

THE EFFECTS OF COMMERCIALISM ON THE  
TELEGRAPH AVENUE ARTISAN

Claudia L. Levin

Historical background and setting.

The street sellers on Telegraph Avenue are a recent phenomenon in Berkeley.<sup>1</sup> The original sellers were craftsmen or artisans who displayed their work not on the public sidewalks of Telegraph Avenue but on a small privately owned land surrounding the front of Cody's bookstore.<sup>2</sup> In the fall of 1969, artisans were forbidden by law from selling in any other area along Telegraph Avenue. It was not until the Berkeley City Council abolished an old ruling that one could not sell anything in one place for more than five minutes, known as the 5-minute Rule, that street artisans really began to display their work up and down the Avenue, on the sidewalks stretching from Dwight Way to Brancroft Way. By December of 1972, the City Council had passed certain other ordinances by which artisans had to abide; that is, they could not obstruct the free flow of traffic on the sidewalks, and thus they were compelled to set up as close to the curb as possible. They were also not allowed to set up on any part of the sidewalk adjacent to the parking spaces on the Avenue. Thus, it has only been since late 1972 that the whole phenomenon of street selling on Telegraph Avenue has taken on its distinct character.

One of the reasons the market has grown up so quickly is because Telegraph Avenue has become the most easily accessible place in which anyone can sell something. By law, all one needs is a peddler's license (costing \$20), however, it has not been until December 1973 that this law has been strictly enforced. Up until about two months prior to December,

about 75% of those who sold on the Avenue did not have licenses. Thus, with the easy accessibility, there are and have been quite a large variety of types of sellers. Most prominent are the craftsmen who sell their own handmade items. Then there are importers who sell clothing and artifacts imported from Europe, Mexico, India, China, Africa and countries of South America. Rarer are those individuals who sell used clothing, records, books or baked goods to eat. Occasionally one will notice retail store representatives who bring some of their store wares to the Avenue in hopes of making extra sales.

It is this variety of street sellers, particularly the craftsmen, with whom I will deal most extensively. I will concentrate on the commercial mechanisms at work when the craftsman sells his craft or artifact. It is the craftspeople who attract many out-of-towners to Telegraph Avenue. The unique assortment of handcrafted items displayed are what have built up the Telegraph Avenue reputation. Any tourist who comes to Berkeley will most probably visit Telegraph Avenue and its artisans.

The artisans believe that most of their customers are tourists, especially during the months from September to December. During the rest of the year, the number of visitors to the Avenue will vary depending on seasonal weather conditions and holidays. For instance, after Christmas, artisans do not set up again until a few days before New Year's Eve, because they know that working people are off on that holiday as well. After the beginning of the year, due to the rainy weather, business will be rather slow and will not pick up again until the sun shines. Finally, as spring comes in March and April and the annual Berkeley craft fairs

are held, a substantial number of artisans are out selling every day. Weekends bring the largest crowds and greatest number of sellers. The artisans also believe tourists are more likely eager to talk to the artisan than other buyers. The artisans sit on the sidewalk and to the outsider, the street artisans and what they have made for sale are very new and surprising. Amid conversations one often discovers that these tourists include people not only from the surrounding communities such as El Cerrito, Richmond, Piedmont and Walnut Creek, but from neighboring and midwestern states as well.

Because the Avenue's market reputation has become so well-known, other artisans from outside of Berkeley have come from time to time to display their arts. Their main purpose is to make some quick money. These same people are sometimes involved in other types of selling such as through retail craft stores, or they may sell in craft fairs or art shows. One finds these sellers on the Avenue most Saturdays, the popular shopping day because of the numbers of people off work.

Other craftsmen are those who will be out not only most Saturdays, but other days of the week as well, often on Thursday, Friday and Sunday. However their selling days may be irregular depending on their other activities. In fact, a few of the artisans are students as well. Most do not become really dedicated sellers until very close to Christmas, or maybe never at all.

The artisans out selling everyday are those most serious about making money. Perhaps street selling is the only means of living for some artisans. The frequent exposure of their work will enhance their chances

of building up a good clientele of both tourists and especially the Berkeley residents who buy all year round from the artisans.

Many of the street sellers are long-term artisans who may have started out selling most of the days of the week, but have gradually cut down their selling time to weekends. They may have stopped selling for a while and then came back. In any case, they have had a fairly long exposure to the whole experience of selling on the Avenue.

The most popular selling time on the Avenue is the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas. As most artisans say, people buy almost everything at Christmas. The Avenue market is certainly attractive to anyone who wants to buy a gift that has been hand-crafted. Any serious artisan will be out selling on as many days as possible during this time because it means "big money".

#### Street selling dynamics.

The month before Christmas is also the time when street selling dynamics are most intensified and most visible, although if one looks closely enough, the same phenomena are occurring all year. All spaces on the sidewalk are free and open to anyone who would like to display his or her articles. Thus, whoever gets there first in the morning and claims the space has the right to sell there the rest of the day. Some artisans pay a person to stay out all night in order to be assured of a space in the morning, or several artisans may get together and organize a system where each takes a turn watching a group of spaces, usually a half block, during the night. Guarding selling space only occurs when the competition for space becomes very tight.

Regular street sellers develop a preference for one or the other side of the street depending on several factors. They may prefer the side of the street where the sunlight lasts longest, providing the warmth needed by anyone who sits out selling all day. People are also more likely to walk on the warmer side of the street, and all these people are potential customers of the street artisan. An artisan might prefer the east side of the street because he believes and/or observes that more people tend to pass on that side. If most of the people are tourists, they would be more likely to walk on the east side because of all the retail stores offering attractive souvenir and gift items. There is also less pollution from car exhaust on this side because of the wind.

How an artisan displays his work plays a part in street selling dynamics. Laying one's crafts along the ground is the least engaging to a buyer's view. A person is less likely to notice the crafts or even take the time to bend down and talk with the craftsman sitting alongside. If the artisan displays his work on a table, it is easier for anyone to approach and touch the articles. Sometimes articles are at hand level, spread out over a slanting board sitting on the ground or set on a table. The artisan's work may also be displayed hanging from a wood beam or a string.

Artisans who do not mind working on the noisy Avenue take advantage of the fact that demonstrating their work adds an attraction to their selling space. Potential customers are often apt to stop and observe the work in process. It gives them a more personal contact with the artisan. For instance people like to watch a leather craftsman carve and stamp

designs on a belt and not just quote prices.

If one takes a broad look at all the types of artisans one sees selling on Telegraph Avenue, the most predominant are leather and jewelry craftsmen. Leather workers sell anything from belts to pocketbooks or leather chess boards. A great variety of jewelry techniques are displayed on the Avenue, such as macrame, beading, featherwork, enameling, silverwork or work using horseshoe nails, brass or copper, where the metal is either shaped or designs etched on it. Both leatherworkers and the jewelers, plus many of the other craftsmen, sell what are considered very utilitarian items. In other words, one can wear jewelry, a leather belt, a crocheted hat, or a woven scarf. The utilitarian nature of these objects is what enhances their chances of being saleable to the public, and the artisans realize this demand for utility. Few people sell purely aesthetic art, such as paintings or lithographs. There are artisans who silkscreen a design on a shirt, or tie-dye scarves or T-shirts or paint scenes on leather belts. The same artisans do not call their finished products art, but craft, precisely because they are functional.

However, for someone who has a very broad definition of art, anything sold on the Avenue could be considered art. The creative assemblage of various raw materials is characteristic of all that is offered for sale. The degree to which each craftsman uses his imagination or creativity differs, and some crafts require more or less of the artisan's personality than others. However, it might all be considered art.

An artisan may consider something he sells on the Avenue a craft and what he sells in art shows or galleries an art. In most cases, were

it not for the difference in price, the article sold on the Avenue is very similar to the article in an exclusive show which has a very high price. Many craftsmen also sell their work in retail shops.

Other aspects of street selling have a special appeal to artisans. In a way, selling one's own work on the street is a lifestyle where one has no boss dictating one's actions. An artisan can set his own working hours. He or she has complete control over selling decisions, such as deciding whether or not price tags should be put on each article. The artisan is his own businessman and he may or may not work with other street artisans.

The artisan may decide how much time, talent and energy he wants to put into his work. That is, he may really enjoy creating something that takes a lot of his time, but produces more articles that require less skill just because they sell very well. If an artisan sets a higher priority on selling his articles than on the enjoyment he may get out of making them, then he is not only interested in making money, but is commercializing the craft as well. And if he is not careful, he may fall completely out of touch with the artistic process involved in creating a craft. No matter what technique is used, be it macrame, weaving or leather stamping and dyeing, there are almost an infinite amount of possible variations on basic techniques. However, after an artisan observes what particular designs or colors sell well, he may just produce those styles. He becomes interested in just satisfying the public demand; the market then becomes the determining motivation for production. In this case, the artisan has less freedom in what he produces. The entire individual

enterprise, so to speak, has turned into a commercial business.

Analysis of case materials.

The following case is a typical example of an artisan who experienced a series of various effects of commercialism on her work. She (Susan) first started selling her woven belts which included a hand-welded buckle in the form of an undulating rectangle. Her color combinations were bright and distinct and the yarn was rather fine. She displayed these belts on a cloth on the ground. The type of public feedback she received included requests for certain changes in the belts, particularly a change to a store-bought buckle. About a month later, her display had gone from the ground to a table, where her boyfriend's leather goods were also displayed. Susan put a few store-bought buckles on her belts despite her dislike for them. She still displayed the belts with the original buckle. At that time it took her about four hours to weave one belt on the loom. She was asking \$8.00 for them, which was little reward for the time she put into this craft. However, the belts were not selling very well, even though she had made a small response to public demand.

Very shortly after this, she discovered she could make a belt in less time, two hours, by using thicker strands of yarn. The new belts also used more natural, subdued colors instead of bright purples, blues, yellows and greens. Passers-by had given the impression, without actually saying so directly, that they preferred more subdued colors that would go with almost any piece of clothing. She hoped that this additional response to public demand would increase the belts' saleability. Thus, one



could see the artistic process slowly becoming more commercial.

Throughout this time, she continued to display her wares on the table, along with leather purses and wallets, and leather handbags hung on a line above the table. In addition, she was also selling some wire and bead jewelry, spread on a slanting board, for another woman. Altogether, these crafts took up quite a bit of space on the sidewalk, but were always neatly arranged with the customer's eye in mind. The artisan and her boyfriend usually took turns selling all the items.

Over a period of about three months she sold a few belts, though not enough to satisfy her. Susan had also begun to lose some of her enthusiasm over making belts conform to what the public seemed to want. And if that wasn't enough, people had apparently, at this point, come around to preferring brightly colored belts because they were finer than the thicker, coarser belts she could weave more quickly. Susan had also come to the conclusion that for what she was asking for the belts, it really was not worth the time to make many more of them.

So, she created a new item, a scarf with long fringes. It took her less time to make the scarf, and it seemed that people would respond to the beautiful, bright colors and designs she wove. The scarves were tied around the same line holding the leather handbags. She still kept her belts on the table in hopes of selling them at some time.

I saw Susan go through these various stages of awareness to her audience. She never came to a point where her sales were so successful that she took large orders for her work. I think the lack of demand was due to the audience's unfamiliarity with her technique, weaving. Her skill

and the articles she created were certainly beautiful. However, most people who approached her stand did not appreciate the fact that the belts and scarves were woven and not crocheted, knitted or macramed.

Another artisan who makes hand puppets, however, has founded her own company in response to the huge amount of successful sales she makes. Her puppets are sewn together from pieces of fur, felt, and other materials. Her process of construction of the puppets has become like a mass production enterprise over a year's time. Instead of laboring over each puppet individually, she has a relative make about two dozen ears for a particular series of puppets. Or, for instance, she will cut out a dozen body shapes for one kind of puppet, all at one time.

Originally, most of her puppets were Sesame Street characters and, thus, their popularity was somewhat established already. Later, though, she expanded her enterprise to include other types of puppets she had created. Both types sell well, most being priced at \$3.50 or \$4.00.

This puppet maker also takes large orders for puppets from stores and schools. Essentially, she has come to a point where if she did not sell on the Avenue for awhile, she would still have a large clientele who would desire her puppets. However, as she puts it, when she misses her usual Saturday on the Avenue, she will inevitably hear later that many persons were asking for her.

One last example is that of a leather craftsman, one of many selling on the Avenue. This particular leather worker made only belts, though. He also considered the idea of making watchbands from the large amount of scrap leather he had left over. His sales were very successful because,

as he said, he only made what he knew would sell. Over a period of time he came to observe just what designs, colors and types of buckles the public would buy. Obviously there was a high degree of commercialism present here because the craftsman wanted to make money. He was a great salesman, though one should not think that his sales technique was his only talent. This same person could do some very fine work on leather which few people would buy. Only another leather craftsman would notice and appreciate the work of his free-hand etched design, because of a similar expertise and background knowledge of leather craft.

In fact, I observed another leather craftsman who sold only free-hand, unusual designs such as a painted landscape using gradations of seven different colors. These belts did not sell nearly as well as repetitively designed belts.

#### The effects of commercialism on the craftsman.

Observations of the previous three cases and of other artisans led me to suggest a framework for understanding the commercial processes at work affecting the artisan and his craft. The artisan will have a selling enterprise which may be at any stage of development depending on the extent to which he becomes commercial.

1. A new, innovative craft and its creator make their first contact with the public. Both verbal and monetary feedback communicates public likes and dislikes and preferred changes in color and/or design.
2. The craftsman makes subtle changes in his work according to public demand, but still retains examples of original craft. He may try one or more variations on the same craft, keeping close scrutiny over public's

reaction. Experimentation with the most effective display and price of his articles will also occur and will continue through most of the artisan's selling experience.

3. If sales are successful on any particular variation of the craft, the craftsman will increase his production of those items and produce less of the new variations. At this point, there may also be a pairing up of two or more artisans in order to share the selling time on the Avenue. If sales are unsuccessful, a completely new craft will be created, probably using similar techniques, and exposed to the market.

4. Then follows a continued increase in production of the saleable items and mass production of the crafting process begins. The craftsman's enthusiasm and interest in these repetitious articles wanes. There may be a complete absence of any innovative products, and thus, no creativity is involved. However, with most long-term craftsmen, their artistic nature and interest in their business will compel them to continue creating new variations of the craft, though the craftsman will not necessarily depend on these items to bring in money.

5. Successful selling over a long period of time continues to affect the craft and its production. The craftsman becomes well-known to the people of the community. He or she may begin taking larger orders on consignment from individuals and/or retail stores. The craftsman may also be able to afford to hire someone to sell on the street for him.

#### Conclusion.

As one observes the artisan and his craft making contact with the public's wants and aesthetic tastes, several events occur which indicate

the artisan's interaction with the process of commercialism. One major event is a change of the color or final design of the item originally produced. Clues about what changes to make come from the public either verbally or through observations of the rates of sale of various items. If sales are successful, the crafting process may become to some degree a mass production affair.

The experienced artisan quickly realizes ways he can cut down on his working time but continue to pull in the same amount of revenue. His whole working process may become quite repetitive, even leading him to lose much of his original interest and enthusiasm for the crafting skill. More attention is also paid to sales technique. At the same time, the craft display is further modified and improved in order to attract the greatest potential number of customers.

A third major change occurs if the artisan has great difficulty selling his craft. He may give up completely or produce a new item for sale. Yet one also notices that the craftsman who is highly successful with one type of product will most often eventually add new innovative items with confidence in their saleability.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Research for this paper was carried out in the fall of 1973 as part of a seminar on art and culture in the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Riverside. The investigator relied on participant observation as a fieldwork technique, and spent September through December collecting data. A short period of follow-up observation was conducted in January 1974.

The study was aided by the use of a tape recorder in order to record conversations with three different artisans. In addition, extensive conversations were held with many artisans during the whole period of observation. Good initial response to my enquiries led me to further questioning. I told my informants that I was involved in writing a term paper and found they reacted positively, perhaps because most of the artisans had been or were college students themselves at Berkeley or elsewhere. I feel that a natural and uninhibited rapport was established particularly because I also became a street artisan; during the three weeks before Christmas I regularly sold my own hand-made articles or a friend's articles on the street.

<sup>2</sup>The words craftsman and artisan are used interchangeably in this paper.