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**Portland's Artisan Economy: The Arts and Crafts Sector**

by

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## **Portland's Artisan Economy: The Arts and Crafts Sector**

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### **Abstract**

The city of Portland, Oregon has recently been experiencing a transformation from an economy of large-scale mass production to a post-modern economy. While current theory maintains that economic development requires expansion of specialized industrial goods and services being traded to other regions, Portland is challenging this notion through its unique characteristics of local production. In what is becoming known as the artisan economy certain sectors are demonstrating craft-like qualities that have catalyzed their success. As a leader in planning, civic life and livability, Portland has increasingly drawn attention from the outside and presents an interesting story that may shed some light on its economic evolution. The study will be used to draft a chapter as part of a book on Portland's artisan economy and will specifically focus on the arts and crafts sector. The research techniques will include document research, visits to craft outlets, fairs and collectives, and personal interviews with local artisans. This will provide an overview of the sector and its relationship to the larger artisan economy within Portland, presenting profiles of individual artisans and their insights into handcrafted production as an alternative to large-scale mass production. This will help tell the story of Portland's unique artisan economy and its potential for success within larger markets.

### **Portland's Artisan Economy: The Arts and Crafts Sector**

#### **Introduction**

The goal of this research is to contribute to a chapter that will be included in a book on Portland's artisan economy, providing an overview of Portland's arts and crafts sector and its relationship to the larger artisan movement within Portland. The participants have maintained qualities associated with locality that allow them to use resources more efficiently, create shorter chains of accountability, build relationships among other artisans and customers, and provide unique qualities of taste and style. This kind of approach has helped the city's major market sectors of microbrews, foods, cycling, and fashion to become a vital source of the city's economic growth and it seems to be presenting an alternative for the current economic trajectory. This study is an attempt to better understand how, in a

global mass market economy that produces at all levels of quality and price, Portland's local artisans find a market for their crafts and maintain success?

### ***Overview of an artisan***

Heying, Ryder, and Eller's recent research on the changing fashion sector of Portland compares aspects of the industrialized world to those seen in emerging trends, providing a basis for understanding the characteristics of an artisan. Most basically, an artisan is a craftsperson skilled in making something; a more romantic definition is someone who works with the hands, head and heart. The artisan's products are handmade and individually unique, with their design closely tied to their production. Highly valued are the process, tools, material, and skill involved. The products of the artisan are meant to be appreciated over time. The work life of an artisan is loosely structured and often blended with personal life; work, living, and socializing spaces are intertwined. Increased skill is rewarded and personally satisfying.

The organizational structure of an artisan enterprise is at a small or medium scale. A high level of autonomy and flexible specialization allow the artisan much freedom in his or her work. Artisan firms tend to be clustered and collaborative with low barriers to entry and lots of room for a plethora of customized services and products. Participants are frequently on the brink of innovation through the aid networking and learning more about the craft.

Artisans typically share a common set of ethics which include staying small, local, and self-reliant. The price set by the artisan reflects the high quality nature of product. Throughout production there is often a high level of consideration for the work, waste, and use. The small nature of an artisan enterprise creates shorter chains of accountability and typically creates more trust between the producer and the patron.

The new term “artisan economy” suggests the antithesis of the modern economy and is essentially a system of production, distribution, and consumption that models the artisan-like approach to these human activities. Within the modern economy, products tend to be standardized with little tolerance for variation. The process of design is far removed from that of production with a sharp focus on the marketability and efficiency of the end product. Often times these products are designed to be replaced not long after their purchase and they maintain a generic style and suggest that they are meant to be consumed.

The work life within the modern economy is routine and structured. Work is strictly motivated by pay and is fixed and monitored by a level of management. Usually work, living, and socializing spaces are kept very distinct from one another.

The organizational structure of a modern enterprise is large scale with a low level of autonomy for workers. Firms contain inherent hierarchical structures that radiate command and control. The system allows for market dominance and creates a need for acquiring skills and knowledge in order to keep new competitors out. Innovation stems from professionals and is primarily used to increase sales.

The ethics of the modern economy differ greatly from those of artisans. Unprecedented growth is ideal, and often times the price is determined by competition and the mere perception of scarcity. Firms are spread out, dependent enterprises with utmost consideration for their own survival and for trading to gain competitive advantage. They rely on a heavy flow of marketing and rarely allow much connection between the producer and the patron (Heying, Ryder & Eller, 2008).

### **History of Arts and Crafts Movements**

It is important to contextualize the arts and crafts sector within Portland’s broader economy. The term sector is used to define the production and exchange of a particular type

of good, which in this case includes handmade pieces as opposed to machine-made production. Much of this sector seems to be an extension of the Arts and Crafts Movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in America and Britain which was largely a reaction to the Industrial Revolution and a search for authentic and meaningful styles during the machine-dominated age.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw a strong reaction to the rise of industrialism throughout Europe and the United States, and the Arts and Crafts Movement embodied the desire to improve aesthetic standards as well as working conditions within these societies. When the movement diversified and spread from Britain in the 1870s, one of the reasons it so successfully took root in the United States was due to the appeal of reviving a tradition of homespun, handcrafted goods in a country with such an individualistic nature. It added a wide variety of views, intentions and principles, and while many of the artists, crafters, and writers of the movement held more conservative and traditionalist ideals others pushed their socialist and reformist agendas. Author, poet and artist John Ruskin (1819-1900) connected the aesthetic nature of the movement with Protestantism, stating that “men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions.” Others worked to maintain Catholic and medieval influence as an ideal, romanticizing the material and moral fabric of the past when production was for necessity rather than profit.

A dominant belief was that a well-designed environment that included stylish buildings and interior furnishings would help to benefit society for all. Many influential minds rejected the trend of mass market production, feeling that industrial capitalism led to lower standards of aesthetic quality and compromised the well-being of the workforce through alienating, mechanized factory labor. From their view, crafts that included products

like jewelry, artwork, furniture, print, architecture should be aesthetically pleasing but should also be the result of contented labor rather than factory work. Workers should find joy in their simple handicraft and feel free to express their creativity and humanity through their labor.

Others however, like architect and educator Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), celebrated the idea of large-scale mechanized manufacturing and pointed out the inherent flaw which was that beautiful work was mainly undertaken by the wealthy. Others who began crafting their wares with optimism eventually went bankrupt, revealing the paradox of the movement that handmade objects are far more expensive and therefore exclusive to a large sect of consumers. The realization arose that social reform could not depend on this movement alone and that the dilemma of this paradox needed to be resolved in order for the movement to be successful. Eventually the earlier romantic ideals began to fade as European and American designers came to terms with mechanized industrial production (Adams, 1987).

### ***Crafts in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century***

Craftmaking was envisioned as a uniting force around World War II, bringing together aesthetics of the east and west and create a sense of harmony among different nations. Aileen Osborn Webb wanted to unite craftspeople and elevate their work from a labor to an art that could be marketable through capitalism. Deemed responsible for the conception of American craft from rural hobbies to building blocks for New York's art scene, Webb founded the American Craft Council (ACC) which established the national craft magazine in 1942 called *Craft Horizons*, known today as *American Craft*. She later inspired creation of the School for American Craftsmen and the New York Museum of Contemporary Craft, and in the 1960s contributed part of her wealth to help create the

World Crafts Council as a way to celebrate craft making and its potential to develop global unity.

Webb transformed the ACC's national gathering at the 1964's World's Fair in New York City to an international conference that attracted 942 participants from 47 different countries, an impressive collection of diverse representatives. The ACC established itself as an organization with a vastly different approach to crafts from other parts of the world, claiming "that the approach to craftsmanship in America is that of the individual artist, working most often alone as both designer and producer, and creating one-of-a-kind prestige pieces" (as cited in Alföldy, 2006, para. 5). The predominant idea that penetrated the international gathering was that an inventive craftsmen and a fine artist are practically indistinguishable and that craft, while maintaining its own dignity and distinction, should receive the same prestige as art. Although many non-western village artisans held significantly different perspectives about the purpose of craft from the western delegates, their low numbers of attendance contributed to a lack of discussion about the focus of craft as fine art during the conference.

Over the next decade craft making took on an image of professionalism and modernism as boundaries expanded to foster greater innovation, education, and willingness to work with designers and architects. A sense of elevation of the status of craft placed it within a sort of artistic hierarchy as western organizers sought to extend their cultural nobility into the nature of these crafts, more commonly products of professionals and formally trained artists. Often those making more traditional forms of craft felt excluded by this trend that transformed the identity of craft. Craft became classified into five distinct categories: apparel and adornment, utility and embellishment in the home, play, ritual and

celebration, and the maker's statement which includes glass, metal, clay and fiber. The last category includes most conceptual pieces formally attributed to individual makers.

The World Crafts Council demonstrated the importance of creating a uniting image for craft producers around the world despite cultural differences between western and non-western crafters. It also presented the paradox that preservation of indigenous crafts was dependent upon western intervention and industrializing forces. Events held by the council in 1974 further stirred up debate around differences between functional and non-functional crafts which remains an ideological divide in the craft world. The ramifications of the World Craft Council's formation continue to influence our conception of contemporary craft and efforts to bring together diverse types of craft across cultures despite the biases and marginalizing actions within western culture (Alfoldy, 2006).

### ***Arts and Crafts in Portland, Oregon***

Namita Gupta Wiggers, curator of the Museum of Contemporary Craft in Portland, has been working to contextualize modern craft in *Unpacking the Collection: Selections from the Museum of Contemporary Craft* which examines the craft movement in the Pacific Northwest and throughout the country. Her research provides a rich, detailed historical context for this movement and helps establish an understanding of how this unique city has fostered such a suitable environment for this kind of work. Susan Beal, a founding member of Portland's craft collective Super Crafty, also provides a comprehensive and condensed history of craft in Portland on the website for the collective at [www.pdxsupercrafty.com](http://www.pdxsupercrafty.com).

Beal describes Portland as having a rich, evolving community involved in craftmaking as it has expanded over the years through new institutions and events focusing on old and new craft. As she points out, once the Arts and Crafts movement took hold in the United States the boundaries that kept fine art and functional craft distinct eventually

began to dissolve. One of the unique qualities of this realm is how women became leaders and had the opportunity to create and teach their handwork to the general public, and the work was appreciated not only for the craftsmanship but for its artistic qualities. The Portland craft community owes its presence largely to the presence of a few hardworking visionary women of the time (2008).

In 1907, local artist Julia Hoffman founded the Arts and Crafts Society (ACS) in Portland in order "to educate the community in the value and creation of fine craft." Through this society members could participate in a variety of events, programs, and classes held in their own homes. As the ACS continued to grow throughout the late 1930s, Julie's daughter Margery Hoffman Smith began interior design work for the new Work Progress Administration (WPA) building, the Timberline Lodge. Seeing the lack of ski lodges available in the Northwest, Margery brought over one hundred jobless locals to Mount Hood to learn to make furnishings through the media of wood, iron, and a variety of hand-woven fabrics. They used only Oregon materials and worked downtown near Skidmore Fountain finishing the interior of the lodge in 1937 just in time for its dedication by President Roosevelt. Margery attributed the success of the large craft project largely to her mother who worked so hard to bring artists and the public together. That same year Lydia Herrick Hodge founded the Oregon Ceramic Studio (OCS) after finally securing help from the WPA in constructing a studio space. Margery Hoffman Smith supported the project and its use of Oregon clays, helping convince the city to provide the four-lot site on Southwest Corbett Avenue for the studio's construction under the terms that all clay artwork made in Portland's public schools could be fired at the studio. Leftover materials from the Timberline Lodge were used in building the wood and glass structure, used not only for ceramic work but also for exhibitions, retail of art materials, and lectures.

In the 1940s craft had taken off nationwide with the formation of the American Crafts Council which by the 1950s had been hosting ceramic shows, craft shows and an artist-in-residence program (Beal, 2008). Called “the Decade of Northwest Ceramic Annuals”, the 1950s were a time when artists shared a sense of freedom to experiment with different influences and techniques using local materials, and their wide range of styles pushed the boundaries of ceramics work and brought a newly defined American Craft Movement (Museum of Contemporary Craft, 2008).

In 1952 the ACS combined with the Metal Guild and Allied Art organizations and situated itself within Northwest Portland. It later purchased an old chiropractic hospital in the area and transformed it into a crafts school where people could practice their work and showcase it within a shop and gallery space. The vision of Julia Hoffman was materializing as new institutions supported an emerging education and appreciation of art (Beal, 2008). The movement in the 1950s coincided with a counter-culture fascination with Asian ideas such as Zen Buddhism and with the influence of ideas from the “Beat Generation”. People discovered new ways of seeing, feeling, and experiencing objects, and this newfound expressionism challenged the traditional notions of functional usage for crafts.

With the death of Lydia Herrick Hodge in 1960, many wondered if the OCS could survive. Ken Shores, an OCS artist-in-residence, became director and renamed the institution the Contemporary Crafts Gallery (CCG), remodeling the building with a collection of new diverse crafts that were both functional and conceptual. The CCG created the Craftsmen in the Schools project to help educate the quickly expanding population of young artistic students. The American Craft Movement that was in full swing presented a

variety of exhibitions from an eclectic art community with a worldview of global influence and conceptualism (Museum of Contemporary Craft, 2008).

By the mid 70s the CCG was significantly helping make up for the lack of gallery space in Portland, accommodating the works of over 175 craft artists. This decade also introduced a new outdoor food and craft market to the city. It was modeled after the Saturday Market in Eugene, Oregon where artists Sheri Teasdale and Andrea Scharf had sold their work and identified an opportunity for a similar market in downtown Portland. They received grant money and a large enough lot area to sell booth space for \$3 to each vendor interested in participating in the new co-op known as the Portland Saturday Market. The institution moved to its current location under the Burnside Bridge in 1976 and quickly expanded as artists competed fiercely for the best lot spaces, eventually extending its hours of operation to Sundays as well (Beal, 2008).

Meanwhile Gordon Smyth, an interior designer interested in emerging artists, took over as director of the CCG during the 1970s. He established its formal residency on Corbett Ave and carried on its role as a social hub for artists and collectors and a place to feature exhibitions. In 1978 the CCG director position changed hands again as Marlene Gabel stepped in to lead the institution through a variety of changes over the next 20 years (Museum of Contemporary Craft, 2008). By 1979 the ACS had also outgrown its space and moved onto a 7-acre orchard as the Oregon School of Arts and Crafts, offering more programs and art forms with which participants could experiment (Beal, 2008).

In the 1980s the Northwest had become the glassmaking center of the nation and Marlene Gabel brought a series of annual glass exhibitions to the CCG and organized group

shows. Portland State University received the Glass Shack Workshop in 1972 and taught emerging artists a variety of techniques for this medium. In 1987 the fiftieth anniversary celebration of CCG was celebrated in conjunction with the publication *3934 Corbett: Fifty Years at Contemporary Crafts* by Jane Van Cleeve. Gabel invited artists and collectors to guest-curate exhibitions that were co-hosted by a various city institutions.

During this time craft began to experience an identity crisis in the midst of a shifting market, changing the direction and style of craft organizations such as the CCG. The CCG started to become more professionalized and increasingly weighed down with exhausting programming work, focusing less on education and more on promotion and marketing. It launched more craft shows and established a less personal relationship with participants (Museum of Contemporary Craft, 2008).

Meanwhile the OSAC grew to receive accreditation for its classes in 1988 and in 1996 it became the Oregon College of Art and Craft. Three years later it began hosting biennial celebrations that showcased the work of regional artists and encouraged them to exercise their creative and intellectual potential. The school's president Bonnie Laing-Malcolmson claimed "The Arts and Crafts movement was a reaction against industrialization; in today's technological world the perpetuation of fine hand craft is equally important to keep us in touch with our creative minds and hands"(Beal, 2008, para. 22). OCAC's Studio School continues to educate a large population while incorporating modern techniques such as digital work into many of its classes (Beal, 2008).

The 1990s were a particularly challenging time for the CCG largely due to the hazy boundaries between art and craft, but the practice of craft proliferated despite its lack of

good programming and education as many commercial contemporary galleries surfaced around Portland. The CCG continued to push through changes as David Cohen succeeded as director in 2002, changing its name to the Contemporary Crafts Museum and Gallery and moving the organization to the Pearl District in Northwest Portland. The building reopened as the Museum of Contemporary Craft in July 2007, proudly maintaining “craft” in its name while so many other institutions have recently been removing it (Museum of Contemporary Craft, 2008). It also added “museum” to its title as a way of representing its impressive and permanent collection of craft goods, and it continues to maintain its original goals as stated on the website: “to present excellence in contemporary craft, to support artists and their work, to connect the community directly with artists, to deepen the understanding and appreciation of craft, and to expand the audience that values craft and its makers” (“A Seventy Year Legacy”, 2008, para. 3).

The Artists in the Schools program also expanded so much that it was absorbed by the Regional Arts and Culture Council. Portland’s Saturday Market, now 35 years in existence, hosts over 400 vendors and 15,000 visitors on a Saturday and has revitalized the area around it which includes Skidmore Fountain and the site of old downtown Portland. It continues to run like a co-op with its members voting on the acceptance of new vendors and charging sales fees and may soon relocate to accommodate its ever-growing status (Beal, 2008, para. 17).

### ***Contemporary Craft in Portland***

Local contemporary craft is seen not only in guilds but through modern institutions that allow people to explore unique styles and innovative techniques, and the craft

philosophy extends into artisanal food, small businesses and locally-made products and fashion. As Namita Gupta Wiggers claims, “People have a desire to get back in touch with doing things manually”. Our modern culture has revived everything from knitting to farming in an urban context” (Skinner, 2008, para. 9). Traditional craft is still very much alive, however, and one can find a niche for his or her craft through a variety of local craft groups such as:

1. Art in the Pearl Fine Arts and Crafts Festival
2. Columbia Basin Basketry Guild
3. Creative Metal Arts Guild
4. Glass Art Society
5. Guild of Oregon Woodworkers
6. Local 14 Art Show and Sale
7. Association of Northwest Weaver’s Guild
8. The Millstream Knitting Guild
9. The Northwest Woodworking Studio
10. Portland Bead Society
11. Northwest Designer Craftsmen
12. Oregon Ceramics Association
13. Oregon Glass Guild
14. Oregon Potters Association
15. Portland Handweavers Guild
16. Salem Fiber Arts Guild
17. Studio Art Quilt Associates

18. Willamette Ceramics Guild
19. Pacific Northwest Sculptors
20. Rich Glass

The following is a list of the types of national associations, guilds, and fairs available in Portland:

1. American Ceramic Society
2. American Craft Council
3. Craft Organization Development Association
4. Craft Emergency Relief Fund
5. The Furniture Society
6. Glass Art Society
7. Handweavers Guild of America
8. National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts
9. Sculptural Objects and Functional Art
10. Society of North American Goldsmiths
11. The Studio Potter
12. The Woodturning Center (“Links”, 2008).

The bulk of actors in Portland’s arts and crafts sector include owners of craft supply outlets, local authors of craft books, professional artisans who sell through markets, fairs and collectives, and crafters with home-based craft businesses. Many also sell their handmade wares to the global community through the web-based store Etsy.com. This recent online shopping phenomenon has allowed many local artists to make or supplement their income by expressing their passions and creativity through their crafts. The vision of Etsy is a new economy in which people “buy, sell, and live handmade” and the marketplace not only

enables people to make a living making things but also attempts to establish a connection between buyers and sellers ("Etsy: About.", 2008, para. 4).

Portland's Saturday Market continues to thrive as a popular hub for artists, performers, locals and visitors on weekends. Often times those who sell at Saturday Market are also active in festivals such as Last Thursday in the Alberta neighborhood or First Thursday in the Pearl District of downtown Portland. Trillium Artisans is "an innovative, green, nonprofit community economic development program that empowers artisans and actively connects them to markets" (Scripter, 2008, para. 1). Crafty Wonderland is another popular event at which various local crafters can market their items. Super Crafty is an example of a craft collective that has taken off in the city, and the Portland branch of the Church of Craft is a weekly meeting place for those who are interested in DIY (Do It Yourself) craft, learning techniques that help them make products to enjoy themselves or sell to the public (Beal, Nguyen & Pitters, 2005).

### **Literature Review**

As Heying, Ryder, and Eller have noted, large-scale mass production is seemingly going out of style in Portland, Oregon as changing characteristics of local sectors are demonstrating a shift toward an artisan economy that fosters craft-like qualities of production. More evidence of this change can be found in contemporary publications that follow the unique trends changing the face of the modern-day economy.

"Is it Art? Or is it Craft?" by Marjorie Skinner describes how the role of craft has changed over time, formerly seen as a functional object rendered artistically by a skilled craftsperson but increasingly becoming non-functioning and challenging the distinctions between what is art and what is craft. The challenge for many crafters has become preserving

and reintroducing the past into a relevant context since, as the article states, “context is everything” (2008, para. 5).

In “The Importance of Story” reporter and trend seeker Lynn Casey noted that stories add substance to everyday challenges, enthrall with the range of human experience, and add texture to objects in our lives. With the rise of the internet, simple commerce has become a vacuum where real touch and real time is scarce. Vendors who provide a story with their products will thrive as the “left brain”-dominated era of the Information Age is coming to an end. We are entering a world of “right brain” qualities where inventiveness, empathy and meaning predominate. The challenge for producers is revealing the inspiration and passion behind the design and translating that for the consumer.

As Casey pointed out, the popularity of Etsy speaks to the consumer’s desire to make a connection with the creator and add a sense of humanity to the exchange (2008). Further referencing the trend, Andi Kovel’s piece “The Cunning of Craft” describes how in the ever-expanding design world she and her studio, Esque Studio, hope to create original, conceptual and content-based pieces building from the resurgence and renewed interest in craft and a recent marriage between art, craft and design. At Esque, objects achieve souls, create profound sense of belonging, and have individual attributes that reflect history, locale, or culture. Kovel believes Esque is helping lead the movement of attaching craft to function to fine art, disbanding the notion of craft as kitsch. Objects should be used and handled, inspire thoughts and ideas, make us feel connected. They should feel authentic and tie together our past and future (2008).

“Handmade and Proud: What's behind the resurgence in knitting, sewing, and making your own stuff?” by Jamie Passaro explores the resurgent interest in domestic crafts among the new generation of crafters who have taken traditional crafts and redefined them

with new styles and unique modernity. Domestic craft has become hip and no longer simply a woman's practice born out of necessity. "The impulse to make things today seems especially anachronistic at a time when we can buy just about anything for less money (and in less time) than it would take to make it" (2008, para. 3). The article points out that craft has taken off as a national trend. Reportedly the sales of Singer sewing machines have doubled since 1999. According to the Craft Yarn Council, between 2002 and 2004 the number of twenty-five- to thirty-four-year-olds who are knitting and crocheting increased by more than 150 percent. Etsy, popularly known as the eBay of craft, reports that it has 300,000 members, 50,000 of whom are sellers. It also reports that in the two years it's been in business, one million items have been sold from its site, and most of these things are either wearable or for the home (2008, para. 5). "Call it the new wave of craft, domestic craft, domestic arts, or the new domesticity. Some link it to the third wave of feminism, to the same DIY (Do It Yourself) philosophy found in punk rock and its three chords, or to the Arts and Crafts movement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries" (Passaro, 2008, para. 6). Like Susan Beal, many people see domestic craft as an important piece of women's culture. Beal also attributes the recent resurgence of interest in domestic crafts to the fact that a lot of twenty and thirty-somethings spend so much time at their computers that they feel disconnected from that "warm and tactile feeling of working with their hands." She also recognizes the expanding mindset of dissatisfaction with consumer culture and unethical practices seen in mass-production (Passaro, 2008, para. 15).

Dennis Stephens, a doctoral student at Columbia University's Teachers College, analyzes craft culture on his blog "Redefining Craft" and points out that DIY craft is a way of confronting mass-market consumerism and cultural homogenization. Some say the craft

renaissance is guided by the same sort of yearning and philosophy that drove the Arts and Crafts movement, only instead of protesting industrialization, today's crafters are protesting technology and globalization. Yet, consistent with the Arts and Crafts movement, there's a feeling that a beautiful or interesting object made by hand by a skilled craftsperson has an honesty that mass-produced objects can't match (Passaro, 2008).

Diane Gilleland (a.k.a. "Sister Diane"), organizer of the Portland Church of Craft, says "There's a certain power in making with your own two hands the things you want in the world" (Passaro, 2008, para. 19). She notes a sort of rebellion against the hardworking, 9 to 5 lifestyle of the baby boomer generation as part of the conscious lifestyle choices made by today's crafters. Curator Namita Wiggers refers to this as a "cache of avant-garde" as she has been thinking about the dramatically different relationship with craft experienced by women today compared to those in the past. She sees how DIY crafts reflect nostalgia for traditional craft and a yearning to reinvent the tradition in a way that often combines the craftiness of the seventies with the irony of Americana of the fifties. Essentially people are proudly returning to the practice of making things with their hands and feeling proud about their crafts (Passaro, 2008, para. 32-33).

As discussed in the article by Jane Savage in *Arcade*, designers are working hard to give clients and brands a "competitive advantage in a sea of sameness" (2008, para. 5). In response to designs that have led to the production of unsafe vehicles and permanent garbage that is added on to our landfills, many companies are working to institutionalize sustainability. Nike, for example, has embedded environmental sustainability into the ethos of its "Considered Design". Cameron Sinclair, founder of Architecture for Humanity and author of the book *Design Like You Give a Damn*, seeks to improve lives through what he calls

“design for the real world” by incorporating innovative, practical, humanitarian aspects into sustainable design. Oncologist Karl-Henrik Robert developed The Natural Step framework after investigating root causes of childhood cancers, and the organization guides a variety of businesses, communities, and leaders in creating solutions and models that put them on a more sustainable path to the future. The framework builds from principles of Native American wisdom which views the act of creation as a sacred, powerful gift designed with mindful intention.

Kelly Walker, editor of *Arcade*, discussed this trend with Bill Fritts, founder of Intelligent Design and SOLIDCORE which create sustainable solutions in furnishings and interiors. Fritts pointed out that there is a rising interest in the idea of making “purchasing decisions that are not throw away”. He claimed that we are in the early stages of transformation of the consumer consciousness and are experiencing a growing desire for well-designed solutions that eliminate the need for constant replacement. According to Fritts, embedded stories are effective and help give a deeper meaning and multilayered connection to the exchange. With regard to the current trend and interest in craft, he noted how craft links together people, material, and place and allows the consumer to sense the hand of the person who made the item. It is even possible to see inconsistencies in the craft which give it personality. This allows us to reach back in time to pre-industrial revolution when everything was unique and individual. The mechanization of the past 150 years in our society has created a disconnection between objects and consumers, and modern economies are separated from craft and its history.

Now we are seeing a vertical growth of design worldwide which Fritts attributed to the fact that art and design have been merging. “Art is an expression colored with the story

of an inspiration” and content is increasingly embedded in product design connecting with original craft-based-art that was initially created for the wealthy by artisans hundreds of years ago. This content adds depth and allows us to experience design on a more profound level.

Fritts sees greening as absolutely necessary for the survival of the planet and with every product designers need to consider all aspects of the “cradle to cradle” cycle. Viewing only form-creation or function-creation is “outdated and uninformed”, according to Fritts, and designers hold the key for what gets produced and eventually purchased and turned back into raw material. The time has arrived when a commitment to working for people and on projects that incorporate green principles can be profitable and provide competitive advantage. Combined with community interaction this leads the way to a life worth living.

These publications reveal a resurgence of artisan-like attitudes like, for example, that adding story and preserving the past through the craft adds to its appreciation and inherent quality. More artistic expression, variation and meaning indicate the intervention of the designer and highly valued is the passion and sense of humanity that becomes translated to the consumer. A greater connection between the producer and patron establishes more trust. People are drawn to products that are locally distinct and authentic. Enterprises are increasingly self-reliant and democratic in circulating wealth, encouraging innovation and improvisation, and outlets like Etsy allow new producers low barriers to entry. Increasingly popular aspects of the moral economy include complex systems in which designers are thinking about their work, waste and use as a way to reinvest in the social and ecological infrastructure.

## **Methodology**

In order to gain a broad range of perspectives on this unique economy taking hold of Portland, this research included document research, visits to craft outlets, fairs and collectives, and personal interviews with local artisans. Contemporary documents such as newspaper articles, trade magazines, websites, brochures, flyers and books published by local participants in the arts and crafts sector helped enrich the process of investigating current trends.

The study included four interviews that used semi-structured and open-ended questions that were designed to focus the interviewees on certain topics but not to lead them to specific responses. For example to gain an understanding of the importance the artisans placed on keeping design and production closely related they were asked to share their thoughts about scaling up their work with regards to the craft aspects of their work. Basic demographic information was also collected from each artisan. The goal of these interviews was to help determine how within this consumerist, mass market economy Portland's local artisans are finding success in marketing their crafts and financially supporting themselves.

The category of arts and crafts includes a very diverse range of products including paintings, furniture, tattoos and body art, graffiti, etc. Recognizing the value and potentially interesting stories behind all these parts of the sector it seemed logical to begin with a fairly small, narrow topic and expand from there. Thus the exploration of the crafty world within Portland began with a focus on a particular medium: leather. The leather craft has survived through the appreciation of the traditional material as one known for its durability and ease with which to work. The varied characteristics of this craft and the artisans involved also represent a cross-section of the larger arts and crafts scene and the dynamics within.

The focus for this section is on the leather craft as a way of demonstrating artisan-like qualities and how they manifest in different ways that seem to be spreading throughout

the sectors of Portland's economy. The three interviews conducted within this field of work revealed the diversity in the approaches to this work that allow such a variety of participants to fall under their classification as artisans. The first interview with store manager Dave Hansen of Langlitz Leathers provided a unique piece of the research and helped demonstrate how the importance of story, as discussed in the *Arcade* article by Lynn Casey, can help drive the success of a particular business.

### ***Portrait of an Artisan Enterprise: Langlitz Leathers***

Located in Portland, Oregon at 2443 SE Division Street, Langlitz Leathers is a family-owned enterprise that offers high-end leather pants and jackets favored by motorcyclists. About 90% or more of the customer base is made up of bikers although cops also frequent the shop and about half the business transactions are with customers in Japan. Garments are approximately 1,000 dollars a piece (for a pair of pants or a jacket) and the reputation for their high quality has made Portland famous in the global biker community. The high prices are a result of the expensive cost of doing business today and have risen steadily in sync with the cost of motorcycles over the past sixty years (Korn, 2008).

Over the years Langlitz has enjoyed coverage in publications such as *Esquire*, *People*, *the Los Angeles Times*, and *the Wall Street Journal* which have helped to boost the popularity of the business. Among the list of celebrities that have donned the products of Langlitz are Clark Gable, Jeff Goldblum, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and Neil Young, who has outfitted many friends, family, and members of his band for years. Members of the Portland Police Bureau have also long been patrons.

Bikers have frequently claimed that the garments are worth the money and wait, saying it's easy to recognize a Langlitz even without exterior labels. Some have even mentioned its armor-like qualities, suggesting that it commands respect in tough bars. Some

of the products include flight jackets, vests, hats and duffles, and the zippered sleeve seen in the jackets is an element pioneered by the founder Ross Langlitz. Although Ross died in 1989, Dave has been diligently maintaining the standards and credo of high-quality that makes Langlitz a business that is sure to stick around for a long time. Over the years people have become more specific with their requests for pockets and details, making production more time consuming, and they are increasingly willing to wait long periods of time for custom-made products that even have the buyer's name sewn into them ("For Serious Bikers", 2001).

### ***All in the Family***

Born in 1918 in Plymouth, Idaho, Ross Langlitz grew up mainly in McMinnville, Oregon where he lost his right leg in a motorcycle accident at the age of 17. Despite being told by doctors that he could no longer ride Ross defiantly drove his bike back to the hospital immediately after his release. Upon marrying Mavis Edwards (aka "Pinky"), he moved to Portland and in 1947 and founded Langlitz Leathers after making several jackets for friends and relatives in his own basement.

In the beginning Ross supplemented his income by commercial fishing for salmon and ran the shop while Pinky raised their three daughters, Nicki, Jackie, and Judy. Jackie eventually came to work at the shop in 1971 and ten years later married current manager Dave Hansen. In the mid 1980s Ross handed the business operation over to Jackie and Dave while he and Pinky retired to the coast that they so adored.

Production at Langlitz has not changed much since Ross first opened up for business. All garments are made on four cutting tables and eight sewing machines. Unlike most modern businesses, custom-made jackets may be ordered, cut, and sewn in the same room while the customer observes. The workers typically build six garments a day, and

depending on the number of orders on the log a custom set of leathers may be finished in anywhere from a few weeks to several months. Garments are usually cut in half a day and sewn over several days depending on the complexity of the design. One cutter and one seamstress are assigned to each garment as Langlitz has always rejected the use of assembly line production. The shop offers some stock leathers so that customers can try on both new and used garments. The products can also be altered or repaired at the shop and Langlitz will even buy back garments or sell them on consignment for the customer if requested (Langlitz Leathers Inc., 2007).

Upon visiting the outlet one will encounter highly personable customer service and a willingness of the employees to discuss the intricacies of the business. The value of carrying on the tradition of quality that originated when Ross Langlitz formed the company seems to resonate with customers and they can feel reassured by witnessing the immaculate attention and care given to each garment from the diligent workers inside the shop. Dave Hansen is known for his generosity in providing a wealth of information and offering a tour of the shop's facilities. While his wife still maintains much oversight of the office work she has basically retired while Dave applies his years of business experience to running the business and making the final decisions.

### ***Philosophy***

According to Dave, at Langlitz they “don’t do things like a normal company would” and his own philosophy is “180 degrees out of whack from the normal world” (D. Hansen, personal communication, July 17, 2008). While other businesses find ways to cut corners and save money Dave emphasizes quality and customer satisfaction, claiming he would rather sell one expensive, high quality jacket to a happy customer than several cheap jackets that need constant repair or replacement. He expresses irritation at companies that cheapen products

in order to stay competitive and when products are so easily disposed of because they begin to show problems. He takes great pride in the company and reuses all the leather that is no longer of worth to the customers. He believes that most chain stores that are “here today and gone next week”, although claiming to put customers first, simply do not give the same quality of customer service as Langlitz.

Dave’s belief is that “the most important person in a business is not found in the office. He’s found in the shipping department. The last person to touch whatever goes out the door is the one that can make or break the image that your customers are going to have” (personal communication, July 17, 2008). As a result, Dave is usually is the last person to inspect a garment in order to ensure that nothing has been overlooked and that he can take responsibility for any errors caught by the customer. He believes that most businesses are upside-down because they pay the least amount to people in the shipping department. This creates a sense of apathy among employees who see their jobs as temporary and unimportant and would not generate as many flaws if they held more valued, well-paying positions.

Customer happiness is at the peak of what Dave refers to as his “priority pyramid”. While it is important to strike a balance between fashion and functionality, for this product fashion is usually at the bottom of the priority pyramid. Whenever someone orders a garment because they want to look a certain way Dave often ends up talking the customer out of it because the fashionable aspects often compromise the functional. This of course depends on the use of the garment, however; if a musician who has never owned a bike orders a leather jacket then he will receive a fashionable jacket. Traditionally every aspect of a Langlitz garment is designed for a specific reason pertinent to a motorcycle, and Dave is not afraid to tell the customer if the aesthetic preference is compromising function. A

serious biker who spends a lot of money on a good bike should plan to spend a fair amount on high quality leather, and for someone like a cop it is necessary for it to function well.

No advertising budget exists for Langlitz and the role of its website is not to attempt to sell any products to visitors. Dave says that it is important to have a legitimate website that is accessible to customers and allows them to know exactly what they are getting. Dave will happily accommodate the needs of each customer because as he says, Langlitz does not have a one year or a ten year guarantee – it only offers a satisfaction guarantee (personal communication, July 17, 2008).

### ***Operation***

Dave is not interested in contracting out the work for the business but the things like zippers that are necessary to order are guaranteed to be top-of-the-line. The shop has had hundreds of offers from international companies that want to sell their leathers and Dave always responds with a polite note informing them that Langlitz will only sell U.S.-made products. He doesn't mind competing with foreign companies because he says he knows people will always pay more for garments made within the national borders, but he has become increasingly aware of other companies fraudulently labeling their products as "Made in the U.S.", an issue with which he feels helpless to compete.

Langlitz will not consider moving its operations or increasing production. It has stayed small-scale for years and has remained resilient to drastic changes in the regional and national economy. Dave claims that craft-based businesses are staying more resilient because they are not increasing output and selling low. Overseas manufacturing becomes expensive and with a tight economy a company runs the risk of encountering problems in shipping and having to "eat" the money lost trying to correct the problem. When the overall economy is going strong Langlitz usually enjoys a longer backlog of customers, but when it is weakened

they still have at least a one or two week backlog. The problem, states Dave, is that many companies climb while the market is plummeting and since they aren't looking out for years ahead they end up closing their production facilities. Growth without restraint gets a company tangled in the economy once the dollar weakens, which is why Langlitz maintains the same philosophy: stay level and don't worry about what the economy is doing. By keeping prices high, production low, and staying level, Dave says the company survives and its competitors face problems with their manufacturing overseas. If a Langlitz garment faces a problem during production, the problem gets solved immediately with the customer standing nearby. Everything happens in real time and within the building, a luxury lost if the production is far removed. As Dave sees it, while businesses are typically judged by revenue and profit they lose in an economic downturn; meanwhile Langlitz shines along with other companies that have stayed small and local and focused on making the product right. (D. Hansen, personal communication, July 17, 2008).

Langlitz has managed to find a way to expand not through employee numbers but through revenue by selling T-shirts which they now produce at about 15,000 per year. These are not manufactured locally so while the process doesn't utilize the capabilities of Langlitz production it still provides economic growth. Another helpful creation is Club Langlitz, a customer resource that allows the company to do what others cannot: provide a step-by-step visual depiction of the entire process of creating a customized product. Dave wants customers to feel they can talk directly to him about a problem, even refusing to allow the business to use an automated message system, and while local patrons can visit the business to personally check the progress of their orders Dave feared that the Japanese would feel this loss of connection when placing their orders. They are also paying three times the price for Americans due to the costs associated with customs and working with a distributor and

dealer. Therefore in order to give back to the Japanese what they lose from doing business overseas Dave created a webpage for each customer that displays pictures of the entire process of making a garment, allowing viewers to view everything from filling out the initial paperwork to loading the finished product into a truck and driving away. Although some doubted that this could be done, it is clearly a success for both the business and the customers who often add pictures of themselves wearing their new leathers (D. Hansen, personal communication, July 17, 2008).

Subsequent interviews with other leather artisans in Portland provided more variety of perspectives and experiences regarding the work of a leather artisan within Portland's local economy.

### ***Talitha Leather***

Nate Bagley, owner of Talitha Leather, makes a broad variety of affordable and high-end courier bags, purses, journals, wallets. He became involved with his craft by making artistic gifts for friends and family, discovering that leather was a medium with which he enjoyed working and could use as a way to get involved in art. He began to realize he could sell his products, so after working as a carpenter and framer for ten years he transformed his craft into a source of supplemental income while working as a counselor for a mental health agency and managing his own private practice in counseling. While he designs bags that are high quality and therefore more expensive, he has expanded his product line by experimenting with a variety of affordable products as well.

As someone in complete control of his own business, Nate says he is not yet big enough to hire anybody on. His ultimate goal is to increase his size to the point of being able to create jobs for people in other countries using fair trade practices. His friend sometimes helps him with big projects and he would consider having others with good designs to help

with the production but would like to keep his product basically the same. Nate says he has no set working hours and since the summertime is slow for counseling with kids being out of school, he sells more during that time.

Nate likes to get a lot of preparation work done ahead of time and work on his sewing while watching television or relaxing. The personal, social, and occupational parts of his life overlap a lot, as everything is done from his home. He says he thinks boundaries are fascinating issues, because on some level it is good to have things blend together but sometimes it is best to keep work separate from leisure time and take lots of breaks (personal communication, July 17, 2008).

Nate sells his work through his website ([www.talithaleather.com](http://www.talithaleather.com)), at Saturday Market, at First Thursday in the Pearl district, and at Last Thursday in the Alberta neighborhood, and says he used to sell at coffee shops as well. He claims that about half of all his business is made through word of mouth, so he provides Talitha Leather vouchers to customers that have been referred for 10% of the amount spent. He also offers free shipping for all products bought online (Bagley, 2008).

At Saturday Market about half of Nate's buyers are visiting from outside Portland, and many people from Southern California buy his work since he has friends there. He knows many of his customers through friends that have spread the word about his high-quality products. About 30% to 40% of his products are custom-made and the backlog of orders tends to vary from time to time. He claims that his products differ from mass-produced items because they are durable and last more than a couple of years. He uses real leather while many competitors use cardboard inside thin leather encasing, and many of his courier bags fall into a unique niche with hard to find, retro-looking styles (personal communication, July 17, 2008).

Nate would like his business to provide a quarter to half of his income, and he would like to develop a more streamlined process with a steadier flow of orders. He says he does not have a lot of ambitions, however; with a baby on the way he will probably work more from home making leather products and focus less on counseling. His current output is about one purse, three wallets, and half a bag per week, so he thinks twice that amount would be ideal. He would probably not partner with a major outlet or manufacturer since he believes the product would change and the quality would be compromised, and if it involved paying employees less than he thought they deserved there would also be a conflict of morals as well (personal communication, July 17, 2008).

Above all, Nate's top priority is ensuring quality and functionality. As stated on his website, "each product is designed and constructed with the goals of simplicity, quality, functionality, and style in mind" (Bagley, 2008). He classifies himself as somewhere between an entrepreneur and an artisan, saying he has good business sense but considers himself as more of an artist with leather. He wants to make things that are "good and beautiful" and identifies with all definitions of artisan: someone who works with the hands, head, and heart, desires to do a job well and for its own sake, and applies skill, judgment, improvisation and passion to his work (personal communication, July 17, 2008).

Nate seeks to make everything out of cowhide, using the leather as a byproduct so there is no waste, and throws away very little leather. He has found that using recycled materials has sometimes made products difficult to sell, but he tries to keep them as simple and natural as possible. He says he would not use leather from an animal killed primarily for its hide. He believes staying local has economic and environmental benefits since it cuts down on the use of fossil fuels and keeps the money circulating locally, but he would like to buy internationally if it would benefit communities that need more economic improvement

than Portland. Nate says he would also not make products used for sexual interaction even though he has gotten requests, because he believes that would not foster healthy relationships and healthy sexuality. He has on occasion talked someone out of buying something if he knows the person can't really afford it and may even lower the price. He tries to give his customers space and avoid pressuring them to buy anything, admitting that he sometimes feels conflicted as someone that has been inspired by an ethic of anti-consumerism.

Nate has lived in Portland for five years and at least half his sales are in the city. He says that he doesn't really see himself as competitive with others doing similar work here and that his products are unique enough to have their own market and appeal to a particular culture. He engages in a lot of collaboration with other artists which often helps him gets references or custom orders. He feels like part of a community within craft fairs and Saturday Market and enjoys hanging out with others in Portland's art community. He says he is not really involved in the local community otherwise, although counseling sometimes feels like a sort of community service he can contribute.

Living here has made Nate more environmentally conscious so he wants to stay local and use sustainable practices. He says that Portland is definitely isolated from the rest of the country but people nationwide are becoming more aware and more likely to buy with an ethic. He finds that most people seek out products but some see the qualities that are in line with their ethics and buy impulsively. He also notices that many prices of handmade goods are fairly competitive with those in the mass market, so artisans are increasingly having an easier time selling their work (personal communication, July 17, 2008).

### ***Twilight and Filigree***

Elizabeth Robinson is the owner of Twilight and Filigree and uses her creative spirit to infuse unique and beautiful qualities into her leather products. About five years ago she entered the world of leather with her bookbinding and eventually began experimenting with making hats and costume pieces for festivals. In the summer of 2007 she completed her first leather purse and has since been creating bags with the intention of selling them. Her original goal was to sell her products on Etsy and acquire the proper equipment to make and sell her goods, and she now has a vision to broaden her selection of products, sell them in more than one store, and finish a website for her business.

Elizabeth's bags include purses, shoulder bags, and laptop bags and she also makes a variety of accessories such as wallets, hats, and hand-bound journals. She ensures individual care throughout every step of the design, cutting, and sewing processes. Elizabeth creates many custom products and takes special orders and says her products differ from mass-produced because they are unique with detailed designs and an assortment of colors. She uses leather she has hand-picked from the Oregon Leather shop in Portland, each piece chosen based on its quality and color variations. She sells her work through Etsy, at the Last and First Thursdays, in a store called Frock Boutique on Alberta Street, and the Faerie Worlds Festival in Eugene, OR. She says she knows many of the people who buy her work through friends and family (personal communication, July 18, 2008).

Elizabeth does all her work at home, where each piece of leather (half a hide) is cut to produce a few bags and wallets. If the item has an appliqué she cuts and stitches it on herself. She generally tries to begin working by eight or nine in the morning at least five days a week and works at least five hours each day. This schedule is flexible depending on other life engagements and her level of energy. She claims that her work tends to increase before craft fairs and events and the time of year from mid-summer to Christmas is generally

busiest. She says she is on the internet probably about one and a half hours each day writing emails, searching for supplies that cannot be purchased locally (especially in bulk), checking Etsy and listing new items.

Making the creative decisions is very important to Elizabeth but she says that custom items are seen as more of a team effort. She feels satisfied that she can express her creativity through every step of the production. She says her personal, social, and occupational parts of life typically blend together as she does much of her business with some of her best friends and rarely has time for herself at home since work consumes much of her time there. She doesn't mind this, however, because her work excites her.

Elizabeth currently shares a house with three others and says she may consider finding a separate studio space soon. She believes producers should always strive to find ways to improve and would like to use more recycled leather, maybe offering wool as a leather alternative, as well as using all recycled paper products when shipping, doing paperwork, etc. She wants to donate a percentage of future sales to non-profit organizations and try to buy materials and supplies that are produced locally as much as possible. At this point she does everything for the business but would consider contracting out the work that she finds arduous and time consuming, saying she would enjoy having the extra help and advice. She believes her optimum business size would include two other workers: a bookkeeper and a seamstress/cutter. She would like to have a full line of readily available products in both leather and wool felt and wants to offer more variety for her accessories, possibly producing costume pieces, and reach a point where she is financially comfortable and happy. She does not want to sell to the mass market because she believes the products would lose the handmade feel if mass produced (personal communication, July 18, 2008).

Elizabeth draws her inspiration from the natural world, art nouveau, Asian art and fairytales, and what she refers to as the “magic” of leather to provide everyday comfort and function. She got into this work to fulfill her creative spirit and feel in charge of her life again. She considers herself both an artist and entrepreneur, feeling this is currently a creatively rewarding venture but hopes for it to soon be a financially rewarding one as well. She feels that she naturally fills a unique niche since few bags use heavyweight leather, rich colors, and detailed appliqués in a shoulder bag style. Her closest competitors are usually not as high-end or do not offer the shoulder bag styles in leather.

Elizabeth simply loves working with leather, she says, for its feel, look, and strength. She believes it is completely unlike any other material with its natural variations of texture, thickness, and dye absorption. She also has a deep respect for the origin and feels this when working, from choosing the hide to cutting and stitching. Because of this she tries to keep waste to a minimum. She sometimes has to leave in marks and scars, even though she tries to hide them, because she so highly values the beauty and origin of leather. She is also a huge animal-lover and as a former vegetarian still sometimes struggles with the idea of using animal products. However she feels in some ways she is honoring the life of the cow, for since the animal was killed for its meat the leather is a byproduct and this is a way of using as much of the animal as possible and leaving little waste. She claims that she doesn't like using vinyl since it is not as durable and is made from petroleum which is non-renewable.

Elizabeth says having a “feel for the work” means that intuition and having an open inner vision join together with the hands and eyes to create the work. She feels you must follow your heart and intuition in order to be successful in creating something that makes sense to you and others. She highly values being honorable, truthful and feels very strongly about doing the best she can with her work because, as she says, even if a customer doesn't

notice that she cut a corner during production it will always drive her crazy. She believes that to be successful one must be honorable, knowledgeable, experienced, intelligent, and courageous, and she strives to hold these qualities (personal communication, July 18, 2008).

Since moving to Portland in 2002 Elizabeth has enjoyed its varied creative scene and its focus on reused and recycled materials, vintage looks and handmade looks. She thinks there are lots of interesting, courageous artists with great ideas in Portland and the scene is an inspiring reminder to follow her heart and pursue her ideas. She feels part of Portland's community of artists and crafters and has been especially active in First Thursday in the Pearl District and Crafty Wonderland. These, along with Etsy, the Faerieworlds Festival in Eugene, OR, and the Alberta neighborhood store through which she sells, have greatly impacted her work. She believes people are friendly, supportive, and giving, and that most encounters are great contacts for networking and sharing information, favors, advice and encouragement. Although she is not very involved elsewhere in Portland's community, she feels like this way she is getting to know more people all the time and is learning the importance of being outgoing and positive. She hasn't collaborated much with other leather artisans but discusses new ideas and problem-solving with her artistic customers who want custom bags. She feels only a small sense of competition with other leather crafters and bag makers because her work is so unique.

The advantages that Elizabeth identified for living in Portland include the wealth of venues such as street fairs and Saturday Market that are available through which to sell work. A disadvantage may be that there are so many other crafters, including some that use a lower quality which buyers don't always see. Elizabeth pointed out that Portland and the Northwest are already known for having such independent styles and the up-and-coming trends in areas like music, fashion, and crafts that this may add to the intrigue of artisans

producing in the area. She also does not feel affected by the presence of large firms in the area that may do creative work similar to her own (E. Robinson, personal communication, July 18, 2008).

The fourth interview with a non-leather artisan is an attempt to gain a broader perspective in exploring the contemporary arts and craft scene in Portland. An active member of the Etsy community, Alisa Timmerman provided her own unique profile as an artisan supporting herself through handmade craft-making within the local community.

### *Zeldaloo*

Alisa Timmerman, owner of the business Zeldaloo, makes soft-sculpture dolls and toys from original patterns that are sewn by hand and with a machine. For long she had wanted to learn how to sew her own clothes and she picked up some seamstress skills because her niece wanted an imaginary friend brought to life in the form of a doll in order to prove it was real. Alisa previously owned a gallery and a stained-glass shop but grew tired of making and selling other people's work. Wanting to build on her desire to create her own things, she moved to Portland from Detroit, Michigan about three years ago.

Alisa considers Zeldaloo her full-time job, using mornings to check her e-mail and takes care of logistics, doing design work until the afternoon, and filling her evening hours with sewing. All of her work is done from home, and she says this schedule keeps her on task. Selling online and wholesale was her original goal, and now that she sells through Etsy, at a few stores locally and in Ohio, at Saturday Market, and various other shows, she wants to travel more and attend more shows which she most enjoys. Her work stays fairly consistent but more seasonal items are produced around the holidays. Her customers consist mostly of moms, younger male adults and grandmas, and she doesn't usually know customers beforehand but likes to get to know them after they purchase from her. She takes

a lot of special orders for her products like her dolls, for example, which have many different color variations for eyes and hair (personal communication, July 19, 2008).

It is very important to Alisa to make the creative decisions, do all the work, have total control and have everything be her own creation. She has been influenced by the art scene at the university she attended in Detroit and the art and pottery scene in which her husband is involved. She tries to make things that are unique and affordable enough to reach a broad range of people, and she proactively positions herself to build a unique niche where she can sell products that can not be found anywhere else. While the internet has helped with business she tries to buy materials from locally-owned stores and get her ideas from family or friends or artists with whom she previously worked. She also claims that her personal, social, and occupational parts of life blend together and she often finds it difficult to maintain boundaries between them.

In five years Alisa would like to still be the designer-creator for Zeldaloo and making more art dolls that are high-end unlike many of the toys she currently makes. She supplies a lot of affordable dolls in order to make an income but would like to reach the point at which she can focus on doing this more as an art and not as what she relies on for her “bread and butter.” She claims that double her current size would be ideal (she currently brings 75 to 100 pieces to each show and is always in production with about a two-to-three-week turnaround for each product). She would like to eventually partner with someone that has more business sense and can help with marketing and production, but she wants to remain in charge of the processes of design and production (personal communication, July 19, 2008).

Alisa creatively designates herself a “crafty-preneur.” She is driven by the ethic to buy locally, use recycled materials when possible, and create a look that is totally different

from mass-produced dolls and toys. She doesn't even like using the same ideas or patterns twice. Even though most of her products are made for aesthetic purposes, functionality plays a role as many of the toys are designed to be played with. She identifies with all definitions of artisan and especially as someone who applies skill, judgment, improvisation and passion to her work, stating "I do what I like. It's hard to make something you don't like." She learned this while working for somebody else and producing stained glass that she thought was ugly (A. Timmerman, personal communication, July 19, 2008).

Having lived in Portland for three years Alisa has established herself within the local community of artisans and crafters. Alisa claims that pretty much all of her work in Portland is collaborative. She feels very active within Etsy and is involved in an art doll group as well as a plush group with over 100 members. This allows for great networking and monthly challenges for the group push the skill and creativity limits for the artists. She also volunteers at the Portland Women's Crisis Line and at a summer camp for those with disabilities which have influenced many of her color schemes and positive ideas. She says the independent feel of Saturday Market and the great artist support attracted her to this town initially, and the availability of outlets like Etsy and Saturday Market makes it easy for her to market and sell her work. She had been looking for work in the art community and started sewing as soon as she moved here, finding an amazingly supportive and creative scene here. She says a potential disadvantage for the scene is that it is growing so much that it is becoming increasingly structured.

Alisa does not feel affected by presence of large firms, however, and feels that people are getting out of the "Wal-Mart mentality" and now want things that are hand-made and different. She says the internet has really helped advance this movement which she sees

happening all over the United States, and believes that Portland is just further ahead of the game than most areas (A. Timmerman, personal communication, July 19, 2008).

## **Results and Discussion**

It is clear from the interviews that artisans may have very distinct approaches to their work while still maintaining characteristics that classify them as participants in the artisan economy. Common threads exist among them that present an alternative to production in the modern economy. The participants have maintained qualities associated with locality that allow them to use resources more efficiently, create shorter chains of accountability, build relationships among other artisans and customers, and provide unique qualities of taste and style. This kind of approach suggests that other markets may also benefit through wealth creation and economic development as changes in characteristics of local production are currently demonstrating a new direction for the national economy. This movement is most evident through the trend of expanding artisans and their ability to maintain success during an economic downturn.

The characteristics of Langlitz Leathers combine in a unique way to deliver an example of an artisan enterprise that still maintains the undertones of a typical modern business. Of the qualities associated with an artisan economy, Langlitz possesses enough to demonstrate an approach very different from that of mechanized mass production. For example, most of its products are hand made with individual care and are individually unique to provide patrons with customized experiences. The products are designed for quality and with the purpose of being appreciated over long periods of time. The processes of design and production are closely tied together, often times allowing the customers to provide design ideas and oversee production as all of this happens within the same building. In the circumstance that a customer cannot visit the shop personally the entire process is

documented and visually represented through the online customer resource called Club Langlitz.

Dave Hansen's philosophy clearly demonstrates his emphasis on keeping production at a small scale so as not to compromise the quality of the products. He is determined to stay local and continue to operate his business from that building, refusing to contract out the manufacturing or move to a larger facility. He also values the ability to remain self-reliant so that any outside changes will not affect the business too greatly and he remains loyal to those with whom he has done business over the years so long as they maintain the same high standards of quality.

Some of Dave's perspectives revealed an interesting contrast between the characteristics of Langlitz and others who may consider themselves artisans. Langlitz, he says, is two things: a production facility and a place meant for a pleasing customer experience. Above all he sees himself as a salesman offering, in his words, happiness rather than leather jackets. The business is not an outlet for creativity or artistic expression, and Dave does not relate it to anyone involved with Saturday Market and in fact sees most of the activity there as a hobby rather than a business. He was not particularly responsive to the term "artisan", openly admitting that he does not have an artistic bone in his body and certainly does not view his work as art. He finds it important to keep business separate from artistic endeavors because he thinks that immersion within a hobby as work can actually harm one's artistic side. Because Dave is around leather and the motorcycle culture all day at work he wants to be far from it outside the shop, a desire that seems especially reasonable since he actually experiences allergic reactions to leather and as a result must remember to take medication throughout the day (D.Hansen, personal communication, July 17, 2008).

As important as it is for Langlitz to stay in place, Dave claims that his business is not part of the local market. Customers do not typically patronize Langlitz simply because it is in the neighborhood; since the products that they offer are so unique and geared for a particular culture people often come halfway around the world to buy Langlitz garments. Dave said he has no interest in trying to convince the local market to buy from Langlitz especially knowing that in the midst of a sluggish economy people are cutting back on buying luxury items. Customers tend to be those who expect to pay high prices that reflect the quality of the products, and when the national economy is flailing Langlitz tends to pick up more international business. Even though Dave likes living in Portland he feels he has to tolerate the way the city treats businesses and says he feels obligated to keep Langlitz local because the roots of the business are firmly planted in the city. However he proudly displays the name Portland on many of the products, including the various accessories and shirts that have become popular in Japan.

Another unusual quality of Dave's management style is his apparent lack of consideration for the employees. He admits that one of his downfalls is that he is not the most "employee-friendly person in the world" and is much more concerned about the happiness of his customers. He says that employees are not easily fired but many have quit because they feel they are not paid enough. According to Dave if they do the work to make the customers happy, there is no problem, but if they take advantage by trying to kill time at work and are "whining instead of working", they simply will not be paid as much (personal communication, July 17, 2008).

While many of today's artisans choose to operate based on their attitudes towards the environment, human rights, animal rights, etc, Dave maintains that the quality of his products remains his only guiding principle. He has never been asked about the ethical

practices of the two or three tanneries from which he receives the leather and prefers to assume that they are operating in a legitimate manner. Dave says that since the price of leather has increased since U.S.-based tanneries have been forced to raise their pollution standards, he sometimes has to explain the high prices to customers but is insistent on maintaining the established relationships with the same tanneries as long as they maintain consistently high quality (D.Hansen, personal communication, July 17, 2008).

Langlitz Leathers provided an interesting profile of a business that is highly structured and brings in a gross income of at least \$100,000 per year, which is more like a typical modern business than other artisan enterprises. Its steady level of success during economic turmoil suggests that the conservative approach to quality and slow growth may provide a positive model for other producers searching for alternatives to the contemporary approach. The other interviews further supported the idea that the model is not a “one size fits all” solution for firms and there exists a high level of variation among these local artisans.

Talitha Leather is much different from Langlitz as a self-employed, very small-scale, home-based art-inspired endeavor providing supplemental income. The views that Nate Bagley expressed sufficiently fulfilled the expectations for an artisan world view, including using a very loosely structured work life, a collaborative approach to business, and an artistic, creative outlook for the work. Another quality that seems part of the emerging artisan economy includes a mode of production that is inspired by an ethic of humanitarian ideals and environmental consciousness. Twilight and Filigree follows a path very similar to Talitha Leather, and like Nate, Elizabeth Robinson strives to use sustainable practices and places great emphasis on locality. As leather artisans both expressed a deep respect for the source of the leather and a desire to produce goods that are unique and very high quality. Unlike Langlitz, both feel that their personal, social, and work lives blend together, that they greatly

benefit from others in the artistic community in Portland. A major difference between Nate and Elizabeth is that Nate uses his leather work to supplement the income from his counseling work while Elizabeth focuses on her leather work as a primary source of income.

Zeldaloo presented a perspective from outside the leather community but reflected qualities that are consistent with the artisan approach. This supported the idea that while leather artisans share characteristics as a result of working with the same medium, many of their qualities are typical of most artisans so they were generally representative of the entire artisan community. Like many in Portland's arts and crafts sector, Alisa Timmerman feels she has greatly benefited from the support of the creative artistic scene here. She has also built a unique niche for her crafts and would like to experiment with more artistic techniques, prefers to remain small-scale and in charge of design and production, and creates social ties with many of her patrons.

Despite the differences between each of these artisans, especially those that set Langlitz far apart from the smaller-scale participants of this study, these artisans share a common thread that addresses the major point of this research: they seem to be part of a broader phenomenon of changes in the characteristics of production that has taken off nationwide. Through reaching a reliable customer base and maintaining a consistency in high-quality production the participants all indicated that they are unaffected by changes in the economy and the presence of large firms that may act as competitors. Dave Hansen noted that the success of craft-based firms hinges on their low output and small size because they can easily fix the problems in their production and remain self-reliant so that they don't get tangled in the economy or financial problems of other firms. He maintains that by keeping prices high, production low, and by staying level, a company can survive while large firms that move their manufacturing overseas are struggling. Small firms can enjoy the luxury

of things happening in real time and in close proximity so that problems are easily resolved. Although he didn't attribute his success to living in Portland specifically, Nate Bagley pointed out that Portland is a unique in that people here tend to buy more with an ethic. He sees this happening nationwide, however, and has also found that problems with the national economy and the weakened dollar have allowed prices of handmade goods to become fairly competitive with those produced in the mass market.

Elizabeth Robinson also identified a unique environment in Portland that allows for many outlets from which to sell handmade work and believes that the trendy, independent reputation of the region has helped artisans sell their wares. Although she seemed to attribute much of her own success to the supportive nature of this region, she indicated that the unique and high quality aspects of her products have protected her from the competition of larger firms doing work similar to her own. Alisa Timmerman also does not feel affected by the presence of these firms and further claims that while Portland has a head-start on this movement, people nationwide are outgrowing the "Wal-Mart mentality" and being drawn toward the handmade and unique.

The historical information from the literature helped to characterize the patterns we see today. It is clear from the literature that there is a revival of the Arts and Crafts Movement happening within Portland. Just as this 19<sup>th</sup> century movement attempted to improve aesthetic standards and working conditions throughout the United States and Britain, the contemporary trends reflect a search for higher quality in designs and morally-driven practices. The alienating factory work that characterized the industrial age corresponds with the feelings of disconnection dominating today's technology-driven, globalized era. Our society is again expressing a desire for authentic, meaningful styles in products. The tradition of homespun, handcrafted goods is once again appealing to the

public and people are again yearning for contented labor through which they can truly express their creativity and humanity.

Just as Steven Adams described in his book, handcrafted products continue to present the dilemma that they are bound to be more expensive and therefore exclusive to a large consumer base. This continues to be a point of contention for those artisans attempting to make a living while expressing their talent and creativity through a supply of high-end products. The historical overview also showed that craft has transformed in meaning over the past several decades and that the worldview of crafters has been dramatically influenced by this changing identity of craft. The ideological divide resulting from the tension between the roles of functional and non-functioning still exists today and resonates among the variety of artisans active in the craft community. As the purpose of craft shifted away from traditional, more functional uses and more toward artistic expression, it became a uniting force for different cultures across the world from one another. Noted in the literature is the paradox that the intervention of western ideals and customs are often necessary in preserving indigenous crafts, still demonstrating the value placed on maintaining these pieces of art and their traditional means of production. Craft also became elevated as a more professional endeavor that was seen as marketable and best placed in the hands of the skilled and well-trained designers, contributing to the problematic nature of craft as a high-end product available mostly to the wealthy community. We are now witnessing how craft has penetrated other markets such as food, brewery, and fashion as a way of appealing to the desire of people to purchase things that have been created with care and with the human touch.

Contributing to an understanding of the success of the craft movement in recent decades, Beal's writing showed that it can be largely attributed to the women who so highly

valued the advancement and education of arts and crafts in America. It has allowed for resistance and expression, as demonstrated through the progress among women who have taken their crafts and turned them into their sources of income.

They pushed for effective practices and policies that would bring the artists and the public together, and as demonstrated by the expansion of the various programs in Portland, the support of the government and new institutions is a key element to the realization of artistic and educational goals. The Museum of Contemporary Craft is a fine example of proudly carrying on the tradition of craft. The various guilds in the region have also helped to keep traditional craft alive, and it is clear through the artisan-like qualities in other sects of the market that the craft philosophy is radiating from a diverse range of cultural outlets. The literature also suggests that the advancement of the craft movement was influenced by the changing views and attitudes of those inspired by eastern and Beat Generation ideas.

The literature that discusses contemporary trends revealed that a new wave of consumer consciousness is helping drive designers to find innovative, sustainable solutions. The new artisan approach seen in Portland's unique economy is rising to meet the demands of these new purchasing decisions. Helping to further explain the resurgence and increasing popularity of artisan values in production, the literature explains that consumers are drawn to the enthralling nature of stories that provide a connection to an object's creator. The "right brain" qualities that currently characterize our society have revealed the desire for authenticity, expression, and humanity in our exchanges. In response artisans have sought to create objects that are inspiring, meant to be handled, and tie together the past and future.

Nostalgia for the power and warmth experienced through hand-made production has apparently inspired many artisans to proudly return to the practice of craft. The statistics in Passaro's article indicate that craft making has taken off as a national trend, and the author

suggests that this work has taken on an image of hipness, seemingly tied to movements of feminism, punk rock ideals, or other DIY, anti-establishment sentiments. With a touch of resistance the trend of domestic craft has resurfaced and rejected its former classification of women's work born out of necessity, confronting contemporary issues associated with a consumer culture driven by technology and mass-production.

The literature also indicated that, as a result of the clear shift in consumer consciousness, designers are finding innovative strategies and methods that are more ethically-driven and appealing to the desires of these purchasers. Many designers seem to be motivated by the apparent need to "green" products and help build a more sustainable path to the future. They are increasingly making products with mindful intention to help lessen their impact on the environment while infusing artistic elements to create objects that provide embedded stories and convey a deeper meaning for people than most products of a modern economy.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the collection of reading materials and personal interviews addressing this topic, it is evident that Portland is setting an example with an economy increasingly driven by artisan-like qualities. The traditions and characteristics of the arts and crafts sector have greatly influenced today's artisans and are increasingly penetrating the city's major market sectors of microbrews, foods, cycling, and fashion. This may be a trend for the larger national economy which currently holds on to notions of economic development through the expansion of specialized industrial goods and services being traded to other regions.

This study may contribute to the understanding of the evolution of Portland's economy, and since the city has drawn much outside attention for setting such a high bar in planning, civic life and livability, it is quite possible that this movement will be reproduced.

This apparent movement is derived from the evidence of an expanding collection of artisans that are maintaining financial success during times of economic turmoil. Their unique approaches to production and exchange have helped explain how, in a global mass market economy that produces at all levels of quality and price, local artisans can find a market for their crafts and thrive. As an evolving consumer consciousness has greatly contributed to this shift, designers and producers are now facing the challenge of meeting the demands of purchasing decisions that are setting a new course for the future of the economy.

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