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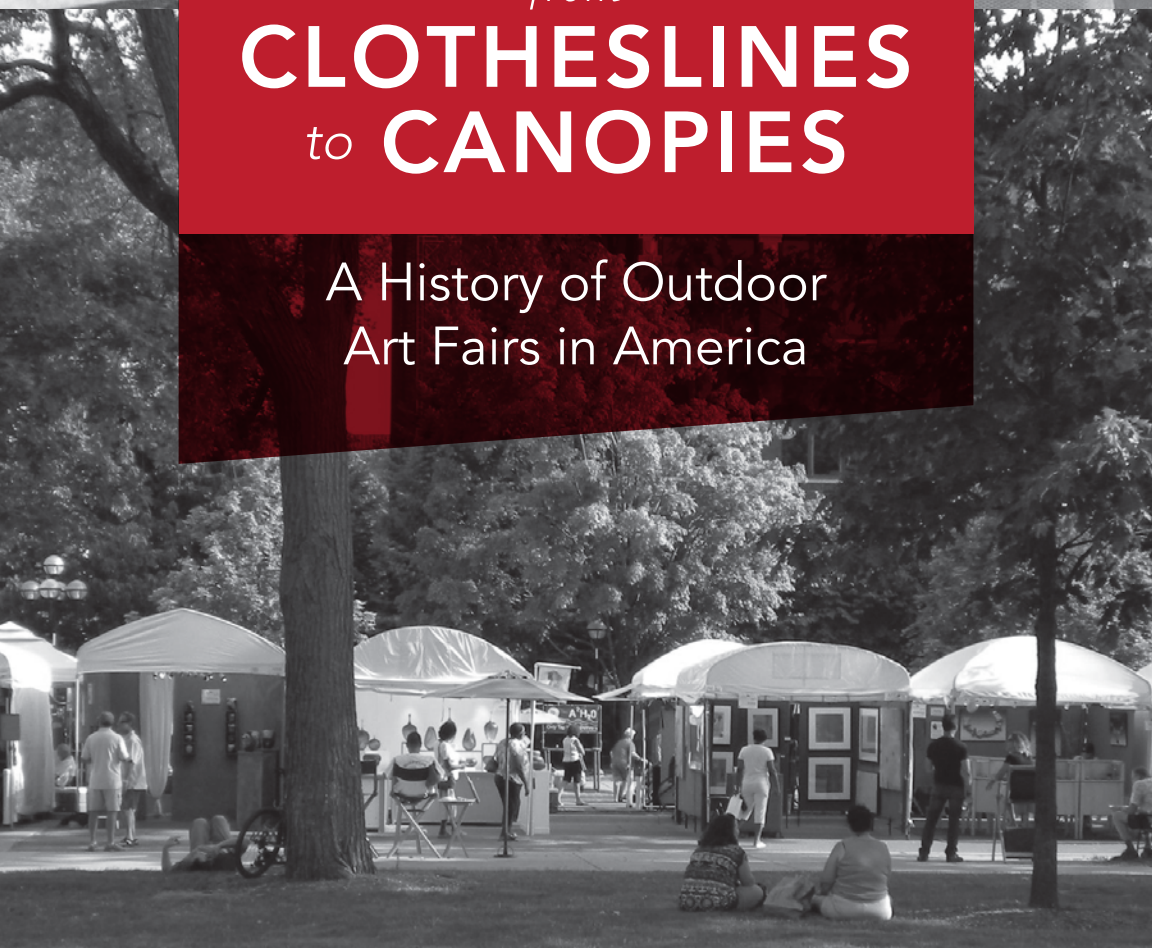
CLOTHESLINES *to* CANOPIES

A History of Outdoor Art Fairs in America



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To the outstanding artists that I've met over the years and their work,
and to the show directors that have helped us make a living.

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Introduction

The outdoor art fair is a peculiarly American phenomenon, an art market unique to this country. Its participants are in an industry that is an art world of its own, one in which millions of dollars worth of art has changed hands. These fairs evolved from small venues featuring only local artists to huge festivals attracting exhibitors and buyers from all over the nation. They are based on a long tradition of outdoor markets where people sell or barter what they produce. While today it is fairly common to find artists selling paintings or crafts on the streets in many countries, what differentiates the American outdoor art fair is the existence of an organized fair with advanced publication of dates, times and location. In order to thrive within this structure, exhibitors must travel to market their work. It is free market enterprise at its most basic level. Artists compete for places to exhibit at the shows that yield the best sales, and art fairs compete for artists—the best artists if possible.

Once at a show an artist must have work that appeals to the fair's audience and is priced appropriately, and sales must be executed easily.

A typical art fair solicits artists to take part in their event, which is usually held during weekends on streets or in a park. After the roster of exhibitors has been established and the necessary plans have been made by the shows and the artists, the fair is then set up, usually in the morning on the first day. A convoy of vans will emerge from the pre-dawn darkness, winding its way through empty streets to a distant destination. As light begins to streak across the horizon, the vans arrive at a pre-determined site and engines are turned off. Drivers and sometimes helpers begin to unload displays, cases, pedestals, chairs, and containers of every shape and dimension. The vans' contents almost magically begin to appear and form into odd-shaped hills and mountains of boxes and gear. Construction dollies and wheeled carts are enlisted to transport these mountains to their proper, numbered locations.

These are no ordinary van drivers. Rather, they are artists, and artists they must be to transform small empty spaces into galleries, using only canopies, display panels, pedestals, cases, drapes, and fabric. In a matter of a few hours (often less) the artists have set up their work within their allotted spaces, ready to impress the crowds that will hopefully begin streaming through the aisles.

Over the next days, some artists will tally sales in five figures. Others will have no sales and will wonder quietly why they attended this particular fair. Most artists have sales ranging between the two extremes, and almost all artists will spend at least some time comparing notes with their neighbors to either side. The end of the weekend reverses the process and brings the fair to a close, as vehicles are loaded with displays, and, in theory at least, fewer pieces of art. Some drivers will head home, elated or depressed, to produce more work, while others remain on the road, heading towards the next exhibition. Once the booths are taken down, and the posters announcing the fair have been removed, the streets will become quiet once again, as if hundreds of America's artists had never actually gathered at all.

Typically artists begin exhibiting at shows close to home to test the waters. If they meet with any success at all, they venture further, seeking the possibility of income in greener pastures across the state and across the country. This type of travel has been greatly enhanced by the U.S. Interstate Highway System, plentiful and reasonably cheap gas, and, in the past few years, the ability to advertise easily online.

Some of the artists and craftspeople that populate this business have incomes high enough that they must work to maintain the illusion that they are "starving artists" rather than extremely successful ones. Many such artists have been able to maintain a middle class life style, raise families, send their children to college and put aside money for retirement. On the other end of the spectrum, other exhibitors are less than successful and there is no deception at all when it comes to labeling themselves starving artists, because starving, or very close to it, is exactly what they do. Yet all of these artists, both successful and not, flout the clichéd warning that "it is impossible to make money as an artist."

Art exhibited at these shows has often been dismissed as unimpressive in quality and sometimes rightly so. While it is true that a few artists who attend art fairs have work in museum collections, that is the exception rather than the rule. The work that is seen at street fairs ranges from the sublime to the just plain awful. The overriding characteristic is that the work is appealing to attendees on some level, and thereby salable, which can lead to catering to the lowest common denominator.

Art fairs that are heavily juried with many artists vying for a limited number of openings tend to offer what is perceived as higher quality and subsequently more expensive works. Non-juried shows or those that have difficulty filling their spaces, by contrast, are sometimes very similar to flea markets. The vast number of art fairs fall between these extremes and offer some very good pieces as well as others that are of marginal quality.

The draw for the public of outdoor art fairs is that they are accessible places to view art, and to meet and even have conversations with artists; that many pieces come with a back story enhances their appeal if a decision to buy is made. For other visitors, part of the appeal is that artists and craftspeople keep

their prices moderate by necessity, and because of this, buyers of average income have the opportunity to collect original art. Whatever category they fall into, the audience can get to know the exhibitors whether or not they are interested in making a purchase. People who come to a particular show year after year often follow individual artists and their work. There are even art fair aficionados who attend several shows each year and seem to keep a pulse on the industry. There is an ongoing two-way conversation between the viewers and the artists, usually supportive but occasionally quite critical.

Artists and craftspeople who exhibit at these shows are a varied lot. The need to produce an income while maintaining a measure of control is the common factor that defines artists who participate in art fairs, rather than background, age, or education. Many have formal art training with BFAs or MFAs. Some start participating in fairs after finishing art school. Others come into the business at a point in their life where their desire to create has overridden their participation in other careers. One of the beauties of the art fair is that credentials are not important: it's all about the work.

The earliest art fairs of record in America that are still in operation began during the start of the Great Depression. The first, founded in 1930, was the Nantucket Sidewalk Art Show—a small local event based on similar street fairs found in Europe. The next was the Washington Square Outdoor Art Exhibit, which started in New York in 1931. Two more followed in 1932: the Rittenhouse Square Fine Art Show in Philadelphia and the Plaza Art Fair in Kansas City. These three fairs developed in large cities with established art schools and museums. The shows started out as small, casual events by artists, art students, and art lovers, but evolved over the years to include many more artists, larger attendance, ancillary booths offering food and drink, and became places to see and be seen.

After World War II, new shows appeared all over the country, as if the population was ready to turn away from the realities of war and artists were eager to offer a creative response to the tumult of recent years. Often the art fairs were called clothesline festivals because artists hung pictures from lines strung between any objects that could hold them. Colorful pictures would

flap in the breeze, beckoning the throngs to stop and admire a thoughtful portrait or a compelling landscape.

Most entries were limited to painting and sculpture—the traditional fine arts—because they predated the acceptance of craft and photography as valid art forms. Some fairs died a slow economic death, while others grew to be major events. Still others decided to use positive advertising techniques and label themselves "big events" from the outset. Later, displays and marketing became more sophisticated, and digital technology became and continues to be an enormous influence. Notably, credit card processing was introduced and became commonplace. The internet has also afforded artists the opportunity to showcase their work via websites, and made online applications to participate in the fairs possible.

The following chapters will present an informal history of this uniquely American business. They describe the artists and the ways they operate in this arena, outline the organization of the art fairs and festivals, and explain how they developed. The shows profiled in the coming chapters were chosen because of their historical importance, their influence on the business as a whole, or because of their reputation as good—and thus competitive—markets for art.

Shows That Set the Course

1930
Massachusetts

Nantucket Sidewalk Art Show

This art show was started in 1930 by Maud Stumm, a painter and society illustrator, and has continued since then except for a hiatus from the 1980s to 2005. Maud had studied art in France and was familiar with the tradition of the sidewalk art exhibits in Paris. Inspired by this tradition, she launched the first show on Nantucket Island, which was held for several days in August and considered a great achievement. The local newspapers believed it to be the first of its kind in the nation, and called Nantucket "the cradle of the movement which has brought art to the street."

Sidewalk Art Show founder Maud Stumm and her key organizer and helper Rae Carpenter at the 1931 SAS on Nantucket. Photograph courtesy of the Artists Association of Nantucket.

In the show's first year more than twenty painters exhibited their work, and tourists and townspeople came to study the varied interpretations of the Island in order to decide which was truest to reality. In this and subsequent years, the Sidewalk Art Show was open to professionals and amateurs alike. Featuring the work of up to fifty artists at a time, the show attracted hundreds of visitors to admire their paintings. One such exhibitor, Colonel Julian Yates, a longtime artist member of the Artists Association of Nantucket, was greatly admired and people would wait for him to arrive with his canvases, some of them so freshly painted that they were still wet.

Maud died in 1935, and Emily Hoffmeier served after her as director for many years. The Artists Association of Nantucket took over the event in 1960. In later years, the Sidewalk Art Show was sometimes sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce. Its locations included places such as Straight Wharf, the old town building, and the Nantucket Atheneum. Currently the Artists Association of Nantucket has resumed sponsorship of the show and has split this event into two art shows, one the last Saturday of May and the other the last Saturday of August in the garden of the Atheneum. It is open to the 220 artist members of the Artists Association and island artists. It is not juried and usually 20 to 35 artists show their work.

References

Artists Association of Nantucket

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