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RISE OF THE ARTISAN ECONOMY

Joel Kotkin & Irene Lottini

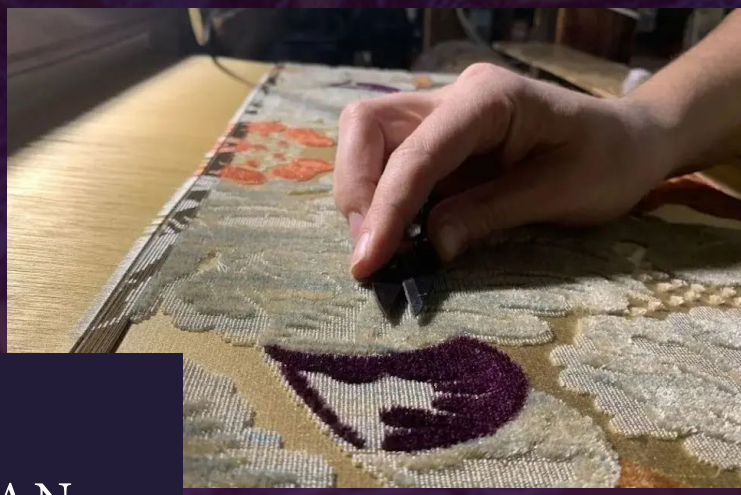












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CONTENTS

The Artisan Imperative: Views from Italy and America 1

The Revolt Against Big Sameness 2

The Struggle for Workers 6

Solving the labor problem: The Penko example 8

How Italy Dominates Fashion and Interior Design 10

Recycling Profitably 11

The Rise, Fall and Rise of the American Artisan 13

Artisans in Space 15

The Growing Market for All Kinds of Artisanal Products 17

The New Agoras 18

Flea Markets and Farmers' Markets 19

Changing Food Tastes Bolster Artisans 20

Artisanship and the Reinvigoration of the Market 24

Artisanship and the Future of Capitalism 26

The Artisan Imperative: Views from Italy and America



Credit: Ameila, Italy by PentaPrism23, under CC 4.0 License

Amelia is an ancient city of 11,000 residents nestled in the hills of Umbria, an hour and a half by train from Rome. Its origins predate the Eternal City by four hundred years, although it also served as a Roman fortress in the days of the Republic, and later the Empire.[1]

Yet if the walls and narrow streets speak of the past, the skills of its artisans, many of them with long-standing roots, remain important, and not only for Italy. The artisans of Amelia provide not nostalgia, but a beacon for what people might be best suited in a world dominated by Artificial Intelligence, machine learning and robots.



Credit: Courtesy of Serena Settimi and Massimo Petracchini.

In a non-descript building on the outskirts of the ancient town, two artisans — Serena Settimi and Massimo Petracchini — create custom closets and dressers for the Roman elite as well as for customers in both the United States and Europe, including the Prince of Liechtenstein. Serena, who studied architecture in college, ended up preferring to work with her hands, and create things of beauty.

Their company, founded over two decades ago, focuses on unique designs for kitchens and closets; the whole place smells of what Massimo calls “the perfume of

wood." The "old timers" in the community helped the couple to get started – Serena's father worked in construction while Massimo, whose specialty is restoration, is following his family's trade as far as anyone can trace it.

> "We have no shortage of work," Serena says confidently. "After all," Massimo adds, "We live on beauty and innovation. We don't live in the past — we are giving people what they want, something personal and unique."[2]

The Revolt Against Big Sameness

At a time when many Europeans decry America's mass consumption culture,[3] the artisans of Amelia — stone masons, farming entrepreneurs, construction specialists — may provide a surprising window to an emerging future. This is nothing new. As historian Rodney Stark notes, Italy developed the basics of modern capitalism, a step beyond the kind of "rapacious rulers" that predominated virtually everywhere else.[4]

Italy's artisan economy reflects the values of that storied past. It is found across the country, including Rome, but its heartland lies in northern half of the country, as opposed to other areas where villages are dying.[5] In Italy, artisan businesses accounted for 27% of all firms as recently as 2018.[6] Overall, family-owned firms still dominate roughly 80 percent of the country's GDP.[7]

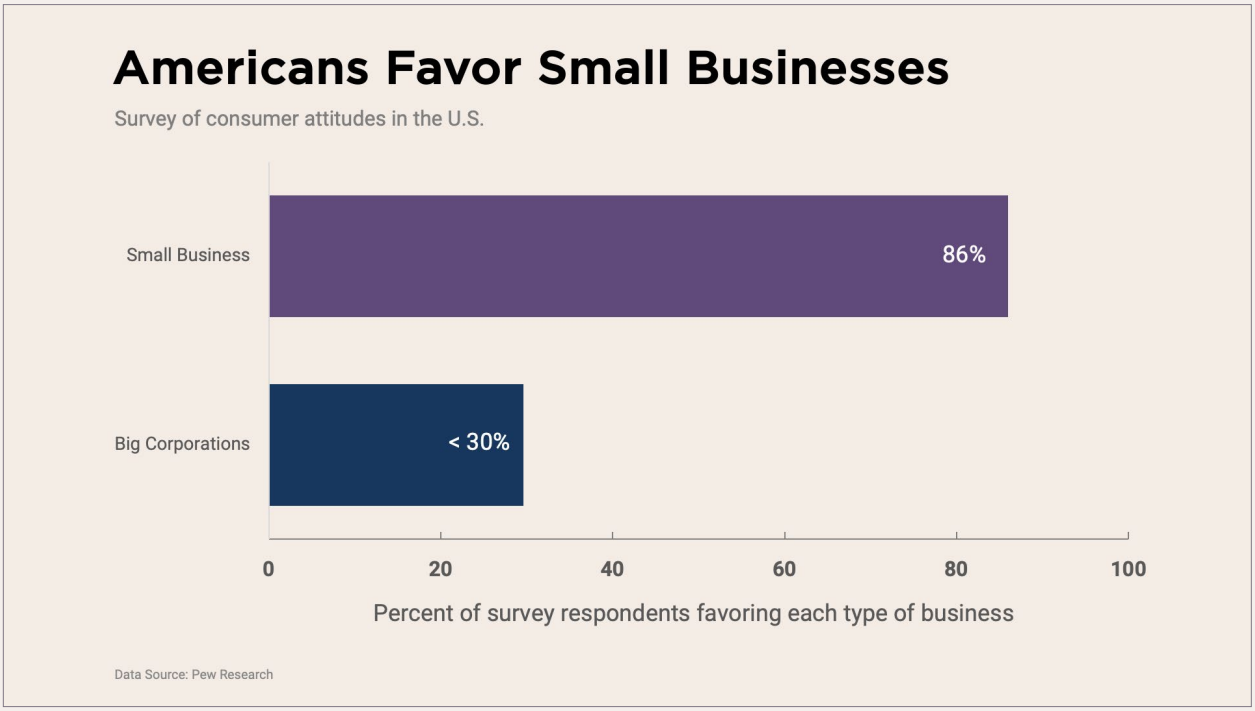
Some see the familism of the artisans as holdovers from a bygone era. Economist Veronika de Romanis, author of the recently published ***Economy of Fear***, argues that the familial pattern is holding the country back. "The family is the capitalist system and it's the center of society," she believes, "with the priority on your family and people related to you." In such a system, serving "the tribe" has priority over the needs of capital or the country. To be sure, overall, both the Italian and European economies are weak in terms of tech and advanced industries, particularly compared to the US as well as China.[8]

Yet viewed in a wider lens, this artisanal economy fits well with a rebellion directed against capitalism that produces the machine-driven sameness that could be amplified by the rise of Artificial Intelligence. Even as the current economy creates unprecedented wealth, it has not created an economy which retains a more human character. The urban historian Lewis Mumford noted that our present order combines "paleotechnic purposes with neotechnic means," an economy that produces wealth, but not much in the way of artistry or human satisfaction.[9]

The outlines of a big company-dominated economy is particularly evident in the critical tech sector. Google and Apple account for nearly 90 percent of all mobile browsers worldwide, while Microsoft by itself controls the lion's share of all operating system software.[10] Three tech firms now account for two-thirds of all on-line advertising revenues, which comprises the vast majority

of all ad sales.[11] Perhaps more ominously, Amazon, Microsoft and Google also control more than 60 percent of the world's cloud services, a crucial factor in the deployment of AI.[12]

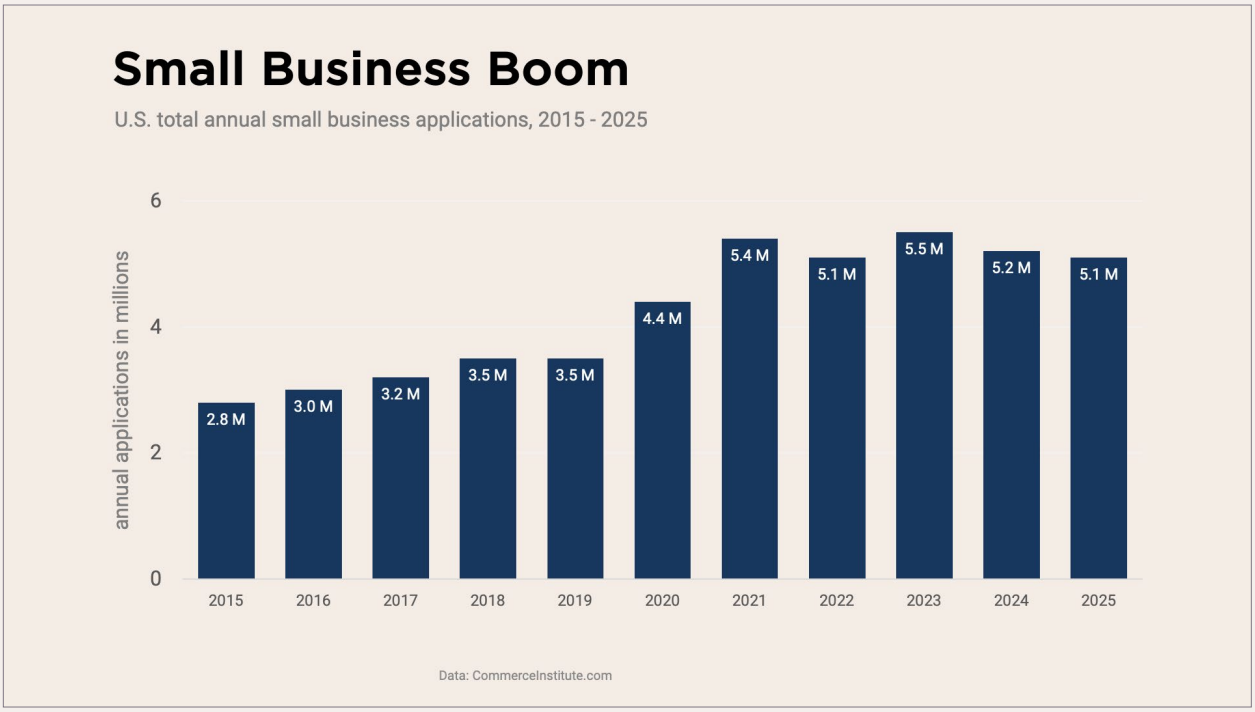
Some fear that the new AI-powered systems will favor the oligarchic giants.[13] Few people here or abroad are happy with the corporatization of every day as well as big firms' tendency to rely on digital agents as opposed to direct human contact.[14] In the US, Pew Research reports that while 86% of Americans favor small business less than 30 percent say the same for large corporations.[15]



Artisanal production now provides an alternative to this consolidation of power, based on prioritizing technology over human skill and creativity. It revolves around many things, from the learning of skills to the critical nature of "person to person" trade. In Italy, even though the absolute number of artisans has declined in recent years, the country's most competitive sectors revolve around essentially artisanal industries, notably fashion-related production.[16] The latest fashion trend for the new generation, notes one writer, is to look like "a Tuscan mom," fashionable without being fancy.[17]

Americans may have created today's technology-driven capitalism, but they have also long been troubled by the process of consolidation. Andrew Jackson denounced "an aristocracy of wealth" — in this case largely financial interests — in favor of the small farmers, mechanics and artisans who constituted his political base. Yet despite bursts of populist agitation throughout the 19th and early 20th century, both small farmers and artisans in America lost ground amidst the steady consolidation of retail, agriculture, and manufacturing.[18] The self-employment rate among non-farm workers fell from around 7% in 2000 to 5.7% by 2019 and has only ticked up in the last few years.[19]

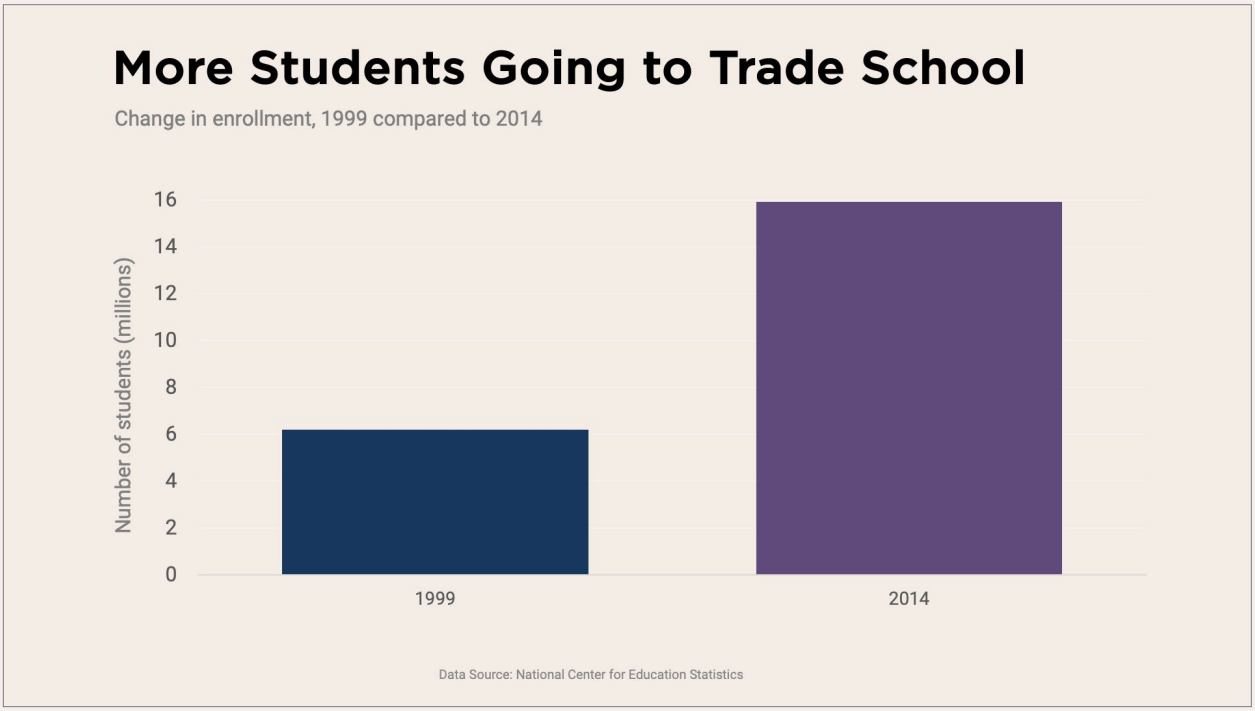
Of course, artisans are no longer essential to meet our daily needs. But they may be more important in capturing the deep-seated desires for human contact and creativity. The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 accelerated the trend towards entrepreneurial venturing as supply chains fractured, cities locked down, and both consumers and producers experienced the vulnerabilities of over-centralization. In the United States, the pandemic unleashed a wave of entrepreneurship not seen in decades. More than five million new business applications were filed each year from 2021 to 2023, far above the pre-pandemic norm.[20, 21] This pattern has continued even after the pandemic. In 2026, new applications for businesses hit a record level, with many of the firms using AI.[22]



We see physical evidence of the rising interest in artisanal businesses in such things as farmer's markets, food halls and flea markets. In an era where Amazon makes ordinary purchases instantaneous, the artisanal product, based on individual skill, and often direct contact, has a growing appeal.[23]

Artisan industries also provide potential prospects for employment for a generation of young people who are confronting a shrinking market in analytical professions.[24] The "symbolic analysts," as Robert Reich described it, once seemed to own the future. Now they are increasingly victims of "skills-based technological change."[25]

Increasingly, college graduates struggle; more than 40% of those 22 to 27 years old are underemployed, meaning that they're working in jobs that don't require their degree, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York reports.[26, 27] In 2025, sociology graduates suffer a 50% higher unemployment rate than the rest of the workforce and earn less than half of what auto workers earn on the assembly line.[28]



These trends are reigniting interest in artisanal skills. One recent survey found that roughly 83% of Gen Z, including 90% of those who already hold college degrees, feel that learning a skilled trade can be a better pathway to economic security than college.[29] Even as college enrollment has fallen a full 11% in the past decade, enrollment in trade schools has grown by 10%.[30] During the same period, the percentage of elite college undergraduates going to graduate school has plummeted.[31]

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The Struggle for Workers

Arguably the biggest challenge facing artisanal firms lies with the labor force. In Italy for generations, children followed the profession of their parents and their closest relatives. But today, families in Italy, now Europe's oldest country, are small, leaving fewer offspring to work in the family business.[32] Worse yet, there are many young people who, particularly after attending college, feel this kind of work to be somehow beneath them.

"It's the class of workers that is disappearing," suggests Carlo Di Venturi, an Amelia stonemason. "This generation wants everything quickly —even my son — they don't want to be apprentices."[33]



Credit: Courtesy Carlo Di Venturi

This has left many companies dependent on immigrant labor and entrepreneurship. Sikh Indian immigrants, for example, have done much to bolster Italy's legendary parmesan industry.[34] This is also true in the garment industry, notes University of Florence sociology Professor Stefano Beccuci, where lack of a willing domestic workforce leaves artisanal firms either dependent on Asian workers, or is forced to sell to entrepreneurs within the same community.



Credit: Sansa55 via Wikimedia, under CC-BY-SA 3.0 License

This is particularly evident in Prato, the core of the Italian "fast fashion" industry, which, unlike the luxury brands, must keep the costs competitive.[35] In some cases, noted the *Los Angeles Times*, conditions are abysmal and often undocumented workers are exploited, as few Italians wish to do this work.[36]

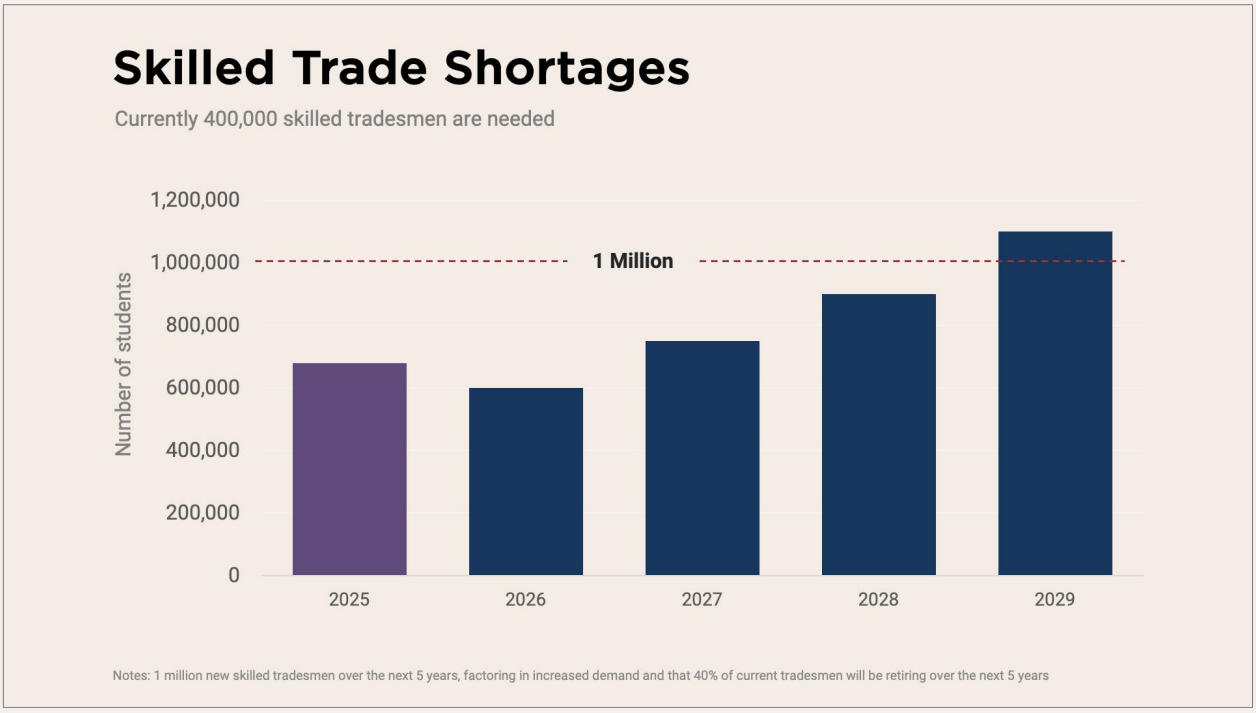
"In Tuscany the Chinese migrants in the 1980s and 1990s made all the difference," notes Becucci. Yet there remains "a separation" between the Chinese and native Italians that does not do much to create a new supply of local craftspeople, who "feel they have been robbed of their jobs."[37]

Future workers for the artisanal sector, notes industry expert Serena Rovai, require an educational system which emphasizes more strictly non-tangible, intellectually oriented work. She has worked to revive craft education with companies such as Ferragamo and even started working with prisoners. "These firms are all worried about the lost skill, what it takes to build a Gucci bag. The cluster of talent for these people are in crisis."[38]

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>
> *— Serena Rovai*



Artisanal firms in the United States face similar challenges. Years of emphasis on four-year colleges have degraded the status of hands-on professions. One key factor has been the elimination of shop classes in American high schools over the past few decades.[39] Kids who might have learned a skill instead chased degrees, which have lost much of their value both due to the changes due to AI as well as the sheer numbers of graduates flooding the market.



A key to maintaining an artisanal economy lies with reorienting the educational system, whether in Italy or the USA, one centered on human talents and tangible products. The remarkable rise of Renaissance Italy was not just the product of the Medicis and other merchant princes; its growth relied heavily on an educated, skilled workforce that, unusual for the time, were "thoroughly literate and numerate." By the 14th century, nearly half of Florence's young population attended

school. This included most artisans and craftsmen at a time when most of Europe, including kings, could barely read.[40]

A successful economy that seeks to create unique products needs a good set of hands. Firms are slowly reversing their dependence on foreign suppliers —a key lesson from the supply chain disruptions tied to the pandemic. In the US, surveys suggest that as many as two million skilled labor jobs are expected to be generated this decade which right now cannot be filled.[41] The opportunities in these trades could skyrocket in an era where the labor force dwindles and more management positions decline.[42]

Counterintuitively, the rise of artificial intelligence could hasten a return to pre-industrial values.[43] A growing cadre of entrepreneurs see the future not in apps, video games, and social media, but in using tactile skills to perform tasks that AI cannot easily duplicate."[44] Jobs revolving around such things as precision engraving need a human touch, and AI has likely no quick answer to the need for new plumbers, electricians, welders and heating/air conditioning workers, which can appeal to younger generations seeking entry into the middle class.[45]

Colleges can continue to play an important educational role by stressing practical skills such as industrial, chemical, or civil engineering that are critical to the production of goods.[46] This includes apprenticeship programs that target not just large established firms but for the startup economy as well.[47] Many figures in the Italian artisan economy — such as Serena Settimi, among others — enhanced their skills at college; their education heightened their ability to exercise their practical skills.

Critical is an orientation to the "real," tangible economy. The fastest growing fields for engineers are in biomedical, petroleum, and civil engineering.[48] A new generation whose technological focus is building things, as opposed to bots, augurs well for the future of the artisan economy.

But the real winners in this transition will wear blue collars. AI entrepreneur Rony Abovitz suggests that the "sophisticated, technically capable blue-collar worker" could be among AI's biggest winners. This is not so much a return to assembly line drudgery, but to advanced manufacturing jobs, now one of America's top growth sectors, which are growing even as some traditional industrial employment may decline.[49]

These jobs — notably those that rely on distinctly human skills -- will become even more valued as artificial intelligence accomplished the total automation of information.[50] Former Google China President Kai -Fu Lee suggests it will end up wiping out the "coders." Lee, a venture capitalist and author of "*AI 2041: Ten Visions for Our Future*," predicts, "a lot of employees are going to feel like turkeys waiting for Thanksgiving." [51]

Solving the labor problem: The Penko example

Florentine jeweler Paolo Penko may be one Italy's great craftspeople, but he knows his firm's future lies with finding and training new talent. To be sure, his inspiration is not the 21st century but stems from the artistic legacy of the Renaissance. His recreations and reinterpretations of Florence's artistic treasures have become part of the collections of the *Museo Nazionale del*

Bargello (National Museum of Bargello) and the *Tesoro dei Granduchi* (Treasury of the Grand Dukes), formerly known as *Museo degli Argenti* (Silver Museum), in Palazzo Pitti.[52]

But to survive as a business, the company focuses on transcending the generational barrier hitting so many Italian artisanal firms. Alongside Paolo Penko work his wife, Beatrice, and their two sons, Alessandro and Riccardo, whose specialized knowledge complements the workshop's traditional foundation. Alessandro, who earned a degree from the *Istituto Gemmologico Italiano* and a master's degree in digital marketing, combines his expertise in gemology with contemporary marketing skills. Riccardo, who attended Florence's *Liceo Artistico di Porta Romana* and later completed a bachelor's degree in art history and a master's degree in jewelry history, infuses his artisanal work with historical and artistic research.

The interns and apprentices now working for Penko have studied at the *Liceo Artistico* (formerly *Istituto d'Arte*) *di Porta Romana*, established in Florence in 1856 as a carving school and converted into a professional center for decorative and industrial arts in 1880.[53] Today, the school's program consists of five years of study and includes a specialized track on jewelry design, which may be followed by a two-year advanced post-secondary course.

Keeping things in the family, while bringing in new talent, is critical to a business that relies on close contact with customers. Beatrice points out that "this clientele is mainly comprised of international customers who seek authentic Florentine craftsmanship."[54] The company uses AI and three-dimensional technology but maintains that only humans can create true artistry.

"I don't think you can replace what we do with technology," Riccardo Penko suggests. "AI can't create something beautiful, but it can help."[55, 56]



Credit: Alessandro, Paolo, and Riccardo Penko, Courtesy of Penko Bottega Orafa Artigiana.

How Italy Dominates Fashion and Interior Design

Nowhere are such human skills more evident than in Italy's remarkable fashion industry. Italy may be a laggard in many aspects of international commerce but ranks first in Europe and in much of the world in high-end fashion.[57] Italy's great claim lies in producing products that are "***belli e ben fatti***" (beautiful and well-made).[58] It is also tied deeply, notes one observer, to "a central component of the country's cultural heritage."[59]



Credit: Photo by Angela Colonna. Courtesy of Tessitura Luigi Bevilacqua

Steps away from Venice's Gran Canal, Tessitura Luigi Bevilacqua carries on the city's ancient weaving tradition to produce fine fabrics that decorate historic palaces and modern luxury apartments worldwide. Bevilacqua's success rests on family traditions that go back to the 15th Century. The looms in the Bevilacqua workshop are operated by hand by expert weavers while a manufacturing facility, located in Conegliano, about 35 miles from Venice, employs semi-industrial looms.[60]

The patterns of Bevilacqua's hand-woven fabrics come from an archive of over 3,500 drawings, spanning from ancient motifs to modern designs.[61] One of its critical customers has been Italy's Catholic Church.[62] Their international competitiveness speaks for itself: Bevilacqua's fabrics have been chosen for the Oval Room of the White House, the reconstruction of the Dresden Royal Palace, Gothenburg's City Theater, and the Kremlin palace in Moscow.[63]

Here as at Penko, the cultivation of skills is critical. The central workshop currently employs seven weavers. They are mostly graduates of *Liceo Artistico Statale* (formerly *Istituto d'Arte*) *Michelangelo Guggheneim*, a high school founded in Venice in 1872 as the *Scuola Veneta d'Arte Applicata all'Industria* (Venetian School of Applied Art to Industry).[64] Alberto Bevilacqua suggests

that the "artistic component of producing inimitable pieces" has attracted recent art high school graduates to the ***tessitura***, thus ensuring "a generational turnover" in the workshop.[65]

In many cases, it's a race against time. Giama supplies components to the country's renown shoe industry. Located in San Gimignano, in the province of Siena, the company is an artisanal business specialized in leather cutting which, as founder and owner Giacomo Malquori told us, "exclusively serves manufacturers handling dedicated production for high fashion brands."[66]

Giama employes 24 workers, including in-factory workers and external collaborators, who mainly belong to the baby boomer generation. Malquori describes them as "highly qualified artisans"[67] but like other artisanal businesses, the company struggles to find young skilled workers.

One key to the future may be paying more to skilled workers. But where this is tried, it also has the consequence of increasing costs. Some firms, like Cucinelli, which espouses "humanistic capitalism," have managed to keep their environmental and worker standards up, but their offerings as largely restricted to very wealthy customers. This strategy works for some companies but does not compete with mass production models targeting the middle class.[68] "An economy can't exist only on luxury," notes artisan space developer Shaheen Sadeghi. "It's an engineering and economic problem. Luxury can only do so much."[69]

Recycling Profitably



Credit: Courtesy of Rojas Clothing, Freddy Rojas.

Freddy Rojas grew up hanging around his grandparent's bridal shop in the predominately Latino neighborhood of Huntington Park, California. He developed his skills with sewing machines, and began to experiment with converting old clothes, often discards or surplus, into unique garments

he sells through Etsy and at the Melrose Marketplace, a maker space every weekend located at LA's Fairfax High school.[70]

Working from a small workshop in south LA, Rojas combines artisanal skill with a cost-conscious approach using discarded or surplus garments. "I go downtown and I buy the overstock and repurpose it," he says between sales at the Marketplace. "I get it, so it doesn't fall apart. Instead, I make magic that people like."[71]

Rojas' business reflects a move that market expert Serena Rovai dubs "sustainable fashion."[72] Italians are rediscovering the virtues of the long-standing recycling tradition of Prato's textile industry. Rifò was established in Prato in 2017, after its founder, Niccolò Cipriani, witnessed the consequences of overproduction in the clothing industry while working for a United Nations program in Vietnam: tons of unsold garments from Western markets are sent back to Asia and ultimately thrown into landfills or incinerators. The desire to counter this tendence inspired Cipriani to return to Prato, his hometown, and retrieve the local tradition of regenerating fabrics.[73]

Prato, a Tuscan city of approximately 198,000 residents located northwest of Florence, is home to the largest textile and clothing district in Europe. A distinctive characteristic of Prato's textile tradition is the craft of fiber regeneration: the recovery of end-of-life garments or production scraps for transformation into new raw materials.[74] For decades, the ***cenciaioli***, literally ragmen, perfected the skill of manually sorting vast quantities of discarded textiles according to fiber composition and color. The sorted rags were then fed into shredding machines, which reduced the fabric to loose fibers, which were subsequently washed, carded, and re-spun into yarn.[75]



Credit: Regenerated fiber. Courtesy of Rifò.

Rifò's founder, Niccolò Cipriani, defines his company's philosophy of giving "***nuova vita***" ("new life") to discarded products.[76] Initially launched through a crowdfunding campaign, Rifò has grown into a team of 26 employees (as of August 2026), who handle the design, development, and promotion of their products through the enhancement of a sustainable artisanal tradition. Sold online, through retail stores in Italy, and multi-brand stores in Europe, Rifò's garments reach what Cipriani identifies as "a growing niche of informed and conscious consumers"[77] whose intentional purchasing choices prioritize quality, environmental protection, and ethical production.

The Rise, Fall and Rise of the American Artisan

Contemporary America does not possess the kind of artisanal industry that flourishes in Italy. For much of its history America depended on Europe for skilled labor, starting back in the early period of industrialization where British, and later German, artisans helped the nation compete with Germany and the leading industrial power of the day, Great Britain.[78]

America has a long tradition of "tinkerers", including such founding fathers as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and George Washington. During the great industrial boom of the early 20th century many of the key players — Henry Ford, Andrew Carnegie and Thomas Edison — were self-taught.[79]

In the 20th century, immigrants provide much of the skill needed by the rapidly expanding country. The some four million who came between the late 19th and early 20th centuries[80] displayed a preference for both self-employment and manual labor.[81] Italian artisans, particularly stone cutters, played important roles in building American cities, most notably in the San Francisco Bay Area after the Great Fire of 1906 and later, in the oil driven Art Deco building boom of Tulsa in the 1920s.[82]



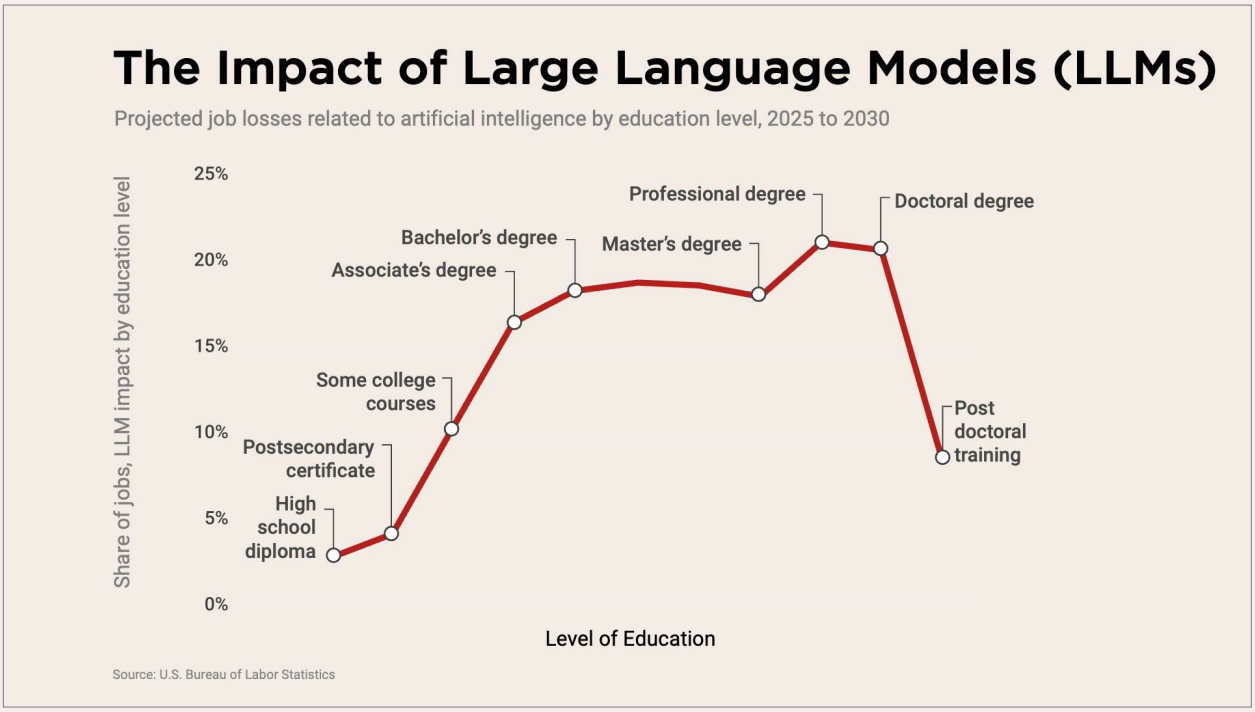
Credit: Art Deco Market of Tulsa, David Broussard, under CC 2.0 License.

Later, during the rapid buildup of US production during the Second World War, two of the most prominent figures, Bill Knudsen, a Danish immigrant, and Henry Kaiser, son of German immigrants, played critical roles; neither was college educated.[83] Similarly, the rise of the American garment industry was driven largely by Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, most of whom came to the country with skills as tailors and cutters.[84]

Today, despite digital technology that can provide customized solutions for digital goods, America's economy is still more associated with massification, sometimes referred to as Fordism, and the rise of automation have made practical skills seem secondary. In the far West, isolated from the great industrial centers, developed a uniquely American artisan industry that still survives, and is widely admired today, but largely as a celebrated aesthetic.[85] The system associated with mass production, perfected by Frederick Taylor in the last century created prosperity but, for many, imposed what playwright Barbara Garson described as a "soul-destroying direction."[86]

But as the economy evolves, the demand for skilled workers and craftsman are again on the upswing.[87] In the emerging AI economy, even practiced "geeks" are vulnerable to what economists refer to as "skills-based technological change."[88] AI programming tools have been widely tied to massive layoffs, including at companies like Amazon, Intel, Meta, and Microsoft.[89] Economist Gad Levanon notes that overall software employment is now down to 2017 levels. Few would have expected that result a decade or two earlier. Had previous growth patterns remained steady, that sector would now include 250,000 more jobs.[90]

In the past, having one, two, or even three degrees was seen as a ticket to a good job. But just having a degree is increasingly not sufficient, particularly in tasks where AI can perform more efficiently. Even major employers are de-emphasizing academic credentials in favor of practical skills, experience, and practical problem solving.[91]



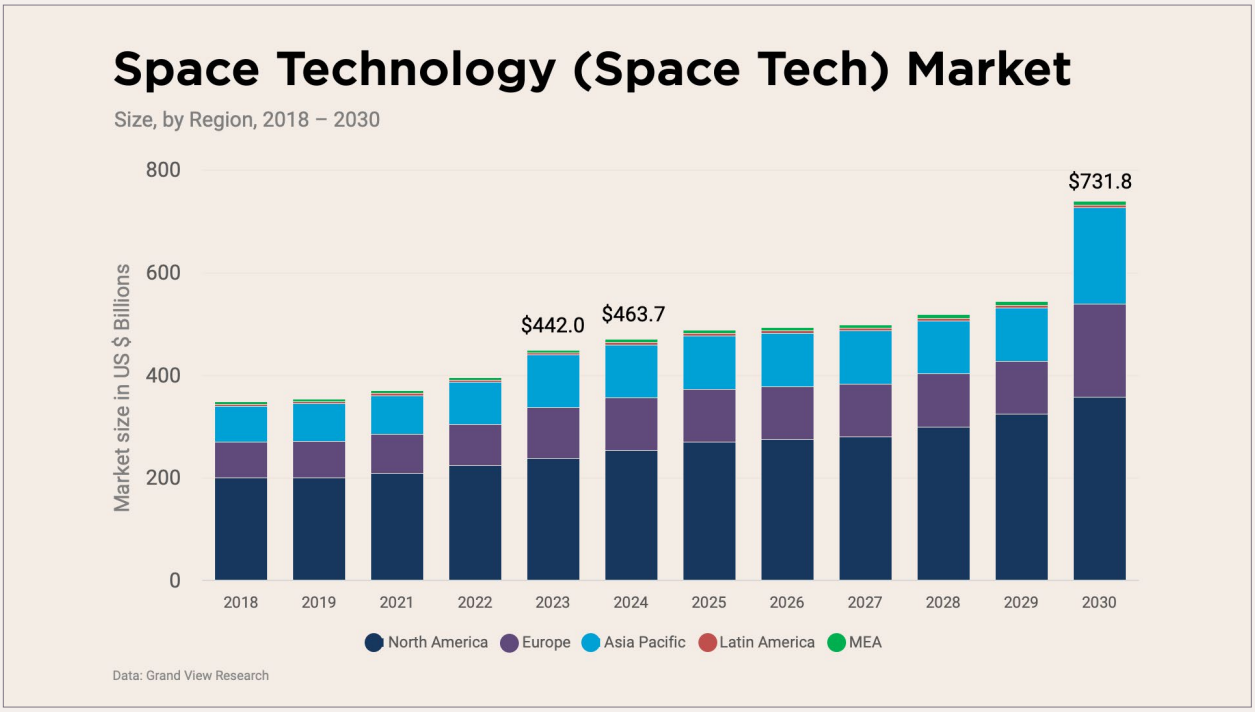
In contrast, there's a boom market for those with skills needed to make or maintain material goods. This is not so much in traditional assembly but in those that require hands-on human skills to maintain and monitor machines.[92] The big opportunities now lie in building data centers, which require skilled tradespeople, as opposed to digital engineering. Remarkably, Meta, the digital economy's exemplar, has opened a center for practical skill training; the project's first

iteration, one focused on fiber installation, received 35,000 applications for one thousand openings.[93]

Artisans in Space

In America, the return to artisanship is being driven by reindustrialization. "Hardware," notes *The Wall Street Journal*'s James Meigs, "is back."[94] High-tech firms are increasingly applying technology to actual things, whether in the form of crewed rockets like Artemis and Space X, or on Ukrainian and Middle Eastern battlefields. The space industry's resurgence, led by Elon Musk and NASA, in some ways returns America to its traditional identity as a real-world builder and innovator.[95]

There is enormous potential here. Space industry global revenues are up tenfold since the early 2000s. The World Economic Forum projects that "by 2035, the space economy is set to reach $1.8 trillion, up from $630 billion in 2023 and averaging a growth rate of 9 percent per annum — a figure significantly above the growth rate of global GDP."[96]

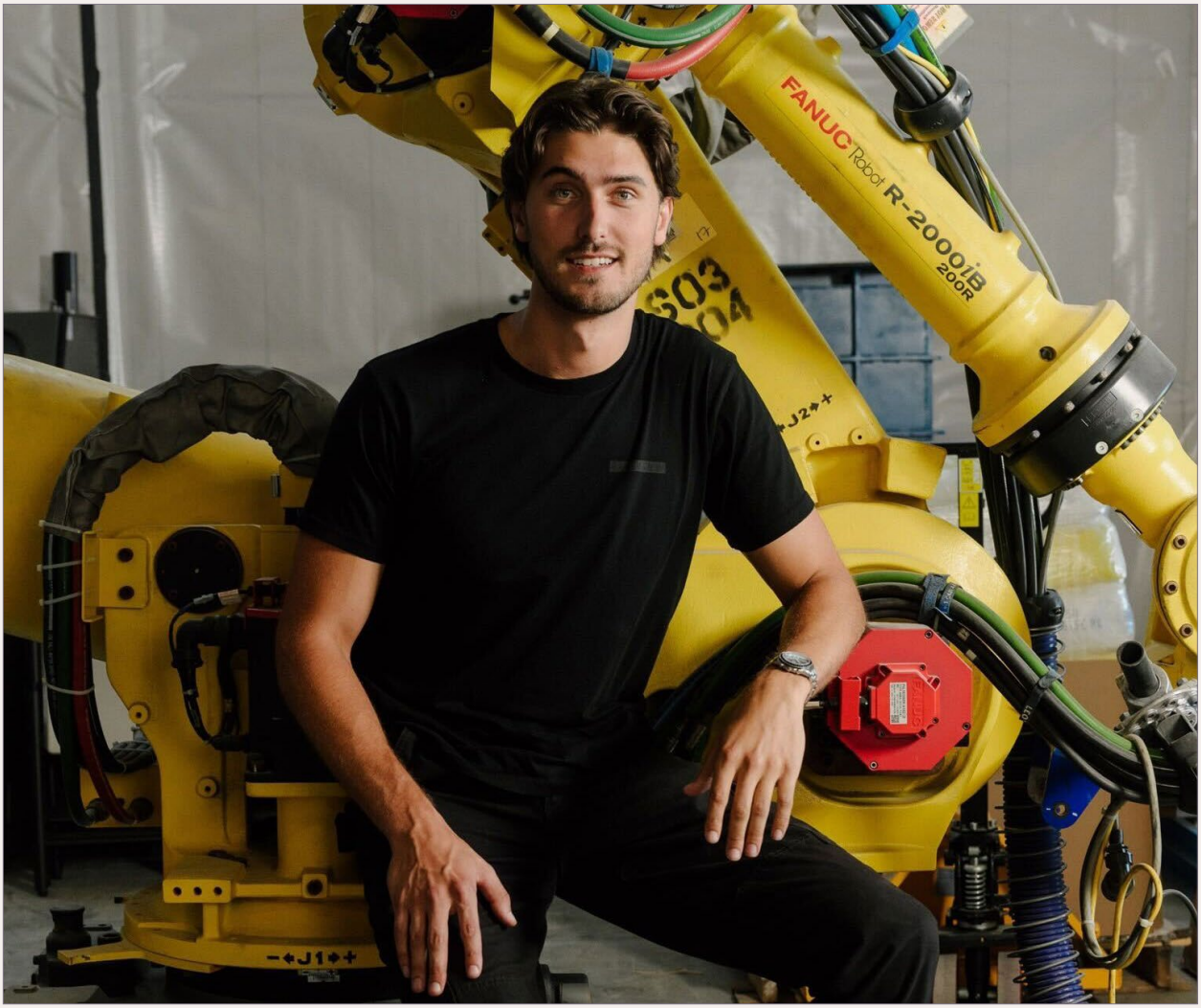


Building spaceships is not like developing algorithms.[97] Space and defense firms rely on human skills from engineering to fabrication and assembly. "People are shifting to harder tech," suggests El Segundo-based (just outside LAX) Varda Aerospace co-founder Delian Asparouhov, whose company specializes in pharmaceutical testing in low orbit. "There is an aerospace renaissance. This can't be done with AI—you need people to build spaceships. It's paradigm shift."[98]

Much of the artisanal approach, explains Eric Hall, chief engineer at Aerospace Corporation, a large LA-based consultancy, comes from the "uniqueness" of working in space, notably the extraordinary impacts of radiation and extreme temperatures. Space is an environment where

machines are under stress and every project needs personalized attention. It is the opposite environment of 20th century mass industrialization. The company, funded by the government to help aerospace firms, takes an approach to training that resembles that seen in places like Tuscany, with new employees mentored by a more senior person. Ultimately, he adds, space is a "nuts and bolts" industry. Software is, of course, critical, but not as a tool to help create "real hardware." [99]

Even as they work with sophisticated software and machinery, workers at fast-growing companies like Rangeview consider themselves artisans. They work with very specialized parts for turbines used in missile and oil drilling bits. The company's 26-year-old CEO, Cameron Schiller, is yet another college dropout. He seeks to replicate the pioneering spirit of those who made the initial spaceflights — he even has a room filled with 1970s memorabilia.[100]



Credit: Rangeview CEO Cameron Schiller. Courtesy of Rangeview

The firm's 36 employees have different talents, Schiller, the grandson of a Pittsburgh steelworker notes, but are all focused on "building things." As he walks around his plant in El Segundo, he notes "some are great at video games, others work on cars. But the biggest thing is they have intuition about machines."

The Growing Market for All Kinds of Artisanal Products



Credit: Oddie District in Sparks, Nevada. Courtesy of Luminomix.

New technology, often the bane of small firms, also makes local, small-scale production easier. The spread of affordable digital manufacturing tools — 3D printers and CNC machines as well as AI—enables microenterprises to design, produce, and sell locally, reducing reliance on long supply chains. E-commerce platforms like Etsy, Shopify, and Alibaba have democratized access to markets, allowing millions to start businesses with minimal capital and fostering direct competition.[101]

These innovations allow craft entrepreneurs to create a vibrant ecosystem of small-scale production, sometimes using robots, but thrive on creativity, quality, and direct connection with consumers, rather than just economies of scale.[102] These new artisanal technologies[103] add tools that once belonged only to large manufacturers, allowing small firms, like bakeries, to use AI to streamline their businesses.[104] Small farmers, a key factor for locally focused artisanal food companies, as in Italy, are also using the digital realm to market to potential customers.[105]

One place where the intersection of art and artisanal products can be seen is outside Reno, Nevada. Skilled workers — attracted by major new industrial plants from Tesla — bring with them their artisanal skills, notes developer Doug Wiele, and often show their works at the newly constructed Oddie District in Sparks, built on a former Lowe's superstore. Several installations at the center, as well as some of the 60 shops, come from these recent arrivals.[106]

"The crossover between art and engineering was much closer than we thought," Wiele suggests. "There's a market for the maker economy as people are looking for an alternative."[107]

The New Agoras

Nick Smoot, one of Wiele's partners at Oddie, notes that the development represents "a return to the agora," the ancient Greek marketplace that serve not only as a place of commerce, but also for art and public conversation.[108] No one has pioneered building such spaces as Shaheen Sadeghi, who grew up in Michigan, the child of Muslim Iranian immigrants, graduated from Brooklyn's Pratt Institute and worked in the surf wear industry — eventually running Huntington Beach based Quicksilver — for a decade until he came up with his concept of "the anti-mall" in 1993. His LAB company, standing for Little American Business, has some 40 projects spread across the county.[109]



Credit: Courtesy of The CAMP..

Yet walking around his expanding development, called The CAMP, Sadeghi has made his vision real. Located on four acres in Costa Mesa — just one mile from the South Coast Plaza and one of the most successful mega-malls in the country — The CAMP hosts dozens of independent small businesses including oddball boutiques, diverse independent restaurants and even a bar — Cowboys & Poodles -- that celebrates southern California's cowboy heritage, with both Western images and artifacts matched with kitschy images of well-groomed dogs.[110]

Sadeghi suggests that as more people, particularly the young, buy depersonalized products online or at a mega retailer like Target or Costco, they also develop a desire to purchase something more human. " We seek to connect more closely to the farmer, the maker of products, and products sourced close to the community." Sadeghi notes. "Shoppers may go online to buy necessities but when they go out to shop, they want something real, something that offers the possibility of serendipity."[111]

> "People want to know something about the person who created what they are buying," suggests Summer Vega, who sells artisan, hand made products at Sadeghi's Palm Springs 'anti-mall.' "In the AI age people are going back to people markets."[112, 113]



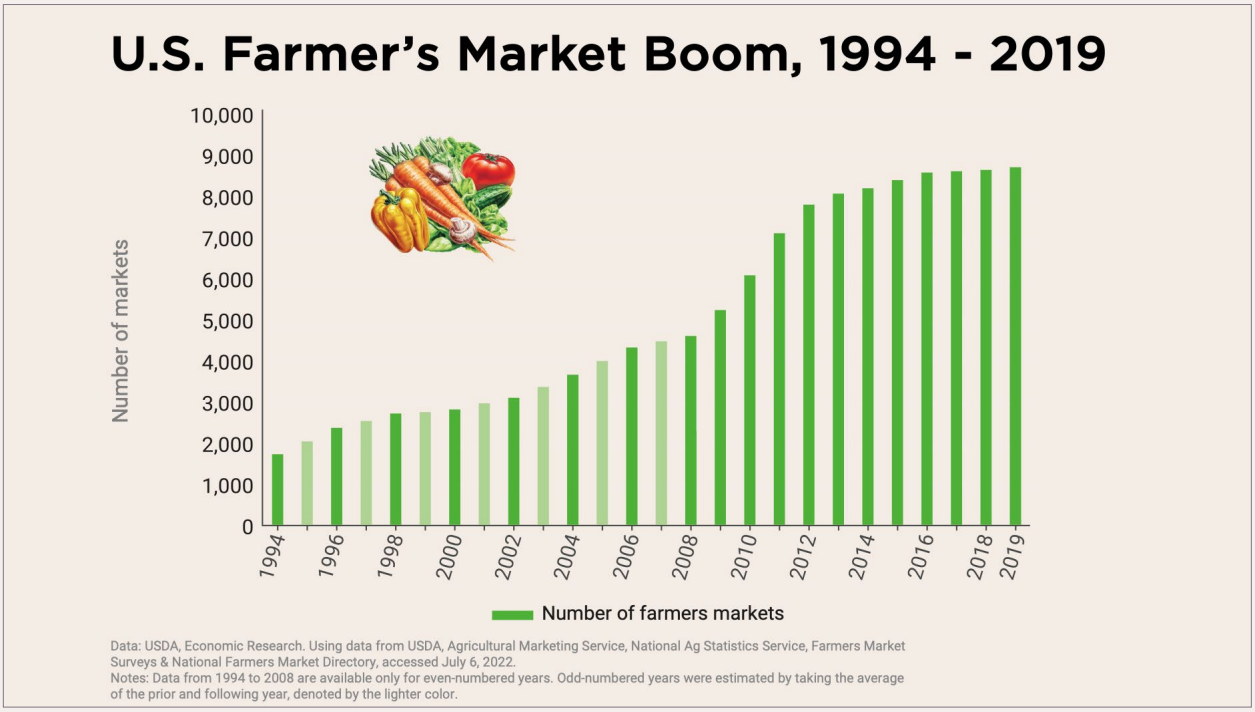
Credit: Corona Farmers Market. USDA photo by Preston Keres.

Flea Markets and Farmers' Markets

Informal and ad hoc markets have also been growing. The 2000s and 2010s saw the growth of the "buy local" movement and the rapid expansion of farmers' markets in the US — from fewer than 1,800 in the mid-1990s to more than 8,770 by 2019.[114] Flea markets have also proliferated around the world, growing at 4.5 percent a year. By 2033, US flea market sales are expected to grow from $12.5 billion to almost $17.5 billion.[115]

The shift to "encounter trade" is reflected as well in surging yard sales. A July survey from Morning Consult found that about half of US consumers said they have shopped secondhand, and a quarter said they sold something secondhand within the previous three months. According to a recent report from online resale shop ThredUp and the retail analytics firm Global Data, the US market for secondhand apparel grew by 14% in 2024, its strongest annual growth since 2021, and is expected to hit $74 billion by 2029.[116]

At a yard sale or farmer's market, you never quite know what you will find and how much it might cost. "It's an experience that AI cannot do," notes Randy Hild, whose Redo Market runs flea markets throughout Southern California.[117] "There's something even for surfers who like something old," he suggests. People like to buy the older American made products featured in Hild's Redo Markets that sell vintage records, surfboards, and all sorts of memorabilia. Hild runs two shows a year, each one, he claims, visited by upwards of 15,000 people.



Such developments, anchored by small, local businesses, are found throughout Southern California, often in redundant warehouse spaces, such as Sadeghi's Camp. Others rise adjacent to supermarkets. For example, the Latino-themed Mercado, located inside the family run Gonzales Northgate market, features more than 20 stalls covering 11,361 square feet and offers a wide diversity of Mexican food from largely independently owned stalls.[118]

It's ironic that these innovations are taking place in supposedly homogeneous suburbia, areas often inundated with chain stores of varied types.[119] "This is not suburbanization but localization," suggests Sadeghi. Many suburbanites, he notes, left the big city but did not have their taste buds removed at the same time. "Suburbia is no longer bland," he notes. "Orange County is local like New York and L.A. are local."

Changing Food Tastes Bolster Artisans

American food tastes are shifting and Europe, particularly Italy, provides the role model due to its retention of its traditional artisan economy. Surveys reveal that more than 70% of EU citizens consider the origin of food products important, with a significant portion expressing a willingness to pay more for locally sourced goods that they perceive as fresher and more trustworthy.[120]

Health concerns are a key factor. Italians and other Mediterranean countries consume far less processed foods than those in northern Europe and, particularly, the US. Processed food constitutes 60% of food intake in the US and the UK, 42% in Australia, and 46% in Canada, but in countries like Italy and Spain the proportion is much lower.[121]

In Amelia, for example, Mariella Semicola and Paolo Giulioli run the Agriturismo L'Arte del Verde, where you can have a terrific meal where all the food is either grown on the 20-acre property or nearby. To anyone used to the industrialized food in places like the USA, even the chicken tastes, smells and looks different. "We think the future is to go back to local products," suggests Paolo Giulioli, who with his wife runs on the L' Arte del Verde agritourism spot in Amelia. In the global age, it is about getting something handmade, something different.[122]



Credit: Courtesy of Forno Pellegrino.

Italy, with its great food tradition, provides the role model, with the fastest international presence.[123] Forno Pellegrino began in 1920 in Varapodio, a hill town between the Plain of Gioia Tauro and the western foothill of the Aspromonte massif in Calabria. In the new millennium, Giuseppe Pellegrino and his wife Maria Rosa Longo began researching production methods and indigenous wheat varieties that predated Italy's industrial transformation of Italy's agricultural landscape.

In 2022 the Pellegrinos moved to the province of Siena, in Tuscany, where they established a bakery that employes flours from ancient grains such as *Verna*, a soft wheat variety native to Tuscany that was largely abandoned for decades in favor of modern, higher yielding grains. The selection of heritage grain flours has brought Forno Pellegrino to work closely with local growers and millers, establishing a *microfiliera* (short supply chain) that enables Forno Pellegrino to provide customers with "completely traceable products," emphasizing that "this traceability ultimately guarantees authenticity and quality."[124]



Credit: Courtesy of Panificio Panchetti.

This emphasis on quality and tradition is common in Italy. Located in the province of Florence, Panificio Panchetti is a family-run business that combines the Tuscan bread-making tradition with a commitment to serve an increasingly conscious consumer. Founded in 1960, the firm now employs 27 workers.[125] They still employ an old wood-fired oven (*forno a legna*) according to traditional bread baking. The market for what owner Andrea Panchetti calls a "*azienda artigianale strutturata*" ("organized artisanal enterprise") lies with customers interested in the quality of ingredients, the production method, and the people who make the food. In this new consumption culture, he believes "the direct interaction between producer and consumer serves as a primary guarantee of authenticity and quality since the human element highlights dedication and expertise."[126]

Americans are now re-discovering these values. After all, many Americans come back from Italian vacations with a desire to replicate their culinary experiences.[127] Much as Italian stonecutters showed Americans how to build beautiful structures, Italian cooks are leading the way to a better diet.[128]

Like their Italian counterparts, some American bakeries and other food-related business seek their own *microfiliera*, establishing links with family-owned farms who constitute 97 percent of all agricultural enterprises,[129] as well as specialized suppliers of flour, often from smaller farms. Many of them are quite new; according to the USDA Census of Agriculture, the number of beginning farmers (defined as those with 10 or fewer years of experience) has grown past older historical figures, with the latest comprehensive data tracking over 1 million beginning producers nationwide, roughly 30% of all US. farm producers).[130]

These culinary entrepreneurs benefit from a growing movement away from processed food in the country which is most identified with it.[131] This is occurring as chain restaurants have been losing momentum for years; even Starbucks, the icon of mass consumption, is now losing momentum and shutting stores.[132] This can be seen in the proliferation of small bakeries. Today this sector is growing far faster than conventional bakery goods.[133] Having grown to over $120 billion in sales, this segment is expected to grow to $190 billion by 2034.[134] Roughly 30 percent of US bread consumers favor such specialized products.[135] There are now over 6500 such small and mid-sized bakeries in the country.[136]

Some of this activity is happening in unexpected places. Barrio Bakery, founded by Tom Guerra in 2016 at his home in Tucson, produces a wide range of breads so good that on Saturday morning you can wait in line for a half hour to purchase it. The bakery recently won a James Beard award as one of the country's most outstanding bakers.[137]

Similarly, in the supposed fast food paradise of Orange County, Sarah Lezama started Rye Goods — which specializes in breads made with rye flour from central California and Camas, Washington — in her garage in 2016.

> "Once we got out there, the orders came," the slight, tattooed 30-something entrepreneur recalls. "We did not expect the response to be so strong."[138]
>
> *— Sarah Lezama*

Lezama opened her first bakery in June 2021 in Newport Beach. On weekends lines form for customers waiting outside to get in. She relies heavily on social media, which provides a kind of enhanced word of mouth that equalizes their reach to larger businesses with money for advertising and promotion. More recently she opened in Laguna Beach as well as Tustin, which is just east of Irvine. She now employs twenty-six workers and has become a supplier of several local restaurants.[139]

Artisanship and the Reinvigoration of the Market

Unlike large corporations, whose functions are necessarily global and not place-based, artisan industries rely on close ties with the local communities. Baker Andrea Panchetti has been very involved with artisan firms in his Tuscan region, helping among other things by providing workers in-house training as well as "cultivating future entrepreneurs who can carry forward the tradition of artisanal production."[140]



Credit: Courtesy of Panificio Panchetti.

Equally important, Panchetti sees his business as part of the social fabric in his town. "A bakery is not merely a place where bread is produced and sold," he notes, "it is also a focal point for the community, a social hub that contributes to the vitality of cities and towns, fosters human connections, and enhances urban vibrancy."[141] London, notes art historian James Fox, rose to be the capital of the world economy in large part due to its remarkably diversity craft economy; something also seen in 20th century New York.[142] As recently as 1970, as Fernand Braudel suggests, Gotham was the world's largest manufacturing center, with a million jobs in what was dominated by small, heavily specialized firms of every description.[143]

For large cities in particular, the need to encourage a revival of the artisan economy, including specialized technology, culinary and fashion products will be necessary to maintain the middle and working classes. This will be more critical as we witness an epochal shift away from the highly concentrated urban centers that geographer Jean Gottman described in the 1980s as the "transactional city, dominated by high-rise office buildings filled with professionals."[144] According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the traditional office jobs that powered the legacy city will not be the biggest demand for new jobs between 2024 and 2034.[145]

Large companies of course will seek to provide a faux alternative to the emerging artisan economy. Newly designed malls now try to "curate lifestyle" by bringing more interesting chains to their food courts.[146] But these lack the originality of artisanal, entrepreneurial businesses, particularly if one is buying from a neighbor or community member.

Rather than seek to recreate sameness, some urban planners, like San Juan Capistrano's development services chief, Joel Rojas, realize that whatever their efficiencies, chain-driven development does little to enhance a city's uniqueness or sense of community. In a world full of duplicate stores, he notes, it is key for a city to project uniqueness of feel and experience.



Credit: Downtown shopping area of San Juan Capistrano, by David Seibold, under CC 4.0 License.

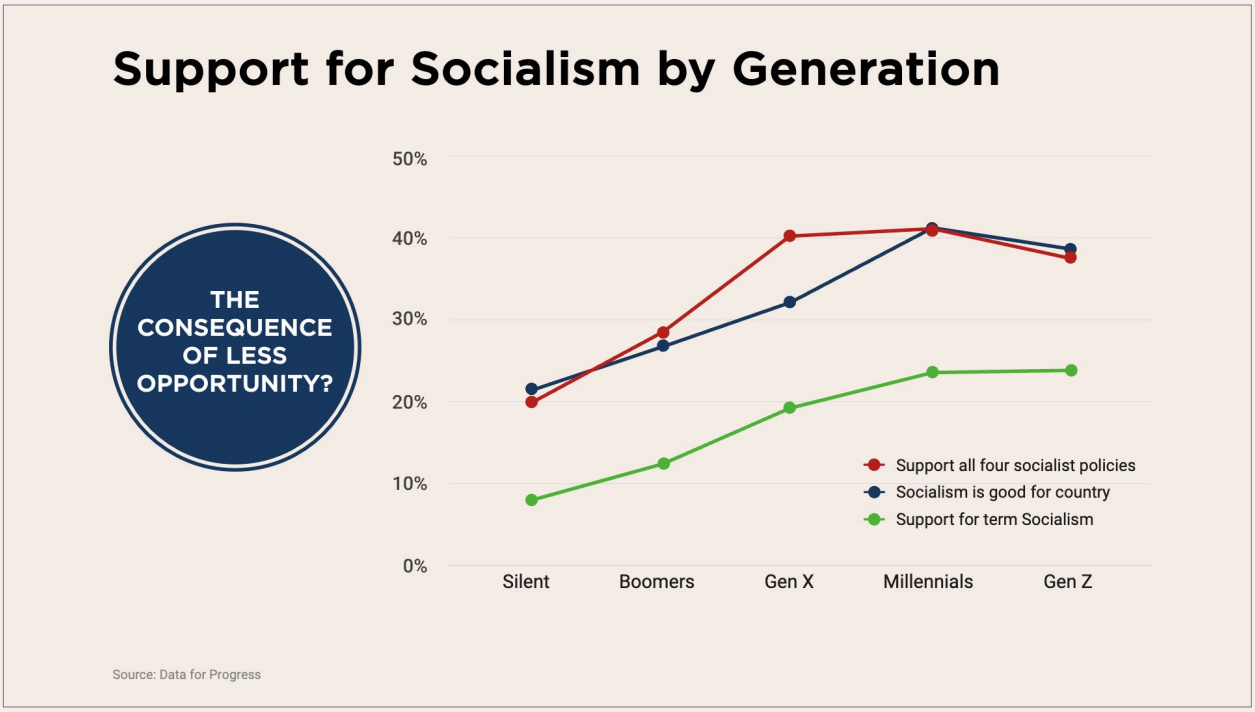
In contrast, he sees the development of the new six-acre River Street Marketplace site opened last year with artisanal firm butcher shops, quirky fashion outlets, and ethnic food stands. Most are locally based. "It's a community asset, not a mall" Rojas suggests, as we picnicked in River Street ample open area, which was crowded with young families. He particularly appreciates the walk's agrarian look — including barn-like structures — as well as its location near an operating farmstead.[147]

River Street developer Dan Alquist (who owns several other artisan-based centers), seeks to take advantage of the center's location next to the city's Los Rios district, built near the city's legendary Mission and California's oldest continually urban area, occupied since Spanish times.[148] "People come here for an artisan experience, dealing with real things, not spending their time staring at a computer," notes Alquist, who lives walking distance from the development. This is one way to get away from isolation and enjoy a community feeling.[149] "Two-thirds of the stores in his development are either stand-alone or locally based small chains."

Artisanship and the Future of Capitalism

The kind of "community" created at River Street, one of the many projects of LAB or the Melrose Marketplace will never fully replace the large global economic system, even as it slowly dissembles into regional or national economies. But arguably its greatest service may be helping to reshape perceptions of capitalism. Small businesses, noted the radical sociologist C. Wright Mills, provided a "civic spirit" that animated community life, much as we see in the thriving artisan-driven towns in northern and central Italy.[150]

In contrast, the prevalence of global firms is widely seen as a driver of inequality, a sense of displacement and lack of opportunity.[151] Today's market system is not much-loved globally and even in the US, particularly among the young.[152] Eighty-two percent of millennials fear AI will reduce their compensation, and they are right to be worried about the current economic system.[153]



The tendency to identify capitalism primarily with a numbing commercial sameness does not do it any favors. The reduction of the artisan class in the first industrial revolution created what historian David Noble defines "the trauma and tragedy" that sparked mass rebellions in many countries and, in the worst case the inhumanity of the fascist and Soviet models that arose in the last century.[154]

What our society and economy need is an economy that is more grassroots based and integrated with human values and creativity.

> "Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex and more violent," noted E.F. Schumaker. "It takes a touch of genius — and a lot of courage— to move in the opposite direction."[155]

The shift towards a more artisan-centered economy also could help save capitalism from its own self-destruction. Small businesses, like those arising in the artisan movement, validate capitalism's dynamism and sense of opportunity. Indeed, Soviet Union Communist founder Vladimir Lenin well understood that capitalism, he noted, "begins in the village marketplace."[156]

Today, when capitalism is losing appeal to a generation that embraces its opposite, often without knowing the consequences, it is critical to restore the human face of the marketplace.

This is an important message. The return of the owner and the producer to the marketplace breathes life — not just in dollar terms — into community and social life. A buffer against both the progressive nanny state and an overwhelmingly conformist global capitalism, the rise of the artisan can restore the faith and utility of the market system. Capitalism can still perform brilliantly but cannot long survive if its essential humanity is stripped away.

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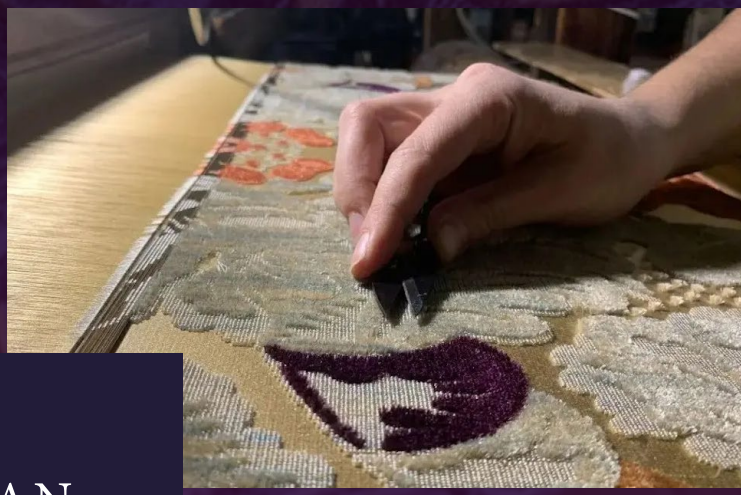












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