At Riverssance, collectors and connoisseurs of art have the opportunity to purchase the works they most love, but their creators are competing with one another for more than just a sale. They're also competing for a share in the festival's $3,000 awards purse.

Riverssance artisans are eligible to compete for one of 13 cash prizes – a dozen $200 Awards of Merit are presented, along with one $600 Best in Show award. (Winning artisans also receive a metal statue designed by area artist Eric Mart.) And as in most trials, the artists' hopes for a cash award lie in the hands of a jury.

Before an artist's contributions are showcased at the Riverssance Festival of Fine Art in Lindsay Park, their work must first be accepted by the festival's screening committee, which, this year, is led by Jury Director Jodean Murdock.

As in a trial jury, there are 12 individual jurors involved in the Riverssance screening process, a group, Murdock said, composed of "artists, art administrators ... people knowledgeable in the field." Among this year's participants were Riverssance Director Larry DeVilbiss; Deb Doehler of Black Hawk College's art-department faculty; and retired Black Hawk artist Bill Hannan, whose exhibit of paintings, calligraphy, and handmade books recently appeared at the Rock Island Public Library.

The process itself begins with the collection of entries, and Murdock revealed that between January and March of this year, 186 artists applied for inclusion at Riverssance. Along with a written entry form, artists provide representations of their work on disk, which are subsequently viewed by the Riverssance screening committee.

As opposed to the deliberations in a trial jury, however, the 12 Riverssance jurors don't discuss the works' artistic merit; each judge screens the contributions privately, with their judgments eventually combined for a group "consensus."

Entrants' artwork, no matter the medium, is judged in four areas: (1) initial and overall impact, (2) original concept, (3) use of materials and technique, and (4) consistency – an indication of what Murdock called "professionalism and maturity." Using these four artistic barometers, the 12 judges rate the artists' work on a scale of one through 10, and after the screening process has concluded, the 12 individual scores are tallied; artists with the highest overall scores are subsequently included in the festival. (A perfect object of art would, therefore, yield a score of 120.)

In the end, 106 artists made the final cut this year, a number dictated, Murdock said, by "the layout of the park. ... We only have room for so many." As would be expected, the majority of the artists included are from Iowa and Illinois, but Murdock sounded pleased to report that Riverssance 2005 will also showcase the work of artists from "Colorado, New York, Florida ... all over."

Once the Riverssance artisans have been selected and their work displayed at the Riverssance festival, the recipients of the 13 cash awards are determined by a single judge elected by the screening committee, who announces the winners – including the prestigious Best in Show

winner – at the weekend's conclusion.

This year's awards judge is Kristin Quinn, a noted area artist whose oil paintings are often exhibited in local galleries, and who serves as a professor in and chair of the Department of Art at St. Ambrose University. Quinn, who has previously served on arts juries for such organizations as Quad City Arts – "but not," she admitted, "on a ... show of this magnitude" – said that "it's an honor and a privilege" to have been asked to serve as Riverssance's judge. "It's one of the highest-quality crafts shows in the area," she said. And when it comes time to make her final Best in Show selection, Quinn said she's confident that the winning artwork will be one that grabs her viscerally, be it a painting or a sculpture or a ceramic piece. "Once it gets down to the final 10," she said, "I'm sure I'll see something that is really going to resonate."

From the initial selection process through the announcement of the final Best in Show selection, Jodean Murdock said the jury-screening process does a great deal to improve the quality of any art show. "Since they're being rated by other artists," Murdock said, both the artwork in question and the festival itself are "raised to a more professional level."

Even if an individual's work isn't selected by the Riverssance committee for festival inclusion, though, Murdock said that the jury-selection experience is one that every emerging artist should take part in. This artistic trial-by-jury, Murdock said, allows up-and-coming artisans "to have an understanding of the process" of professional, artistic jurying, enabling them to "continue bettering their work, and continue learning."