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Fifty Years of the Art Fairs

From Sixties euphoria to Aughts angst

by [Peggy Page](#)

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Scott Berry began going to the art fairs in the 1970s, when he was in elementary school. He and his sister collected bottles while their father, John, sold jewelry from his booth on East University Avenue.

"Back then you could wander around as a kid," says Berry, now forty. "You could make \$20 to \$30 in bottle returns, which was pretty huge when you are ten." When he turned twenty-one, he became a partner in his father's jewelry business, and now he is vice-chair of the board of directors of the Guild of Artists and Artisans, whose Ann Arbor Summer Art Fair is the largest of the four fairs that this year run July 15-18. ([Click here for a detailed map of this year's fair.](#))

At art fairs in Florida earlier this season, Berry says, he got lots of questions about the Michigan economy. But "my biggest concern is not the economy," Berry says. "It is the media coverage of the economy, the fear factor it generates. You don't just hear about GM going down. It's always, 'Who is next?'"

"Yes, unemployment is more than ten percent in Michigan, but you never hear about the other ninety percent. Things are looking pretty positive in the Midwest from the fairs I've been to. The shows in Ann Arbor have a really good reputation, a lot of momentum, an established client base, and a really good model. The serious people will come out. And the art fairs are an economic stimulator for Ann Arbor and the state."

According to the 2009 edition of Greg Lawler's *Art Fair Source Book*, artists who responded to his survey of all four fairs reported 2008 average gross sales ranging from \$5,650 at the Ann Arbor Street Art Fair, the Original, to \$6,092 for the Guild's fair. If those figures are typical, they added up to more than \$7 million in sales for last year's roughly 1,300 artists and more than \$420,000 in Michigan sales tax. And that is just the art. Visitors also buy food, rent hotel rooms, shop, and park.

The Guild, Berry said, "has always been financially conservative." Originally the Michigan Guild of Artists and Artisans, it decided to diversify geographically, and now runs fairs in

greater Toledo and Cleveland as well as Ann Arbor. It owns its building on North Fourth Avenue. At first it had a gallery for member shows on the first floor and offices on the second floor. "But the gallery wasn't generating cash, so we moved the offices to the first floor and rented the second floor," says Berry. The move "was huge," he adds. And the group changed its membership policy to make it easier to plan for replacing retiring original members with new blood.

As a result, the Guild's Summer Art Fair is fiscally sound. So are the two fairs sponsored by downtown merchant associations-Ann Arbor's South University Area Art Fair and the State Street Area Art fair. That's not the case, however, for the Original fair, which is facing a \$65,000 budget shortfall. The fair blames a drop in corporate sponsorship and U-M campus construction that will reduce its available space this year, resulting in less rent from artists.

"This is not the year we expected it to be," says Shary Brown, executive director of the Original fair. Brown, a third-generation townie who formerly headed the Guild's fair, is sixty and plans to retire in September. But she's not going out on the high note she had hoped for.

Instead of celebrating a big anniversary and the 2008 MacArthur genius grant won by basket maker Mary Jackson, a longtime exhibitor, Brown knew by late last fall that her fair would have to scale back its 2009 show. This spring, the fair announced its deficit in its email newsletter and made a call for donations. In June the fair announced the shortfall on its website. It's even had to eliminate the tent celebrating its fiftieth year from the fair site to squeeze in more artist booths, and for the first time it's putting out donation jars.

One art fair insider suggests the Original fair's campus location may be part of the problem, because "the site is sterile-it doesn't have the ambience of the city like the other three fairs do. The success of the fairs is complex: a mix of the artists, the businesses, and the city itself. If you isolate yourself, you have to create an ambience instead of having one naturally."

Since most people find the four fairs a big blur, bad news about one is likely to be perceived as bad news about all. That's what happened as the story of the Original fair's problems rippled outward to Detroit newspapers and television. Word got out that the "Ann Arbor art fairs" were in economic trouble-a rumor that the other fair organizers want to squelch. "There are four of us," emphasizes Maggie Ladd, director of the South University Area Association, "and only one of us is in trouble."

Tom Heywood, executive director of the State Street Area Association, says his fair is on track to raise \$30,000 in sponsorships, matching last year's total. By mid-June, all of its 315 artists had paid their booth rentals. Still, Heywood says, the economy is a concern.

"Everybody is afraid-the artists and the small business owners," he says. "But in hard times people go to free events like art fairs. The question is, will they spend or not? I think things in the lower range will sell-but I don't know about things going for \$20,000."

"What's an art fair?"

Gil Dorer of Chelsea is business manager for his wife, Jan Dorer, a painter who is retiring after forty-nine years on the art fair circuit. She has exhibited in all four Ann Arbor fairs, beginning with the second year of the original fair on South University in 1961. "Her booth rental was \$6," says Gil, and they still have the receipt to prove it.

Back then, it was "just charming," said Gil, and it got more outrageous when hippie culture arrived. "There were Jesus freaks, a man who carried a python, the Hare Krishna marching through."

In those days, beer flowed freely and openly, and weed scented the air. At its peak, Gil Dorer says, "It was so damn crowded, you couldn't get through it.

"Now it's like a [George W.] Bush rally, all controlled," he laments.

Before the first fair in July 1960, summer was a sleepy time for local retailers. The late Bruce Henry, co-owner of the old gift store Artisans, had heard of art fairs in Chicago, New York, and San Francisco. He thought starting one would give merchants on South University a competitive advantage over other downtown storekeepers during Bargain Days, a citywide promotion.

Artist RoseAnna Tandler Worth, who then worked in enamels, was new to town. For a story on the fair's 25th anniversary, she told a reporter that when a friend asked her if she was going to participate in the art fair, she asked, "What's an art fair?" When the idea was presented to the Ann Arbor Art Association, the late Jean-Paul Slusser, a distinguished U-M art prof, declared that "No good artist would sit in the street to sell art."

Still, 132 artists showed up for that first fair, hanging their drawings and paintings with clothespins from wire strung between parking meters. Pottery sat on the street. The fair proved so popular that by 1964 it had grown to 380 artists, necessitating the first jurying for quality control.

Cynthia Shevel, seventy-four, first arrived in Ann Arbor during the 1963 fair. "I was trying to rent an apartment," she remembers, "and I had to drive fifteen miles outside of Ann Arbor to find a place to stay while I looked." She opened her store Middle Earth on State Street in 1967 and remembers pushing a cart "of fun stuff like toys" over to the South U fair to get some of the retail action.

The following year, the State Street Area Association started its fair. In 1971, an anti-establishment "Free Fair" sprung up around the Diag. It later became the Guild's fair on State, Liberty, and Main streets.

Scott Berry's father, John, now sixty-four, was in the early Guild fairs on East University. He

remembers two artists who had a double-decker booth and slept on the top level at night. "We'd have ten people staying at my house, and tents pitched in the backyard. It was a burn-the-candle social event. Liquor laws were laxer then. After the fair ended each night, the 'Antler Bar' opened at the booth of Jan Kaulins." (Back then, Kaulins made all his artwork out of antlers. Now he is a photographer and exhibits in the Guild fair on State Street.)

Marsha Chamberlin, CEO of the Ann Arbor Art Center, exhibited pottery in the Free Fair on East University in the early 1970s. One year it was so hot she got heatstroke and had to leave. An artist in the booth beside her "drank about twelve beers and smoked dope all day. I couldn't believe that he stayed awake and was alert enough to sell."

Ron Suarez, a software entrepreneur and former city councilman, was a graduate student in the 1970s and went to the fairs with large groups of friends. Back then, Suarez was a Deadhead. He and his friends made bootleg copies of Grateful Dead concerts for \$1 and sold them for \$3. "The night before the fairs started, there would be impromptu drummers and people gathering around the Diag," Suarez says. "Dr. Arwulf Arwulf of WCBN would lead parades through the fairs. He was responsible for the slogan, 'It's not art, and it's not fair.'"

To most eyes, though, the fairs just got better and better. High demand for a limited number of booths enabled the juries to pick and choose. As the art fairs matured, "the quality and price point improved," says John Berry, who has an MBA in marketing and worked at Ford before becoming a jeweler. "When I started, my prices were \$5 to \$150. When my son, Scott, joined the business around 1990, we were working in all gold, and our price range was \$300 to \$700. Now there is hardly anything in our booth that is less than \$700."

Although there is still some beer to be found (one artist hides his in a pottery cup, which he sips from throughout the day), the fairs have toned down from their hippie days, except for an occasional nudist at the naturist booth in the nonprofits section or the staged nude events by photographer Harvey Drouillard.

At the end of the 1990s, the South University merchants and the Street Art Fair ended their forty-year relationship-in court. The longtime fair ended up leaving South U for the area around Burton Tower and adding "the Original" to its name to distinguish itself from the rest-especially the fourth fair that the merchants started, Ann Arbor's South University Art Fair.

"I got very upset when the split came," John Berry recalls. "It was a perfect storm. At the same time as the economy was going through an upheaval with the dot-com bust, the number of artists was increasing from 1,000 to 1,300. Creating another fair was a bad solution as far as I was concerned."

Suarez recently moved to Brooklyn but says he stopped going to the fairs even before he left town. "In recent years, it is too much of the same stuff repeated over and over again. It's just

a bunch of individuals showing up, instead of having a bigger sense of community. Now it's more of an annoyance."

Attendance has dwindled visibly since the fairs' heyday. When Cynthia Shevel moved Middle Earth to South U in the 1970s, she recalls, "there were huge crowds. You literally couldn't walk on South U." She would hire seventeen or eighteen extra people during Art Fair week to staff six tables set up outside the store. "It's certainly not that way any more," she says, "at least not for the last three or four years. Now I hire just three extra people; we have one table outside, and we're fine."

Her anecdotal observations match trends in art fair shuttle ridership data from the Ann Arbor Transportation Authority. From 1993 to 2008, the peak year was 1996, when shuttle ridership was 133,285. Since then, ridership has zigzagged downward to a low of 61,995 last year.

In terms of average gross sales, the Ann Arbor art fairs used to rank near the top in Lawler's reference books. In the 2009 edition, the highest-ranking local fair was the Summer Art Fair; with average sales of \$6,092, it finished twenty-fourth. Number one? Sausalito, California, with \$11,299.

Looking ahead

Sculptor John T. Unger was relaxed as he strolled around the 2008 fair. Why not? He was just there as a tourist with his girlfriend.

Unger, of Mancelona near Traverse City, has exhibited at some art fairs, but never Ann Arbor. Why should he? Last year, his gross revenue from selling metal fire bowls and masks was more than \$100,000. He works from home and gets 98 percent of his sales via his website. "I have enough profit to support a family of three and an assistant who has a mortgage," he says.

"The Internet is my primary sales tool," says Unger, forty-one. "I did \$9,000 in sales last week without leaving the house. I wouldn't want to do the Ann Arbor shows. It would be so disruptive to my production schedule what with the travel time there and back, the setup time, and the lost studio time." And because he sells online, he has customers in forty-three states, giving him a buffer from Michigan's economic downturn.

But his high-tech approach doesn't work for everyone. Bryan David Griffith, a photographer in the State Street Area Art Fair who got an engineering degree from U-M in 1997, also has a website, but he finds he sells best at art fairs, where he has direct interaction with customers. "I think that to fall in love with a piece, you have to see it in person to appreciate its subtleties," he says—particularly with his high-resolution images, which are shot on large-format (four-by-five-inch) film. Besides, he says, "If I was selling from a gallery or online, I'd be so isolated from my customers."

Griffith, who lives in Flagstaff, Arizona, got a little panicked about the economy after the financial markets plummeted last fall but says "I decided to hunker down and focus on making new work." He expects the national and state economy to impose a Darwinian contraction on the number of artists at fairs. He would like each Ann Arbor art fair to reduce its artists by 20 percent "to increase the sales for everyone."

But if a fair has fewer artists, it gets less in booth rental fees, a major source of revenue. The solution may lie in partial or complete unity, a concept those involved with the fairs have discussed for decades-so far, to no avail. Scott Berry points out the advantages-not just in controlling costs, but in potential new income. "Now the four shows compete individually for sponsors. Many potential sponsors have told us that what keeps them from sponsoring us [the Guild fair] is that they cannot underwrite the entire event. If we could become the 'Ann Arbor Art Fair,' we could get a mega-sponsor like Coca Cola or Disney."


In the meantime, everyone has their fingers crossed about the 2009 fairs-particularly since seven out of eight visitors are from Michigan, according to a recent survey.

"George," (not his real name), works at one of the Detroit Three auto companies. He passed up a buyout offer two years ago, hoping to outlast downsizing until the economy improved. He was optimistic about his chances until June-when he was asked for a report on outsourcing his own job. Every week he hears a different rumor about the future of his work group. As a preventive cost-cutting move in case that dreaded pink slip arrives, his child will enroll at Washtenaw Community College-instead of going away to school.

In years past, George and his wife have been regular art fair shoppers. He estimates they've spent more than \$1,000 on paintings and jewelry and would break up their shopping with dinner at fine downtown restaurants. This year is different. "Our dishwasher is broken," he says. "We need new gutters on the house. We've downsized our vacation. My son is working instead of going to camp."

"We like to go to the art fairs, to talk to people and look at things-you don't want to stay home all the time and cut yourself off. But this year we can't go to the art fair and buy art. We'll walk around and look, and at the most, we'll get some quick food from those small ethnic places."

As this art fair writer can attest, you can do the fairs with round-trip AATA bus fare (\$2.50 per adult), a packed picnic lunch or supper to eat on the Diag, and a water bottle that can be refilled for free from those delightfully chilly water fountains in the Michigan Theater.

People watching, the main entertainment of the fairs since they began in 1960, is free 

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