

Mrs. Chester's fair was so very elegant and select that it was considered a great honor by the young ladies of the neighborhood to be invited to take a table, and everyone was much interested in the matter. Amy was asked, but Jo was not, which was fortunate for all parties, as her elbows were decidedly akimbo at this period of her life, and it took a good many hard knocks to teach her how to get on easily. The 'haughty, uninteresting creature' was let severely alone, but Amy's talent and taste were duly complimented by the offer of the art table, and she exerted herself to prepare and secure appropriate and valuable contributions to it.

Everything went on smoothly till the day before the fair opened, then there occurred one of the little skirmishes which it is almost impossible to avoid, when some five-and-twenty women, old and young, with all their private piques and prejudices, try to work together.

Louisa May Alcott

Welcome to Vintage Americana. Exploring and restoring rural American Culture. I'm your hostess, Holly, and this is episode 33 - The Craft Bazaar.

I do apologize for the lack of an episode last week, but the entire family did indeed have the dreaded Covid. "I'm not dead yet!", everybody is on the mend, and I'm going to do my best not to cough my way through this episode. In the meantime, don't forget to follow the podcast on your favorite app, so you don't miss some upcoming interviews with some fun folks. And visit the blog at brambleberrymeadow.com to grab my recipe for In the Gloaming Grape Apple pie before grape season is entirely done. Plus you'll be able to subscribe to my e-mail list and get all the fun goodies I have planned to send you for the holiday season.

And now - on to today's topic.

The quote that starts the episode is the opening of the chapter from Little Women in which Amy participates in a Fair to raise money to help Freedmen. Which shows you how far back the idea goes. And I've chosen it today because it's the start of the true Craft Fair or Bazaar season.

So ubiquitous, I'd be surprised if anyone is unfamiliar, the Craft Fair can range from a tiny event to massive conglomerations of crafters. Some are charity-based, while others

are purely mercenary.

The most common format, and the one that might have the longest tradition, is that of the Church Bazaar. Most of these are run by one of the women's groups of the church. The structure is pretty consistent. The church group sets a date, provides tables, volunteer leg work, and advertisement, while various crafters rent booths to display their wares for sale. So, the fundraising aspect comes from the money generated primarily via booth rental. Although it's common for the church group to have it's own booth of donated items to sell, and often to also hold a 50:50 raffle or just plain accept donations as well. The Craft Bazaar is one of those events for which the success of every part of it is all tied together. The more vendors a Bazaar can attract, the better its reputation for having lots of stuff, the more buyers show up, the more stuff everybody there sells, and the more the church can charge for it's booths. This is one of the reasons that old, established bazaars are often huge, anticipated, and can be a major source of fundraising for the sponsoring church.

And churches are not the only groups to hold them. Back in the misty depths of time, my high school was well known for the Junior Class Bazaar. It might have been THE major fundraiser for that year, with the money going to many of the Senior year activities that would happen the next year. The cafeteria, gym, and hallways would all be packed with booths. In fact, the parents of two of my classmates even used our Junior Class Bazaar as part of their strategy to launch a new business venture. Called Fireside Coffee, it's gone on to become a very successful (and tasty!) venture. I'll link them in the show notes, and I recommend the Cinnamon Chocolate Cafe Mocha.

Even during my college years at Michigan State University, one of the highlights of the Calendar was the Christmas Craft Bazaar. The entire student Union building would end up stuffed to the gills with booths selling everything from photographic prints and dolls clothes to silver jewelry and wooden toys. I was glad I could walk from my dorm room, because parking anywhere near the Union was an impossibility. And I always put it on my list for Christmas shopping. I remember getting my sister an opal pendant one year. And it was always just pleasant to wander the aisles and chat with the proprietors.

In fact, let's start by talking about all the reasons to shop at a Bazaar. It's something a lot of people enjoy doing. And there are even some die-hard fans who plan their Calendars around the most prominent Fairs in the show season.

The wares at craft fairs can vary wildly. If you're new to the idea, ask around. Pay attention, too, to how the sales market themselves. "Art fairs" tend to at least aspire to offering higher end booths that may sell things like jewelry, paintings, stained glass, and other items that tend to be more expensive. They're also things that require both a less common skill and a greater investment in equipment to produce. Certainly, these are a good place to look for things for the person who has everything or is otherwise hard to buy for.

More "craft" oriented fairs tend to offer items that are sewn, knitted, or otherwise handmade. And stereotypically, we think of items like kitchen towels with a crocheted-on top that button onto the handle of your oven. Often populated by stay-at-home Mom crafters and Grandma's galore, these can still be a source of endless delights. Yes, you'll see a lot of fairly silly items on offer that will make you wonder who would buy them. But you'll also see a wide range of things in different price categories. There really is something for everyone's budget.

And, while at first, you might snort at a pile of hand-knitted dishclothes, stop for a second and think about - could you wander the room and assemble a gift basket of handmade items? Those knitted dishclothes, a handmade wooden soap rack, a "kitchen witch" that holds extra plastic bags for re-use, etc.

Remember how much I like to hammer on the idea of local economies? And I'm betting that, unless you live under a rock, you've also been hearing about all of the supply chain disruptions and how anything that wasn't on a ship four weeks ago won't be here for Christmas.

You know what WILL be here for Christmas? The piles of stock that artists and crafters have been accumulating for the Craft Show Season. If you wanted to do it, you could probably have a handmade Christmas of thing entirely purchased at craft sales or made yourself. And not have to worry about things that were never on any boat, anywhere.
#goals?

If this is an idea that appeals to you, let's walk through two things. First, Craft Bazaar etiquette and tips.

1. Be comfortable. Wear sensible shoes and dress in layers. Sometimes those gyms and cafeterias can get unbearably hot. So be ready to strip down a couple

of layers so you don't die of heat stroke.

2. Travel in packs. Craft fairs are always more fun with friends. Plus you can sometimes use the "divide and conquer" technique.
3. Be careful what you say while you're shopping a booth. "I could make that," or "you can get that anywhere" are things that shouldn't cross your lips. Even if it's true, it's rude. Maybe you could make it. Maybe you couldn't. Sometimes I buy things that I COULD make but can't be bothered. Or, I can't do it nearly with the efficiency of the vendor, because I'd have to buy 9 skeins of different colors of yarn to knit that little thing that probably used a few yards of each. Know what? it's both less expensive and less work to buy it from someone who just made 20.
4. If you are really in a buying mood, make frequent trips back to the car to divest yourself of your purchases. This is where traveling in packs can be helpful. You can send one person back to the car to drop things off. There are two advantages to this: it allows you to continue to shop, hands free. And it keeps your armloads of parcels out of the way of other shoppers in what is often very tight quarters.
5. Use caution and extreme politeness if you're going to attempt to try to bargain. Make sure your offer is reasonable. And take into account the fact that most handmade items are already rather underpriced. It's not just the materials. It's also the time it took to make. Booth rental. The day spent selling. Whatever packaging materials are needed. And so on. If you ARE going to make an offer, do it late in the day. Politely accept a refusal to negotiate.
6. Some vendors will have one item on display and be taking orders from people who want that thing. They are unlikely to sell their model, and certainly not early in the day. If you choose to place a special order, make sure to get a good receipt, contact information, and a clear expectation of when to expect the finished item.

Now lets talk a bit about what sorts of things you might be able to find in your gift-giving quest.

Who are we shopping for?

Infants and very small children. Craft fairs are often excellent places for baby gifts. Hand knit blankets and sweaters, simple toys, etc. BUT - do inspect things carefully. Toys for very young children shouldn't have anything that can be pulled off and swallowed. Wood toys should be decorated with nontoxic paints only. Ask if you're

unsure. A good vendor will have information available for you.

Young children. LOTS of craft vendors sell things like dolls and doll clothes. In fact, American Girl doll clothes are REALLY popular. And some of them are just darling. I've seen a remarkably accurate set of Anna and Elsa dresses for American Girl dolls at one show. Stuffed animals, toys, puzzles, and personalized room decorations are other things to look for. I'd be a little cautious about personalized clothing. It's not always a good idea to let strangers know what your kids' names are by emblazoning them on their clothing.

Older kids and teens. Unique clothing items - IF you know the teen well enough. Or are well versed enough to know what's in style, especially color choices. Personal care items like bath bombs are often appreciated. Do they collect something? Themed items that go with a collection are fun. Or, given the recent resurgence of vintage things, you could look for an item made from vintage things. The possibilities here are only limited by the offerings at a given sale. I've seen clocks made out of vintage lunchboxes, and lamps out of an old telephone. Cool and unique items for a bedroom or future dorm room. You can also look for custom themed planners for keeping track of homework and practices.

Adults. This one is WIDE open. Again, think about your recipient. Do they collect something? Look for something to add to the collection. Hobbies? Same. Or, put together that themed box. Budding cook? Look for a custom cutting board, beeswax-coated fabric food wraps, or other fun kitchen items? Tailgate fiends? Trick them out in goodies for their favorite team.

Older relations. Sometimes here your best choice is either comfort items like lap robes, slippers, shawls, and the like. Or, items that will allow you to incorporate photos of grandchildren. Vintage items that stir memories.

At this point, you might be thinking "I can get that stuff on Etsy." And, you can. And, I do. But no online marketplace can really replace a good craft sale. For a few reasons.

First, there is the social aspect. It's really a lot of fun, even for a relative introvert, to chat with the vendors about their wares. And you'll learn things about them you wouldn't if you just "click and ship."

Second, remember that whole "local economy" thing? When you're buying at a craft fair, chances are pretty good that the vendor is relatively local. So you're contributing to their bottom line, you're supporting the organization running the fair, and likely eating locally, too. Since nothing works up an appetite like shopping!

Third, you're not paying to have things shipped from a bunch of different places to make up that themed basket of handmade goods. Part of the fun of a Craft Bazaar is that all the vendors are together in one location. It can be a decent strategy to do one pass to see what's there, then go back through and make your purchases. Although this can come with the risk of missing out on something if someone else buys it before you do!

Alright, now that we've gone over the ins and outs of shopping a Craft Bazaar, let's talk about selling at them.

There are, really, two sorts of folks who sell at craft shows. People who sell at the occasional (or maybe just once a year) local sale. And people who sell at craft fairs as a business venture.

Having a booth at a local craft bazaar has been a side hustle for women for decades. There have been whole publications devoted to what sorts of goods to sell, and how to maximize profits. One of the longest running was called Workbasket. It started publication in 1935, and ran at least through the 90's. Now, Workbasket didn't specialize in the most stylish, trendy things. In fact, some of their designs could be cringe-worthy, even when they were published. My grandmother was a subscriber for many, many years. And I remember flipping through her issues of Workbasket - mostly cringing at the designs.

Of course, fast-forward any number of years, and I have a small collection of old Workbasket magazines myself. Although I should note that MY collection are from the 40's and 50's. And back then, the cover often said, "Ideas for the Bazaar, Home, Gifts, and Spare Time moneymakers - With many Inexpensive, Easily Made Items that find a Ready Sale." And one of the features in each issue was "Women Who Make Cents" - that offered tips for craft sales and other ways to make a little money from crafts.

Now, my grandmother was one of the women who took all of these little ideas and made all sorts of - mostly useless - tidbits and trinkets to sell at the Bazaar.

And there are still a lot of people who carry on the tradition of cranking out bric-a-brac from cheap materials to sell in these venues.

It isn't the best idea. We all are familiar with the stereotype, because we've all seen those booths. And walked right by them.

And, I suppose, if your primary motivation is just to rent a booth in support of a church or other charity group, go ahead. But you might find, like Amy, that being in charge of a booth that isn't selling anything interesting ends in your whiling away lonely hours in the corner.

If your goal also includes actually selling things, and having folks interested in your booth, you'll likely want to have a booth full of something a little better than that.

What sort of things?

You'll need to do your research. Where to do that? Etsy. Craft Bazaars. The internet, in general.

What are you looking for?

Things that are popular. Do you want to sell knit hats? What sorts of styles do you see? And - what is your skill level? You want your items to be well made. And you also want to make sure that the time you spend on each item is not excessive compared to what you'll be able to sell that for. And this can be related to your own skill level at making them.

So, you want something that people are looking for. Checking Pinterest and Instagram for photos of popular styles will help.

On the other hand, you don't want to make something that is SO popular - and SO easy - that the craft sale you go to is filled with other booths selling the same thing. THAT is something that is best determined by visiting other craft shows. What's popular in one place may be scarce in another. Internet searches are less useful in determining what really is popular - and what sells. Although talking to other crafters can be useful.

A few other things that are popular just now?

Personalized gifts like tumblers, signs, and vinyl stickers that can be made with the help of computerized cutting machines. Upcycled items. One of the more popular booths at a sale I frequent is filled with thrifted flannel shirts that have been altered with bleach, dyes, lace, and other add-ons into more feminine tunic-style one of a kind tops. Another sells succulents planted in vintage items like tea cups or enamel pots.

Vintage, in general, is popular. Although you should check with the rules of the sale. Some of them require the items offered for sale to be made in whole or at least in part by the seller. So, simply selling vintage items would be prohibited. Others are more of a blend of vintage, handmade, and upcycled.

Another type of item whose applicability will vary is food. The whole world of selling food is interlaced with so many state and local laws that it can be almost impossible to say anything definitive about it.

I do remember when I was young, that every Craft Bazaar featured chocolates. Usually painted in multiple colors of candy melts, packaged in cellophane, and irresistible to kids. The modern equivalent can cover anything from candies and fudge to cookies, spice mixes, dip mixes, or whatever you can come up with. And whatever both local food laws and the craft sale rules will permit.

And of course, clever ideas are always... clever. Which is why it's considered bad form to take pictures of someone else's clever idea so that you can replicate it. No, there aren't any laws against it. But you probably don't want to end up at another Craft show a few months later, with booth space near the vendor whose idea you stole. That's not nice. Be inspired by other folks - but put your own spin on it.

A few practical tips: Have enough change in your cash box, and price your items to make sure that you can make change appropriately. Be aware of sales tax laws. That proposed rule about your bank reporting transactions of more than \$600? That's not about billionaires hiding their profits. It's about catching little people with side hustles. If you're going to do more than just a single local show, set up your business AS a business, and be aware of the laws regarding it. And give some real thought to making arrangements to take credit cards or digital payments. It's a lot easier than it used to be to get your own Square for your iPad or iPhone, or at least open a Venmo account. NOT being able to take payments other than cash or checks is leaving money on the table, in this day and age.

Make your display as attractive as you can manage. Presentation is 90 percent of the game. Branding. Labeling. All of that. Make it as easy to buy your wares as you can. Samples? If you're selling handmade soaps, keep the trimmings in jars as "sniffing samples." Put out business cards and make sure they provide a way to contact you. Have an Etsy store? (and there isn't any reason you can't do both!), put that on your cards.

If you are willing and able to take orders for anything you've run out of, have a way to do that. Determine, in advance, what sort of a down payment will be required, and what sort of time frame you can fulfill those orders in.

Don't forget to make it a team effort. Take a friend. If she also makes things, split the booth. If not, just ask for her help for the day. Make sure each of you gets the chance to stroll the Bazaar, see what everyone else is offering, chat with vendors, and maybe buy a few things yourself!

Spending time at a local Craft Bazaar is another way to be part of a community. Whether you are buying or selling, you're supporting your neighbors. And, this year, it might mean the difference between being frustrated with trying to shop of Christmas and having a "local Christmas"

I hope I've inspired you to go looking for your local Craft Bazaar.

Before I wrap this up, I'd like to invite you to Follow the podcast on your favorite app. You can also follow me on Instagram at [brambleberry meadow](#), and follow the podcast at [vintage Americana podcast](#). If you enjoyed this episode, screen shot it and tag me. I'll be sure to tag you back!

Stop by and visit the blog at [brambleberry meadow.com](#). I promise, new posts soon, now that everybody in the house is recovered. And sign up for the E-mail list. You'll get that pie recipe as an instant download. Plus you can look forward to more recipes, some craft patterns, and my list of suggested Christmas gifts to help bring more real food into your life. Don't miss it!

All of which means I have a lot of work to go do. And plans to go to the Christmas at Countryside Craft Sale in Allendale Michigan. Are you coming?

