inch of it is precious to us! We love that our fellow crafters have signed the table with cheerful messages of appreciation.



### Building a Crafting Community

The workshops we teach weekly in the studio have cultivated a creative, community atmosphere. People stop in and call with questions: “Is this for beginners? Can I do this? I’m not crafty,” and “I can’t paint!”

We always say, “You absolutely can do this; we will teach you!” We give encouragement, space, tools and hands-on direction to complete projects in a way that expresses our clients’ individuality. Art is in the eye of the beholder; there is no wrong way. That’s the message we send to our fellow crafters and upon that, our business has taken off!

We have folks that come to our workshops on their own, then they bring a friend or family member the next time, and at the end of two hours, they’ve chatted enough with everyone that they leave as friends, sometimes even making plans to see each other at our next workshop session.

While the workshops were definitely a part of our business plan from the start, they have exceeded our expectations for what they could do for our business as well as our personal fulfillment. Now we offer classes weekly, and by special request, we have added kids’ DIY studio time, host-your-own-workshop night and team-building projects for any group. While the planning, prep work and supply gathering is hard work, we love it! Our classes consist of mixed media, needle felting, wood projects, painting techniques and altered art. One of the perks of taking a class is a shopping discount on the class date. Class participants love this added bonus to unleashing their creativity. It amazes us how many know each other and wind up reconnecting or reminiscing around the table while being creative. Hence our hash tag, #getaseatatthetable.

### Sharing Our Style and Inspiration

Our unique style is rust and ruin; we love to infuse vintage and new. We like that our customers don’t realize we carry 22 artists or 85 vendors; they just know that it all goes together and feels right! As many vendors and artists as we have, our venue sends a cohesive design aesthetic where new, vintage and handmade all look as if they were curated from one place and are chapters in our style story. The choices we make in selection are painstaking. Every choice has a reason behind it: Do we love the artist’s work? Is the item made in the United States? Do they have a green initiative? Do they support a charity? Is it fair trade? Does it match our overall aesthetic?

We suppose our creative inspiration comes from us being old souls. We really feel at home with anything old, chippy and dusty. A component of the vintage fairies I (Lisa) make are old cabinet cards. Imagine being that little girl or little boy or mom: What was life like then? How did they get there to that place in time? I always say I am recycling people’s relatives and giving them a new life.

The mushrooms I (Danielle) make are created from vintage treasures, fabric bits and baubles. There is always one piece that the mushroom celebrates and is created around—something vintage or found. It writes its own story. In some way it speaks to me, and I just have to make it and share it in my art.



## Wise Words

*Lisa*

“This is impossible.”

“Only if you believe it is.”

—Lewis Carroll’s  
*Mad Hatter to Alice*

### Challenges and What's Next

Our biggest challenge and biggest accomplishment go hand-in-hand: the classic work/home/life balance. Each requires 100 percent of you, and each suffers and thrives at the same time. We say #weloveourlife. The more we say this to ourselves, the more it’s true, and our customers and their support affirm that. We need the community we’ve created as much as they need us!

We love that our shop is not typical, so our customers are not! They expect to see us working on something different and original anytime they stop by. The challenge is keeping the store stocked with small, limited inventory orders and keeping new handmade constantly coming so our space is fresh.

We have exciting plans. We hope to create the opportunity for guest-artists to offer workshops, and we hope to collaborate on the launch of a custom jewelry piece exclusive to us. This summer we’ll appear at the Country Living Fair in Rhinebeck, New York, to offer our handmade goods and host crafting demos to market our business. But, the most exciting prospect is to expand into interior decorating with our own home décor line! We know no matter what we do, we’ll be doing it as members of the vibrant local crafting community.



More on Danielle and Lisa  
[sjVintage1923.com](http://sjVintage1923.com)

