

Soul Sensations



The crafts scene of the North Atlantic is vibrant and stirring to all senses **By Stephanie Finnegan**

The North Atlantic region of the United States—more frequently defined as New England—holds a unique place in the history and evolution of America. If the Midwest is the “heartland,” then New England is this country’s conscience.

Its inhabitants have led the way in demanding and fighting for independence from England during Revolutionary War days, and the citizens of this geographical area preached, wrote, lectured, lobbied, and rallied for abolition during the Civil War. It was New England’s poets, authors, ministers, and great thinkers who helped to persuade and support Lincoln’s emergence as the Great Emancipator.

The states that comprise this pocket of the United States are Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. These six states have earned a reputation for being at the forefront of our nation’s literary, philosophical, and educational movements. Some of the world’s leading universities and colleges are located in the North Atlantic region.

The Industrial Revolution, which transformed the economy of the country and changed the way goods are manufactured and transported, had a deep-reaching effect on New England. Still, amid this overarching adaptation to mass production and factory assembly lines, the pride and self-expression of the New England craftsman and craftswoman has remained tried and true.

Known for being self-reliant, self-determining, and self-supporting, the artists who reside in this section of the country are creative and are reflective of their region’s rich history. Always ready to take the high road and to set the moral standards of America at a higher and higher bar—urging their fellow countrymen to

strive to be the best and the most equitable—the folks who uphold this legacy in their workshops and their studios have much to draw upon.

Museums, galleries, exhibitions, and crafts unions all celebrate the uniqueness of the North Atlantic/New England personality. In this coastal strip, the accomplishments of the past very much influence the pride and the artistry of the present.

Artisans Hand Craft Gallery Montpelier, Vt.

In 1978, during the holiday season, a group of young craftspeople decided to open a temporary gallery in a storefront in Montpelier, Vt., as a way to sell their wares—mainly jewelry, pottery, woven scarves, and block prints. Thirty-five years later, Artisans Hand Craft Gallery is flourishing, exhibiting the work of over 140 handcrafters, most of who reside in Vermont (a few are from neighboring states).

The gallery, one of the oldest retailers in town, has been designated a “Vermont State Craft Center.” Over the years, Artisans Hand has survived the vagaries of the economy, increased access to cheap imported goods, and even some major downtown floods.

Initially, the gallery was a true cooperative. Along with creating their own work, the artists clerked in the gallery, displayed the crafts, and did the promotion, marketing, cleaning, and everything else that needed to be done. Over the years, the structure has changed.



Now all major decisions are made by the six-member board of directors: jewelers Bill Butler, Steve Noyes, and Lochlin Smith, silk and chenille scarf maker Maggie Neale, clay whistle maker Mary Stone, and potter Leslie Koehler. Paid staff members include a manager, assistant manager, sales staff, and a professional bookkeeper. The board meets monthly to plan gallery activities and jury prospective exhibitors.

The gallery strongly reflects the spirit of Vermont. Photography and woodblock prints feature iconic Vermont landscapes, flora, and fauna. Bowls, cutting boards, clocks, and other products are made from locally sourced wood. Specialty food is made with local ingredients. Even the gallery's colors reflect the hues of Vermont: the russet of autumn leaves, the lime-green of new spring growth, the orange of sunsets over Camel's Hump mountain.

Artisans Hand's mission is to support and celebrate Vermont's crafts community and to enrich the lives of their customers with beautiful, high-quality handmade treasures. They encourage young talent and work with them to bring out the best of their capabilities, ensuring the next generation continues the long tradition of creating quality, locally handcrafted goods.

For more information, visit www.artisanshand.com



Above from top: An array of Jean Meinhardt pottery is a beautiful offering at Artisans Hand Craft Gallery. • The colors of Artisans Hand were chosen to reflect the palette of Vermont. This peaceful green wall showcases Mary Simpson and Carol MacDonald prints. The metal sculptures of Steven Bronstein are proudly on display. *Photos by Erin Roper.*