

Yes, but Is It Crafts?; In Western North Carolina's Craft Country, Artisans Are Putting a Fresh Spin On a Time-Honored Tradition [FINAL Edition]

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Inside the old brick building that houses the Local Color Weaving Studio in Bakersville, N.C., wooden looms fill the room and shelves are cluttered with spools of yarn. Hunched over one of the looms in the dusty sunlight, Fred Swift glances up and hollers, "Helloooo."

With his snow-white hair and his frameless eyeglasses slipping down his nose, Swift seems to reinforce all expectations about a weekend visit to Appalachia. You came in search of crafts--genuine, handmade, time-tested, rooted-in-the-region crafts, the kinds of things you just can't find in urban shopping centers or suburban art galleries--but also something about the life itself: folksy, historical, somehow authentic.

You think you have found, if not literally then figuratively, the real McCoy. You figure Swift to be a seventh-generation Appalachian, someone who learned the craft by candlelight, along with a hundred stories about coal miners and bootleggers and rural electrification. Swift eases slowly off his stool, and you half expect him to pull out a corncob pipe.

And then you discover the truth. Swift tells you he is a retired Rutgers University entomology professor who learned his craft by taking a 24-hour course in Florida. He has been expertly weaving scarves and throws from hand-dyed silk and wool for . . . around five years.

You like his work--feather-light, multicolored neck scarves. And you like his mellow demeanor, the shif-shif of his worn leather moccasins on the studio floor. He shows you how he dyes his own yarn, how he makes each scarf one at a time, laboring for days. He shows you the designs, a series of triangles in crimson, ocher and muted indigo, that he scratches out on graph paper. The finished product sells for around \$60.

But you find yourself somehow disappointed. Cheated. You expected the real thing, and you got this . . . well-educated retiree who has learned a craft and practiced it not much longer than the average student spends getting a bachelor's degree.

And Swift turns out to be the rule in western North Carolina, not the exception.

"That old romantic notion of coming to the hills and finding mountain people on their porches making indigenous crafts is a thing of the past," says Richard Dillingham, director of the Southern Appalachian Center at Mars Hill College in Mars Hill, N.C. Dillingham's ancestors were among the 12 original pioneer families to settle in this part of western North Carolina. "Ninety-five percent of the artists and crafts people here today

are new Southerners," he says. "Is that good or bad? I have yet to decide. I know it makes me sad."

Today, western North Carolina boasts the fourth-largest concentration of artists and craftsmakers in the country (behind New York City, San Francisco and Santa Fe). It draws a stunning 20 million visitors a year, most of them seeking, or at least buying, some local handmade goods. It has a spreading national reputation as serious territory for handmade clothing and furniture and other forms of rustic, authentic craftwork and art. Low taxes, incredible views, four seasons and affordable housing have lured many artists, beginning in the early 1980s when those pollsters who sort, rank and quantify the U.S. landscape first declared it among the "most livable" places in America.

"There's a potter here behind every tree," says Bob Meier, a Boone potter who moved to the area in 1974 to attend college and has operated his studio, Doe Ridge Pottery, since 1988.

As expected, this population growth has changed more than just the artist profiles. "We have a rush hour now, at 8, noon and 5," says Meier. McDonald's, Taco Bell and Dollar General stores clutter rural intersections surrounded by fields and woods. At an intersection in Old Fort, you linger at a green light and nobody honks.

But up the road, near Blowing Rock, a young man in a basil-green Lexus flips off an elderly farm couple in a 1960s Ford pickup as he passes, going 70 mph in a 45, on a two-lane road so steep that it includes runaway truck ramps. New people, no doubt.

None of which is to say that western North Carolina is not an interesting and worthwhile place to visit, or to explore and buy crafts. Visitors can walk into the private studios of hundreds of potters, weavers, furniture makers, jewelry makers and string-instrument craftsmen (called luthiers) in the broad North Carolina region surrounding the Blue Ridge Parkway, stretching roughly from Sparta in the north, through Asheville, and south to Saluda. Asheville, the largest city (metro population 213,000) and about a 10-hour drive from Washington, along with the surrounding small towns are home to about 140 craft studios, more than 135 commercial galleries and at least 60 museums and special attractions. There's the Todd General Store, built in Todd in 1914 and still open, and All Saints Episcopal Church, built of logs in Linville in 1910 by Henry Bacon, designer of the Lincoln Memorial.

This year, a nonprofit group called Handmade in America, which promotes the craft trade in the area, issued a second edition of "The Craft Heritage Trails of Western North Carolina," a 146-page guidebook that lists artists, phone numbers and addresses. The book combines folksy language and functional, good-looking design to lead the visitor on self-guided driving tours, even suggesting traditional CDs and cassettes for on-the-road listening. But in some ways, the book is more fun than the real trip, as if the writers traveled on a particularly foggy day and somehow missed the Hardee's and the newcomers.

With dozens of guidebooks and promotional pamphlets hawking various studios and stores and crafts as "authentic" and "heritage" and so on, Dillingham suggests that visitors start by trying to understand the difference between original and indigenous art.

"The new artists work with their hands, and handmade items are certainly a part of our heritage," he says. "However, very few of the items being made today are indigenous."

In the late 1700s, traditional indigenous craft skills were passed on among early settlers from one family member to another, primarily to produce useful, everyday items--baskets, blankets, clothing--that families could not afford to buy, says Dillingham. Even if families had money, the mountains limited access to stores. But many of the skills began to fade as the need for them receded. Textile factories and lumber mills began to move into the area around the 1930s, providing jobs and much-needed paychecks but cutting into both the time and the necessity to make household items by hand. Around the same time, the mail system improved and more goods became available even in isolated communities.

"The Sears, Roebuck catalogue dramatically changed everything," says Dillingham. "Suddenly [the people] could afford the items and have them delivered to their doors."

Andrew Glasgow, director of programs and collections at the Southern Highland Craft Guild in Asheville, tries to reduce a visitor's disappointment when he suggests that only one type of craft is truly indigenous to this region--items made by the Cherokee tribes that inhabited the mountains until the mid-1800s. Members of the tribe display their baskets, pottery and beadwork at the Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual in Cherokee, about one hour west of Asheville.

"A lot of what people consider indigenous is radically foreign, with influences from Norway and Denmark, on top of the more traditional Scotch-Irish culture," says Glasgow. "But the point is that a visitor can come to this region and find some really great crafts handmade by people who are vested in this, who are just as valid as the old-timers but who come from a different perspective."

Glasgow also stresses the idea that tourism itself is indigenous to the area. Families have been summering--and buying local crafts-- in the area since the 19th century. "It's not as hokey or as new as it sounds," says Glasgow of the commerce in crafts made for visitors seeking some piece of the region and its past. "It's actually more democratic today, because back then only the wealthy summered here."

"The Craft Heritage Trails of Western North Carolina" groups the area into seven self-guided tours, complete with driving directions. Expect delays as you tour around, such as a truck full of boulders on a two-lane mountain road too curvy for passing.

On a lengthy trip such as this, you might drive three hours between each artist. Better slip in the Bill Monroe CD.

Casual art fans with only a four-day weekend--that is, most of us--would probably be wise to limit a visit to a few key, artisan-rich towns: Asheville, Boone, Blowing Rock and Black Mountain, maybe. An accommodating place to start is Asheville, the most cosmopolitan outpost, where mostly young, newly arrived artists operate more than 30 businesses and studios. Park the car and walk in this funky-hip city of dogs and gentle people and patchouli oil.

Candlemaker Pamela Brown is one of Asheville's new crafters. A former social worker, she hand-dips candles at the cash register of her tiny studio, Mountain Lights. Blue in the center, a ring of orange, an outside ring of red, the candles are not precisely replicas of the candles used by early Appalachian householders. But she does use traditional hand-dipping methods. She's been making candles for two years, after learning the craft from a friend in Florida.

"As a social worker, I got tired of writing reports that no one ever read," she says. She much prefers her new trade. But, she says, "I'm finding that the hardest part about running this business is asking people for money."

Down the street, Laura Petritz at Mystic Eye specializes in custom-made, hand-dyed silk clothing--muted earth tones in a mottled, not-quite-tie-dyed pattern. "I can just look at you and know what will look good on you," she says, holding up a bias-cut silk chemise for a customer.

The clothes are hippie-modern, but she employs only local "home sewers," whose skills are a product of the area's once-booming textile industry. "A lot of people lost their jobs when Burlington moved to Mexico a while back," she says.

And so the local craft of hand-sewing continues in this new, and distinctly commercial, contemporary form.

Be forewarned: Once you leave downtown Asheville, nearly all of the craft studios are on artists' private properties, in garages, basements or adjoining structures. You have left the world of Retail Shopping and are now into the World of Mountain People's Lives. This is not bad; this is, in fact, probably why you came. Just be prepared to be a bit weirded out the first time you creep your car into some stranger's gravel driveway and holler, "Hello?"

Handmade in America has asked that all artists in its book include a business sign, an accessible driveway and something like regular visitor hours. But nearly half of all artists on a recent visit had either moved away or were not home during their advertised open hours. Make sure you call first.

Once you find one at home, the artists will happily show you what they do and provide prices for their displayed work or take orders for something custom-made.

Bring a checkbook, since many of the artists don't have credit card machines. And don't expect backwoods prices. A throw at the Local Color Weaving Studio costs \$120. Pottery in the region, mostly hand-thrown, practical pieces like vases and bowls glazed in earth tones, starts at \$35. A large wooden bowl thrown on a lathe in Black Mountain costs \$950, and a glass sculpture at the Penland School gallery costs \$5,800.

As you head northeast out of Asheville, you begin to run into pockets of pastoral Appalachia. Sure, you came here to find crafts, but you will also discover your Type B personality as you ramble through the rolling hills. A few rustic highlights: rows of off-brand canned corn stacked in a 1950s gas station with a sign reading "For Trout Fishing." A circle of musicians called the Western North Carolina Dulcimer Collective in an impromptu jam session at the Folk Art Center near Asheville, playing and singing songs as old as the hills, sending a bolt to that place in your heart that gives you goose bumps, waters your eyes and calls to mind your ancestors.

Out in the countryside you'll find contemporary potter Don Davis, who holds a master's degree in fine arts from the Rhode Island School of Design and created reproductions of Iroquois pottery for the movie "Last of the Mohicans."

But you will also find chair craftsman Max Woody in Old Fort, who comes as close as anyone to the Genuine Article you came looking for in the first place.

Woody, 70, lives in a cabin in the woods. His studio is on Route 70, a two-lane highway. A sign over the building says, "Since 1950. Hand crafted chairs since early 1800. This ain't no studio or gallery. Hits a real workshop." His cabin has oil lamps and a wood-burning stove. "I've got running water, but it's not hot," he says, then adds that he's getting remarried soon, and his bride-to-be has insisted on a hot bath. He's putting in a heater.

Chairmaking goes back several generations in his family, and he's teaching the craft to his son. As a boy, Woody worked in a factory, saving his money until he turned 20, then took a bus to Charlotte and bought his machinery--a lathe, a band saw, a table saw. His father, grandfather and great-grandfather made the same chairs he makes today, tall rockers with cane backs and seats. The chairs are custom-made, according to your height and weight, and cost from \$375 for oak or maple to around \$850 for walnut. And you don't pay for it until you receive it.

"When you get the chair and you like it, you mail us a check," he says.

As expected, Woody has strong opinions about all the newcomers. A fellow recently moved into the area, bought an old barn and set up a business that mass-produces mountain-style rockers. "He's capitalizing on the reputation of the area for crafts," says Woody. "So many people are simply looking for money. If that's what you're after, then okay. But that's not what I'm after."

Woody has mixed feelings about organizations such as the Southern Highland Craft Guild, which displays juried regional art in its four guild shops, one of them in the Folk Art Center about 15 miles down the road.

"They've gotten so contemporary and diverse," says Woody. "They've got Raku. I'm not at all sure that a Japanese pot belongs in a Southern heritage museum."

Pamela Gerhardt last wrote for the Travel section on traveling I- 95 north.

DETAILS: N.C. Crafts

Asheville, about a ten-hour drive from Washington (about 520 miles), is a good base for exploring western North Carolina. US Airways and Delta offer connecting service to Asheville; round-trip fares start at about \$209, with restrictions. If you fly, check out the excellent tourist information center next to the rental car area in the airport, where you'll find brochures and guidebooks on everything from local bird life to art.

FINDING THE SHOPS: "The Craft Heritage Trails of Western North Carolina" has maps and suggested routes as well as information on lodging and restaurants. It's \$13.95 plus \$3.50 shipping from HandMade in America, P.O. Box 2089, Asheville, N.C. 28802, 1-800-331- 4154.

In addition to individual artisans' studios, the Southern Highland Craft Guild (see below) operates several shops, including the Folk Art Center (Milepost 382, Blue Ridge Parkway, just outside of Asheville), a must-see stop. It's best to go near the end of your journey, when you can peruse the crafts displayed in the museum with a knowledgeable eye and realize that you learned something, including the difference between traditional and modern crafts.

WHERE TO STAY: The Asheville area (about 40 hotels) and Blowing Rock (about 16 hotels) offer the greatest variety of lodging in all price ranges. Unless you want a rural bed-and-breakfast experience, it's quite easy to zip back to Asheville after 5 p.m. (when most studios close) in time for dinner and a hotel swim.

INFORMATION:

* Handmade in America, 1-800-331-4154, www.wnccrafts.org.

* Southern Highland Craft Guild, 828-298-7928, www.southernhighlandguild.org.

* North Carolina Division of Travel and Tourism (order a state map), 1-800-847-4862, www.visitnc.com.

* All American Roads and National Scenic Byways, www.byways.org.

* Smoky Mountain Host, 1-800-432-4678, www.smokymtnhost.com.

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