

REGIONAL PROFILE: Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota & South Dakota



FOCUS ON **KANSAS CITY, MO.**

Kansas City's Arts

Scene Has Arrived



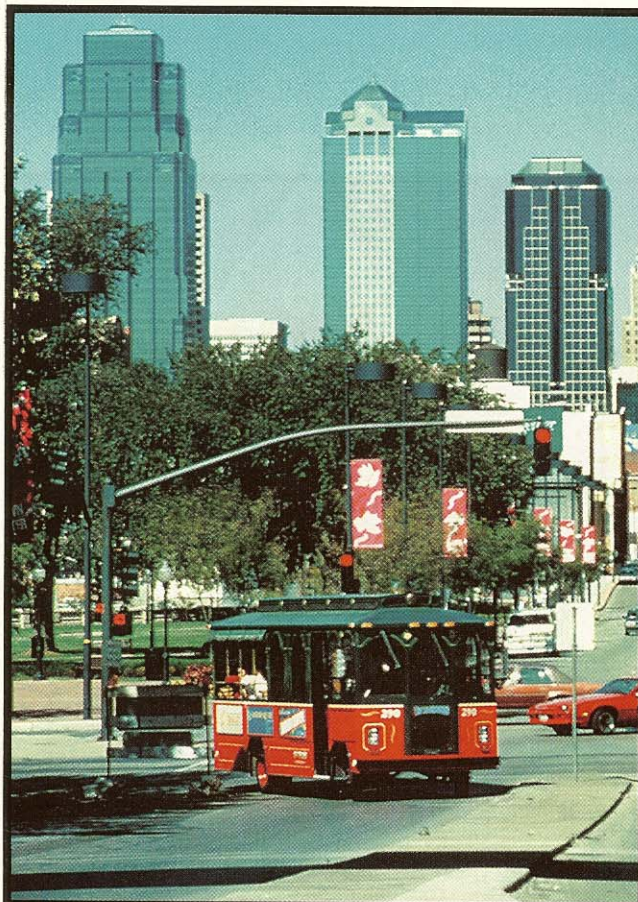
Photos by Diana Lambdin Meyer

In a city where recent maneuvers by Missouri's beloved Chiefs football team dominate almost any conversation, even the most diehard sports fans are talking about First Fridays and the Crossroads Art District.

From the small communities north of the river to the suburbs of Johnson County, Kan., people are talking about and visiting the Crossroads. A typical First Friday event draws more than 10,000 people to the downtown region, and the residual effect is felt for days and weeks after each event.

by Diana Lambdin Meyer

(Above) Kansas City's First Fridays have become a big attraction for the region's arts scene. (Opposite page) At Stuff, in the city's Brookside neighborhood, over 60 artists are represented.



(Above) In the city's Crossroads District, which is an arts destination for many shoppers, free trolleys run during the First Friday celebrations. (Right) River's Bend Gallery is located in the community of Parkville, 10 minutes from downtown Kansas City.



"We make consistent sales on First Friday, but the next day, the first Saturday, is equally busy with people returning to make purchases they considered the night before," says Kelly Kuhn of Blue Gallery, which represents more than 30 artists.

Crossroads is approximately 20 blocks between the downtown business center and the well-known Crown Center Complex, the world headquarters of Hallmark Cards. From the 1920s to the 1960s, this was a vibrant area of small businesses, warehouses and restaurants. But after the riots of the 1960s and as the city began its urban sprawl in the 1970s, this quadrant of Kansas City fell vacant.

By 1990, a few artists began to take advantage of the inexpensive rent and the

massive space available in the Crossroads District. They began to make a name for themselves, get a little press, draw neighbors in the form of small architect and engineering firms, and the Crossroads Community Association was born.

Today, approximately 60 galleries and studios make their home in the Crossroads. They are joined by nearly 150 additional businesses that include restaurants, professional firms and other cultural organizations, such as the Kansas City Ballet.

"There's power in numbers, especially in art," says Kuhn. "I'm a fan of going to a city, like Santa Fe or New York, and finding a nice selection of art in the same neighborhood, and now we have that in Kansas City."

A number of factors contribute to the

overwhelming growth and success of the Crossroads District. Among them: timing. "Just five years ago, downtown and Crossroads just didn't do it, just didn't have the energy or respect," says Leslie Miller, a tile artist and owner of Bella Mosaique Creations. "We're more organized now and have a lot of visibility."

The Community Association is responsible for two key components that generate the huge crowds at First Fridays. The first is a well-defined map of the Crossroads District. It clearly outlines the boundaries and identifies the galleries and restaurants open on First Fridays. The map is available on the organization's Web site, but is also printed in visitor guides, local newspapers and numerous other outlets. "The map in

itself is the single most important piece of publicity we have," Miller says.

Key components of the map are the kiosk symbols for trolley stops. Once a familiar site of transportation along city streets for locals and visitors, the Kansas City trolleys disappeared from use a few years ago, leaving an emptiness for those familiar with their red and green image.

The Community Association works with a local transportation service that now owns the trolleys to provide free shuttle service around the 20 blocks of the Crossroads District during First Fridays. The trolley rides contribute to the festiveness of the First Friday experience and encourage interaction throughout the district. Between street music at many locations, ample parking and great art, First Fridays are becoming events for the entire family. "It seems we're reaching more than the core art community and drawing in those that have an interest in art, but may be uncomfortable attending a gallery opening," Kuhn says. "The anonymity of being in a large crowd makes it more comfortable for people who are on the fringe of the art community."

Despite the growing popularity of the Crossroads District, it remains relatively affordable for the struggling artist. Miller at Bella Mosaïque recently moved into a larger space on Grand Blvd., three blocks from Crown Center. The 7,000-square-foot loft, already divided into individual gallery spaces, is on the third floor and rents for \$1,200 a month. "Kansas City is a great place to struggle as an artist, because it's cheap," Miller says. "And right now, the Crossroads District is a goldmine."

Few areas of Kansas City compare to what's happening in the Crossroads District. However, one of the most cherished neighborhoods in the city is Brookside, a pleasant family friendly area known for antiques, mom-and-pop businesses and tree-lined streets.

That's where sisters Sloane and Casey Simmons were lucky enough to find an open space on "the strip" in May 2002, after having spent nearly eight years in other Kansas City locations. Their shop, Stuff, represents more than 60 local artists in a little less than 1,700 square feet, literally exploding with color and energy. Jewelry, fiber art, glassware, home-made soaps, crocheted washcloths and any sort of odd, funky thing works at Stuff.

"We believe that art should be in all

aspects of our life and it should be fun," says Sloane. "In our store, there's no need for that hushed, quiet feeling of a gallery." Indeed, jazz music rocks from hidden speakers and Sloane's dog, Einstein, greets customers at the front door. Casey's baby daughter coos and spits up, and the cash register rings all months of the year. "Kansas City is a great place to come to look for talented artists," Sloane says. "We're overwhelmed and hon-



Outside Blue Gallery during a First Friday.

ored by the number of talented people who submit to us."

Another cherished Kansas City community is the historic town of Parkville, located north of the Missouri River, yet 10 minutes from downtown K.C. Most of the buildings on Main Street date to the 1860s and are filled with a number of eclectic shops and restaurants. Parkville is considered THE day trip destination for metropolitan Kansas City. This is where Home Embellishments has created a niche since opening nine years ago. The shop represents 60 artisans, about 30 of them local. Everything is fun, funky and one-of-a-kind.

"If it doesn't fit anywhere else, it fits here," says owner Kristy McKibben, who welcomes phone calls on Tuesday mornings from interested artisans. Home Embellishments specializes in light fixtures, knobs, pulls and switch

Regional Resources

Crossroads Art District

(816) 472-5701

www.crossroadscommunityassociation.org

Blue Gallery

(816) 527-0823

www.bluegalleryonline.com

Bella Mosaïque Creations

(816) 216-6860

www.bellamosaïque.com

Stuff

(816) 361-8222

www.pursuegoodstuff.com

River's Bend Gallery

(816) 587-8070

Home Embellishments

(816) 505-1025

plate covers. Yet Kristy is looking for a greater variety of kaleidoscopes that she can sell for less than \$100.

More high-end glass art will do well just up the street where Kristy's husband, Rick, operates River's Bend Gallery. River's Bend is known for quality glass art with items ranging

from \$15 to \$8,000. Wooden bowls, jewelry and some hand-woven scarves also sell well here. Rick represents about 100 artists, but only 15 or so of them are local.

"I believe a glass artisan could come to Kansas City and be well received because we just don't have any glass blowers in town," Rick says. "Maybe that's because it gets so hot here in August, but still, the market could use a couple more glass blowers."

Parkville is also home to an artists' co-op, and the gallery at the town's majestic Park University also draws crowds to admire student work.

Not to be overlooked as an asset to the Kansas City art community is nearby Lawrence, the home of the University of Kansas. Forty miles west of Kansas City, Lawrence prospers as a haven for potters, fiber artists and a myriad of other art forms. The annual Lawrence ArtMarket in August draws thousands to the historic downtown.

"I think the fly-over zone of the Midwest is becoming a hot art destination because we struggle for recognition from the rest of the country, and that struggle shows up in more passionate work," says Miller. **TCR**

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