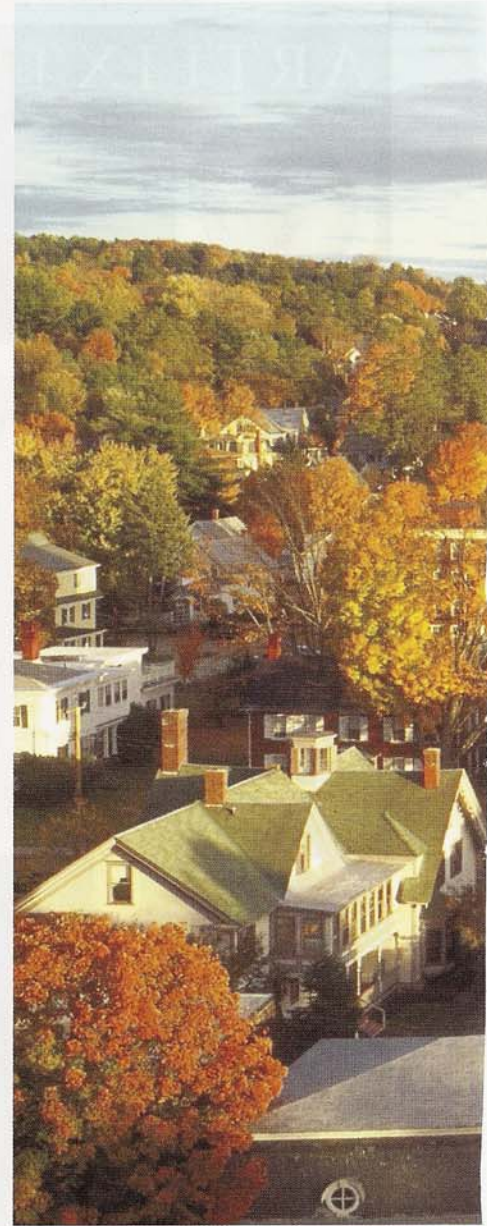


Capitol Dome. Photo by Andre Jenny.



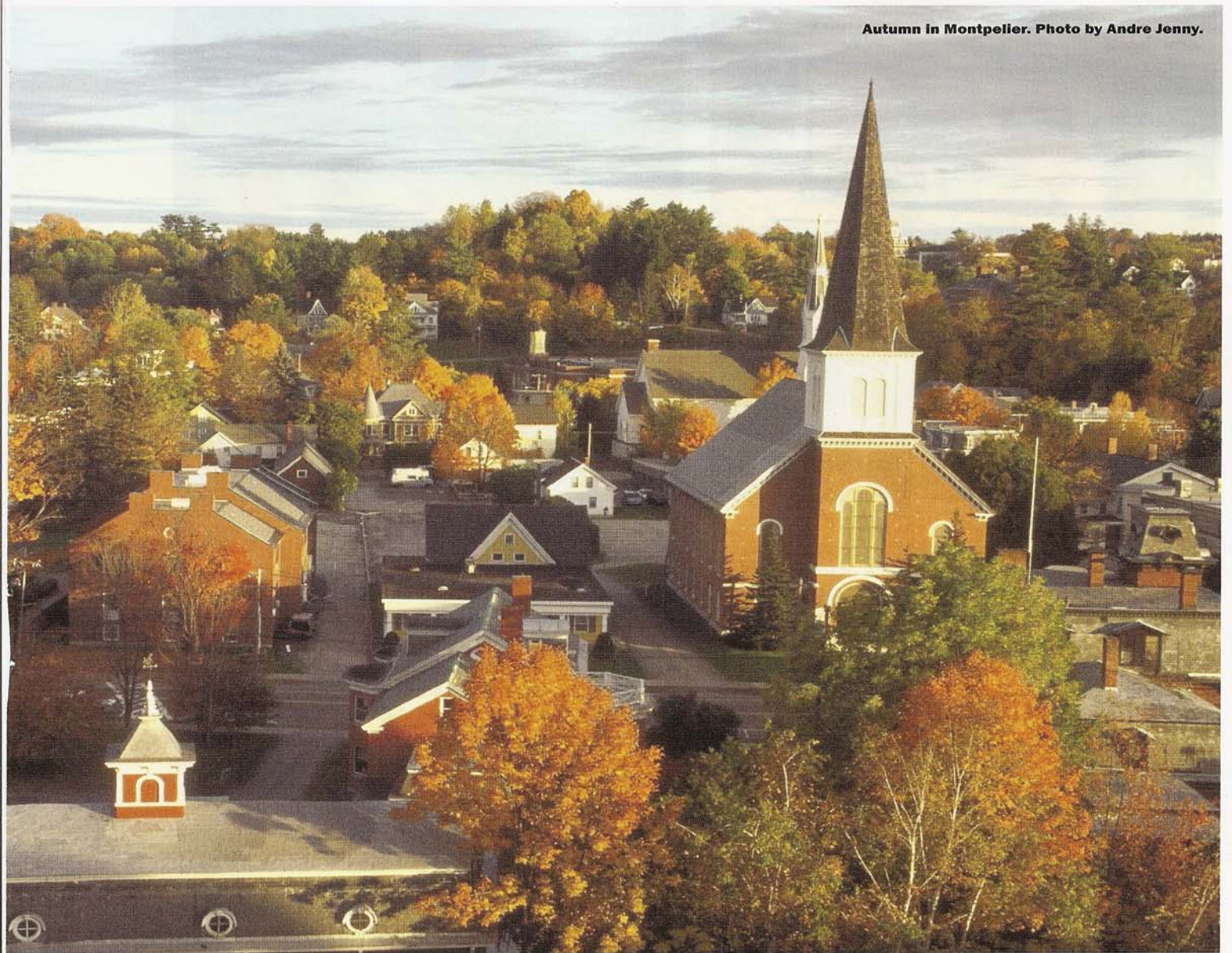
Montpelier

Area Makes its Mark as a
Handmade Destination

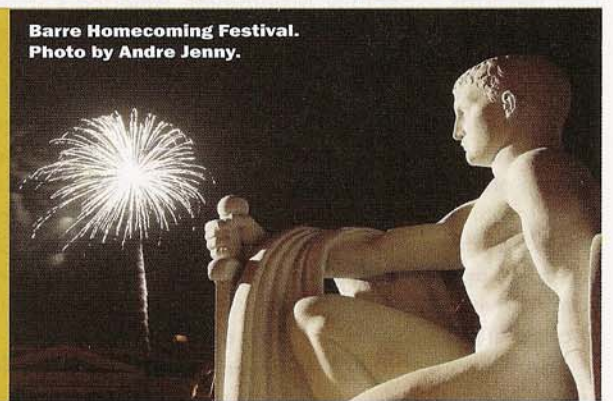
Barre adds a down-home connect
get back to American craft roots

by: Jon Margolis

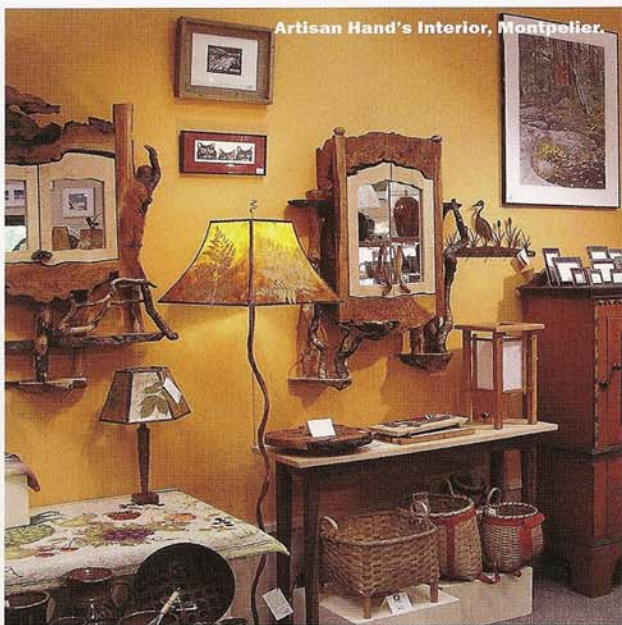
Autumn in Montpelier. Photo by Andre Jenny.



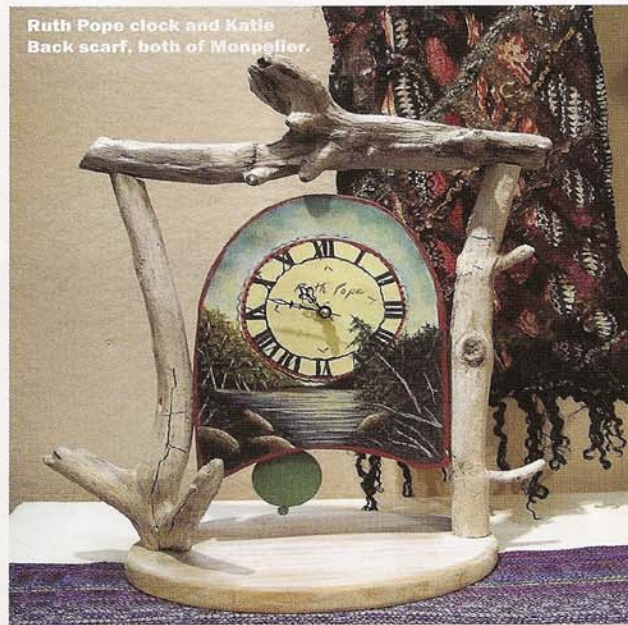
Barre Homecoming Festival.
Photo by Andre Jenny.



ion for those looking to



Artisan Hand's Interior, Montpelier.



Ruth Pope clock and Katie Back scarf, both of Montpelier.

Though it's smack-dab in the middle of town, hard by the corner of State and Main Streets, Artisan Hand is easy for the passerby to miss.

It's a small shop that looks just like the stores on either side of it. It's a few steps up from the sidewalk. Lots of passersby pass right by.

But that's okay. Business is good at Artisan Hand, a collectively run craft gallery founded 29 years ago by local potters, weavers and jewelers, and has been thriving ever since by selling the art and craftwork of Vermonters.

"We seem to stay on a very even keel," said Maggie Neale, a weaver and fabric designer who is on Artisan Hand's board of directors. "We are not in the red, unlike many arts organizations."

No surprise, really. If ever there were a place for a collectively run craft gallery to succeed, it would be Vermont, and perhaps especially Montpelier, America's smallest state capital, and, (with the possible exception of Juneau, Alaska), its funkier.

Like its even funkier "twin city" Barre, Montpelier has the feel of the early twentieth century, if not the late nineteenth. Low-rise brick buildings dominate the downtown and an old-fashioned diner sits on one corner of State and Main, right next to one of the four independent, locally owned bookstores in town. The gold-domed State Capitol, a five-minute walk along State Street, is in the Renaissance Revival style popular in 1859 when it was built. All in all, a fit setting for a crafts community.

And does it thrive. In Montpelier alone there are at least seven professional crafts workers—two potters, a book-

binder, a maker of hooked rugs, a tile maker, a jeweler, and a weaver—not to mention six galleries and one teaching studio. Pretty impressive for a town of 8,000 people.

And it isn't just Montpelier. In her cramped little office on the second floor of the old brick building just across the street from Artisan Hand, Martha Fitch, the director of the Vermont Crafts Council, taps a few keys on her computer, takes a look at her screen, and confirms her estimates.

"I think there are about 1,200 Vermonters doing serious crafts work," she said, "and at least 100 in and around Montpelier, if not more."

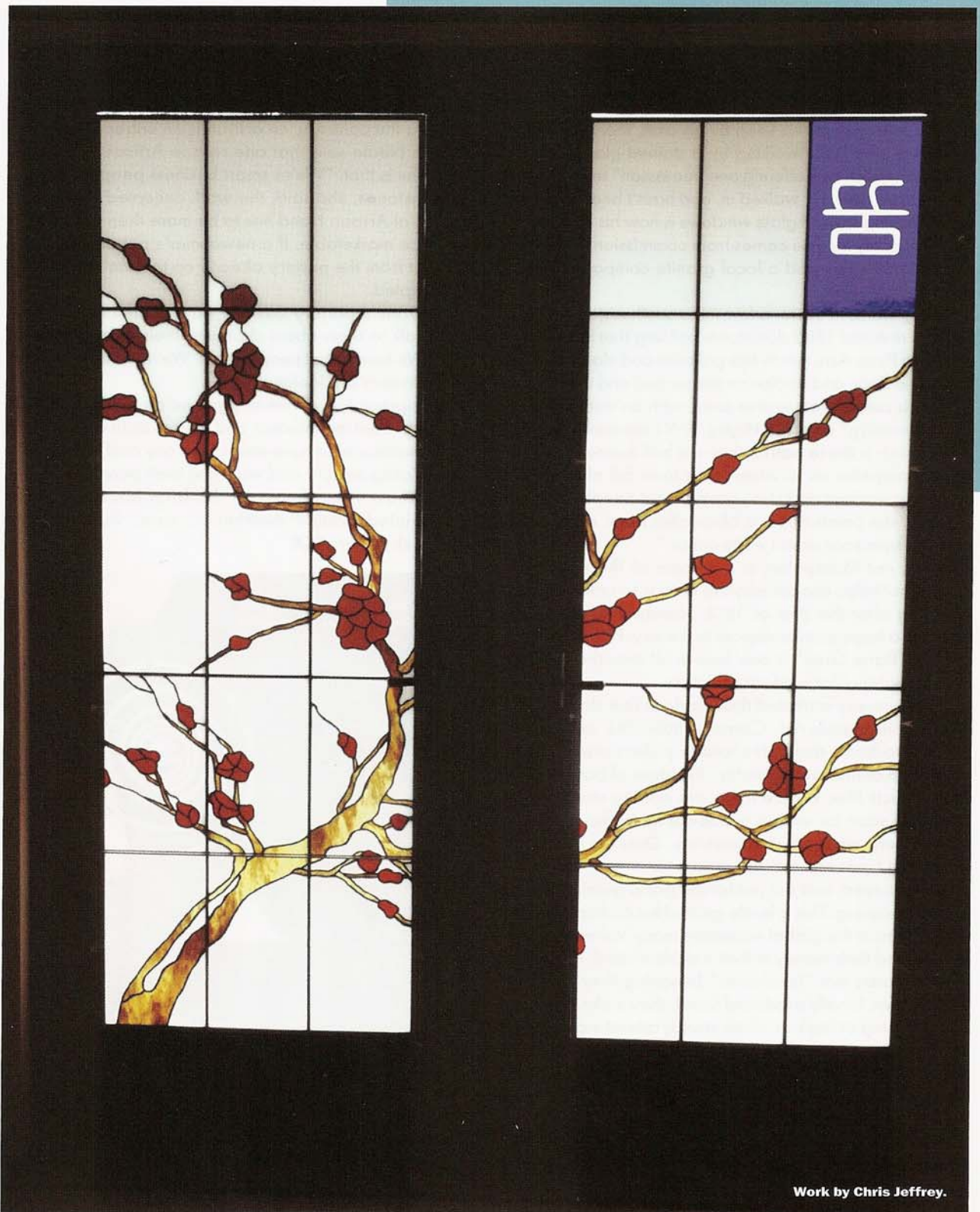
That means one out of every 600 hereabouts is engaged in craftwork.

Nationally, there are about 127,000 craftspeople, according to the latest estimate from the Craft Organization Development Association (CODA, formerly the Craft Organization Directors Association). That's about one in every 2,500.

Vermont's abundance of craftspeople makes sense. It's relatively inexpensive to live here, so the modest earnings of a potter or weaver can provide a decent living. Lochlin Smith, a 60-year-old Montpelier jewelry artist who came to Vermont from New York 32 years ago to buy a beautiful—and cheap—farm, said that "when you get to places like Connecticut or Massachusetts, the economics just drive people in a different direction."

In New York, Smith had been a part-time bartender "to support my art habit." His original plan was to stay for six months.

"But Vermont held on to me," he said. "I had to find work, so I had to dig down deep to find what I wanted to



Work by Chris Jeffrey.

do. I'd always had a connection to jewelry in my mind. I never studied it but always thought I could do it."

Apparently he can: he's been making his living by creating jewelry for 30 years now, he said, selling his products at local craft shops and online.

Chris Jeffrey earns his keep by his craft, too. A New Jersey native who was "walking by a stained glass studio in Burlington which was offering one free lesson" several years ago, Jeffrey, now 47, walked in, and hasn't been the same since. Making stained glass windows is now his livelihood.

"Most of my income comes from commissions," he said, from homeowners and a local granite company that designs mausoleums.

Jeffrey works in Barre, a few miles southeast of Montpelier, in a restored 1885 downtown building that is the home of Studio Place Arts, which has galleries and classrooms on its ground floor, and studios on the second and third.

"This is actually a creative town, with an authentic artisan community," said Sue Higby, SPA's executive director, who is such a Barre patriot that she half seriously disparages Montpelier as "a white-collar town full of insurance company workers and state government people."

Barre, she points out, is a blue-collar town, and "artists and craftspersons aren't white-collar."

Barre, not Montpelier, is the home of the natural resource that helps explain why this area is so crafts friendly. Not long after the War of 1812, somebody in Barre discovered a huge granite deposit in the city. Huge and high quality, "Barre Gray" is now known all over the world as superb material for outdoor sculpture.

The discovery attracted thousands of fine stonecutters, many from marble-rich Carrara, Italy. The newcomers brought to Barre their left-of-center politics and their appreciation of fine workmanship. Residues of both remain. Like attracts like. Where there are quality stonecutters, there will soon be serious wood-carvers, who in turn attract potters, weavers, and jewelers. Over the years artisans of all kinds came to the area.

Many stayed, and not just for the good granite and the low-cost housing. This is fertile ground for craftspeople because even in the global economy, many Vermonters prefer to spend their money in their neighborhood. Thousands of Vermonters are "localvores" (meaning they prefer locally grown, locally produced food); they make a point of not shopping at big-box chain stores; attend independent productions at venues like the Lost Nation Theatre in Montpelier; and fill their houses with the arts, useful and otherwise, of the potters, jewelry artists, sculptors and wood-carvers who live nearby.

Few places demonstrate this preference more than Montpelier, where a few years ago a mighty citizens' uproar convinced the executives of McDonald's that their brand of restaurant was not welcome. There is one chain

food place right next to Artisan Hand. But it's Ben & Jerry's, a Vermont company (if now owned by a multinational corporation).

None of which means that Vermonters in general or the crafts practitioners among them have any hostility to business. On the contrary, an artisan is an entrepreneur, and Maggie Neale said that one reason Artisan Hand is so successful is that, "We're smart business people."

For instance, she said, the work accepted by the jury process at Artisan Hand has to be more than just good; it has to be marketable. If a newcomer's pottery isn't very different from the pottery already on the shelves, it won't be accepted.

If anyone's pottery already on the shelf isn't selling, "we'd talk to them about changing their display," Neale said. "We know what people want. We try to listen to what our customers are looking for."

An appreciation of fine design and an eye for the main chance are not inconsistent, and they're both appreciated by Vermonters, who have never seen any conflict between appreciating beauty and watching their pennies.

You know why almost all the farm houses up here are painted white? Aesthetics, sure. But also—the paint's cheaper. **TCR**



Maggie Neale hand-painted silk with Lochlin Smith spiral, Montpelier.