Introduction

People frequently ask what was my favorite craft show.

Invariably I give an inaccurate answer. In truth, my favorite show of all time was the first Northeast Craft Fair in Stowe, VT, known at the time as the "Confrontation Craft Fair." But I am getting ahead of myself.

The original "craft fair" retailing experience was the ancient souk. It was an infrequent and impermanent marketing event organized beyond the limits of a city, where merchants and craftspeople gathered, erected small tents and stalls, and displayed goods they had created or purchased, hoping to sell what they had brought. A souk was by its very nature transient, occurring only when the merchants and craftspeople arrived, and terminating when they left. Activities during a souk invariably extended beyond buying and selling to include shared food, as well as other social and cultural activities.

The organizers of the Confrontation Craft Fair, held in August of 1966 (also known as "Confrontation '66" or just "Confrontation"), recognized the need to preserve the framework of the souk. But to make it work in modern times, it required an amalgamation with a second predecessor of the modern craft fair: the rendezvous. Rendezvous originated 100 years ago among the Rocky Mountain trappers and fur traders as a yearly gathering of like-minded people to sell, resupply, and meet with friends. During the brief life of a rendez- vous, friendships coalesced and community formed among the disparate groups of rugged, solitary, individualists.[1]

The concept of the modern craft fair, introduced in August of 1966 at the first Northeast Craft Fair in Stowe, VT, can be seen as a fusion of these two

traditions. Confrontation ‘66 sought to celebrate the best craft makers of the day, identify the needs of the next generation of craftspeople, and develop a vision for the makers of the future. And it succeeded.

The ancient traditions of the souk and rendezvous were built on a foundation of a close-knit community that drew support from attendees who gathered because they belonged to, and supported, the established order.

By DAVID PAUL BACHARACH

Modern craft makers are widely dispersed. In 1966, most makers were self-taught in all aspects of their trade, and so, did not even possess the shared backgrounds and camaraderie that arises from the rigors of collegiate life. For the modern craft fair to survive, one additional component was necessary: a *community* of crafts makers who shared the same inherent need for the community to survive.

Craftspeople are generally solitary individualists with a single-minded purpose. Age, gender, race and ethnicity were never criteria for inclusion in the craft community. At sixteen, I was the youngest exhibitor at Stowe, but I immediately felt embraced. The paradigm of the modern craft show survived and prospered because it was founded on a community of like-minded makers where anyone was welcome; individuality, creativity, and mastery of process were the keys to acceptance. Friend- ships often blossom quickly and endured. During set-up, at the show, and into the night at communal dinners and fêtes, exhibiting craftspeople maintained a constant ex- change of stories and information among themselves as to what the community had accomplished and what it could be in the future. By virtue of the core group of exhibiting makers assembling and reassembling many times a year, a communal quilt of conversation, memories and mutual respect was stitched together by the stories each member of the community told and retold.

Sponsored by the Northeast Regional Assembly of the American Craftsmen’s Council (the name was later changed to the American Craft Council), Confrontation ’66 was organized and run by volunteer craftspeople and held in a ski lodge at the base of Mt. Mansfield. Of the 175

craftspeople who attended the fair, 80 set up full displays of their work for wholesale and retail sales. (This was the first craft fair with a dedicated wholesale component.) A few craftspeople displayed

small selections of their work in a communal display area and some were selected to display in the juried "Court of Honor" gallery space. In addition, panel discussions covering wholesale and retail issues, critiques of work by peer committees (chosen by the exhibitors themselves), an auction of donated work, a dance, and numerous communal meals all took place during the week-long event.

The craft fair format introduced at Stowe was new. Untested. Confrontation '66 planted the seed that germinated in the years that followed, producing new approaches for jurying, layout, quality of work and display.

the greatness of a craft

consists firstly in hoW it brings comradeship to men.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupery

I was taught from an early age that individuals coalesce around mutual interests and needs, but community is crystalized by sharing bread, salt and wine.

Seeing colleagues at shows fostered dialogue and sharing. To fully participate and succeed in a craft community exchange though required a course in CSL (Craft as a Second Language). The most obvious means to acquire a general understanding of CSL was through craft community involvement; exhibiting at a craft show and meeting other craftspeople provided the opportunity for that involvement.

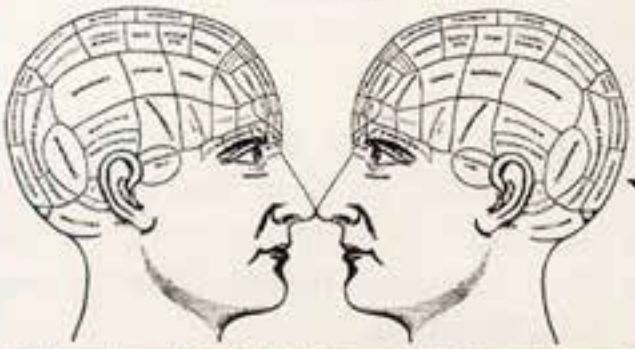
Questions could be answered in casual conversation: How to execute specific techniques? Where to find particular materials or equipment at the best price? What are the best shows? How to apply to a show? How to build a booth? What is the best

tent for outdoor shows? Which gallery owners pay their bills on time (or at all)? How to write a contract? How to price work? How to estab- lish a minimum order? What is consignment and what are normal consignment terms?

At the first four Northeast Craft Fairs, meetings were held each evening. Exhibitors would gather after the show closed to discuss the day, exchange ideas and solve problems. During the meetings, jobs would be assigned, with volunteers chosen to clean the bathrooms, sweep the floors, plan demonstrations of work in various media, pick up supplies, and create and place posters.

Then, as now, booth size and location was a major topic of discussion. Stowe's layout was informally configured in a variety of unequally sized and shaped booths. Every booth cost five dollars. Occasionally, dis-

A.C.C. CRAFTSMAN STOWE, VT.



CONFRONTATION CRAFT FAIR

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agreements over booth size and location would require mediation during the meetings.

At early shows, craftspeople could pick out an area and set up their booth, taking as much room as they required. Outdoor booths included parking spots for cars. These "tailgate" booths (costing three dollars) enabled an exhibitor to sell from his or her trunk. If everything sold, a craftsperson could go home.

The current 10' x 10' booth size did not become standard until 1969, the first year the show was held at the Bennington High School location. The 10'x10' size was chosen because nothing deeper could be accommo- dated by the school's hallways.

As unpredictable as booth layout and con guration was from 1966-1972, it was equally uncertain who would exhibit, or where their booth might be located, until booth installation was completed. Exhibitors often arrived unannounced and unexpected. Spaces were allo- cated on a first-come, first-served basis. On the wholesale day, exhibitor volunteers would gather names and contact information (after they had set up their own displays). After typing, mimeographing, collating and stapling each final copy, they hand-delivered one to each exhibitor, as time allowed. Formal lists of exhibitors, booth locations and show maps were unavailable until the afternoon of the third day of the show, if at all.

This informal procedure was followed until the Northeast Craft Fair's second year at the Benning- ton location in 1970 (technically, that was the Fair's fifth appearance). That year, the exhibitor volunteers directing the show decided that to maintain control over the now-sprawling event, they needed to limit the number of available booths. Pre-assigned booth spaces were the outgrowth of that decision. Committees began to lay out shows onsite, before exhibitors arrived. Until the second year at Rhinebeck (1975), exhibitor acceptance was based on the postmark visible on the envelope containing payment for the booth. The jury process was an outgrowth of the committee decisions made at Bennington in 1970.

Additionally, at Stowe and the shows that followed, there were often formal lectures, workshops, and critical reviews. The two-pronged approach of infor- mal and formal narratives, like those told at yearly craft rendezvous, provided

concentrated sources of education that taught skillful handling of materials while impart- ing a lexicon and a set of business practices that went

far beyond the technical mastery acquired in lectures, workshops, or at school.

Unbeknownst to all participating in the 1966 show at Stowe, we were participating in the creation of the modern craft event. The format begun here was to become a model for countless yearly crafts rendez- vous that would eventually span the entire nation. Like the event at Stowe, these early fairs were directed by exhibitor volunteers to benefit the community of crafts- people who created their work in widespread (at times, isolated) studios and gathered periodically to sell, resupply and meet with friends.

We have to remember that What We observe is not nature in itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning.

—Werner heisenberg [2]

Experiencing a craft event of this sort for the rst time, we all felt like one of the blind men in the old Buddhist parable, trying to make sense of an elephant.[3]

Craft-based businesses are one of the oldest eco- nomic models that exist. Today, approximately five million Americans collectively earn six to ten billion dollars through the sale of crafts. Between 30,000 and 50,000 Americans create and sell crafts as their principal means of income, earning between 1 billion and 1.8 billion dollars in sales annually.[4] In many ways, it all began right there in Stowe.

At early wholesale/retail craft events, it was not unusual for craftspeople to create work during the winter, then bring everything they had created to the one or two shows they participated in each summer. Stores and galleries would pick out work from what was being shown, pay for it, and take the work with them when they left the show that day. Any work remaining when wholesale ended was sold at retail. If nothing remained post-wholesale, a craftsperson would pack up and head home.

it is not enough to knoW your craft - you have to have feeling. science is all very Well, but for us imagination is Worth far more.

—edouard manet

The stories that follow codify the myriad experi- ences of exhibiting crafts community members as they go about creating, exhibiting and living. Men and women, rich in the rewards of traveling a path of their own choosing, filling the spaces between imagination and achievement with the actions of continual learning. Craft makers who create objects that inform and provide a unique way of understanding our world. Objects with the power to generate and bear witness to cultural change in a society in perpetual motion, telling stories that provide a fragmentary insight into the maker's life, while provoking unique memories of our own.

In this book, we are given privileged glimpses into the makers' lives. Each story contains multiple layers of meaning that connect it to the crafts community, while reflecting the community as a whole.

It through such makers— such objects— such stories— that we record our past, enhance our present, and enlighten our future.

1. For more information, see Fred R. Gowans, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous: A History of the Fur Trade 1825-1840* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975).

2. Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science* (New York: Harper, 1958), p. 28.

3. According to one version of the traditional parable, which appears in the *Udâna* (Inspired Utterances), an ancient Buddhist text, the king has an elephant, and asks the blind men of the capital to come to the palace and describe it. When each of the blind men had touched a part of the elephant, the king went to each of them and asked, "Well, blind man, have you seen the elephant? Tell me, what sort of thing is an elephant?" The men likened the elephant to a pot, a winnowing basket, a plowshare, a plow, a granary, a pillar, a mortar, a pestle or a brush, depending upon whether they touched the elephant's head, ear, tusk, trunk, body,

foot, back, tail, or tip. According to another version of the parable, six blind elephants were discussing what men were like. After arguing, they decided to find one and determine what it was like by direct experience. The first blind elephant felt the man and declared, "Men are flat." After the other blind elephants felt the man, they agreed. Other versions have also been documented, and attributed to other religions. See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_men_and_an_elephant. Accessed Jan 31, 2016.

4. "Craft Artists, Income, and the US Economy" (*The CODA Review*, 2011), p. 1. Available online at craftemergency.org/files/ CODAReview2011.pdf.