

## Art Fairs are Good Business

By Shary Brown

Executive Director, Ann Arbor Street Art Fair, the Original

The theme of the recently released Arts Alliance study of the Economic Impact of Arts and Culture in Washtenaw County, *Art is Good Business*, is certainly true of the Ann Arbor Art Fairs.

In 1960, the first Ann Arbor Street Art Fair occupied two blocks of South University Avenue and featured 99 artists. It was envisioned as a short-lived attraction to the existing Summer Bargain Days held by the South University Businessmen's Association.

Forty seven years later, the Ann Arbor Street Art Fair, the Original, occupies a new home in the area surrounding Burton Carillon Tower and is one of the four official Ann Arbor Art Fairs, including the State Street Area Art Fair, the Ann Arbor Summer Art Fair, and Ann Arbor's South University Area Art Fair. Collectively, the fairs invite nearly 1100 juried visual artists, cover 30 blocks of downtown and draw more than half a million visitors.

So what does this mean economically? Mary Kerr, President of the Ann Arbor Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, using models developed by the Michigan State Travel and Tourism Research Center, estimates conservatively that the art fairs bring between \$36 million and \$44 million direct new dollars to Washtenaw County annually. Over 300 full time year round jobs are created by the dollars brought in by the art fairs. The dollars earned are then spent again in the community in our local businesses.

Visitors focus on the art, meeting the artists, the food, and entertainment. They participate in free hands-on art activities, and shop and dine in our local stores and restaurants. Hotels are full and tour companies bring visitors by the busload, encouraging those who only have a chance to sample our attractions to put Ann Arbor back on their list for a return visit.

"For many of our small downtown businesses a good art fair represents the difference between staying afloat or going under", says Susan Pollay, the executive director of the Downtown Development Authority. She adds, "Our downtown is rich in remarkable one-of-a-kind special shops and restaurants and for some of those businesses, the four days of art fairs are the single biggest four days of revenue for the year, including the winter holidays. From May to August about 25% of the population disappears and for nearly 50 years, the art fairs have filled that economic gap."

The economic benefit generated by the fairs is felt locally, regionally and nationally. Nearly all services and supplies are purchased locally. Business partnerships with regional and national corporations bring mutual benefit to the art fairs and the sponsoring organizations who gain publicity and access to the demographically attractive audience.

More than seventy area non-profits raise money and educate the public through participation in the non-profit area. Other non-profits earn revenue by sharing their volunteers and earning a donation in return. Churches and schools provide services such as parking earning income for their programs. Community and University art organizations showcase their programs through partnerships with the Fairs.

Towns across America would be delighted to have an event one tenth the size and quality of the Ann Arbor Art Fairs. The Ann Arbor Street Art Fair, the Original, was recently named the *Number One Art Fair* in the nation by the readers of *AmericanStyle* magazine (October 2004), and ranks in the top ten in all the rating services annually, competing with fairs in cities of upwards of 2.5 million. It is truly remarkable that a town of 115,000 residents and metro area of 400,000 hosts this fabulous event.

[www.artfair.org](http://www.artfair.org) Ann Arbor Street Art Fair, the Original  
[www.a2state.com](http://www.a2state.com) State Street Area Art Fair  
[www.theguild.org](http://www.theguild.org) Ann Arbor Summer Art Fair  
[www.a2southu.com](http://www.a2southu.com) Ann Arbor's South University Art Fair  
[www.washtenawnonprofits.org](http://www.washtenawnonprofits.org) Art Fairs Non Profit Area  
[www.downtownannarbor.org](http://www.downtownannarbor.org) Downtown Development Authority  
[www.annarbor.org](http://www.annarbor.org) Ann Arbor Convention and Visitors Bureau