

Beyond the Sock Market

At Greenflea, Immigrant Entrepreneurs Sharpen Merchandising Skills as Open-Air Vendors

By LYNN M. ERMANN

WOMEN all over New York are still searching for Roberto Vascon. In the early 90's, his richly colored handmade purses attracted a cultlike following around the city, especially on the Upper West Side. But high rents and construction forced him to close his flagship Columbus Avenue store in 1995, and a self-service laundry took over the space.

In the years that followed, women toting his distinctive handbags would stop one another in the street to ask: Where is Roberto?

"He just vanished from the scene," said Katherine Janus, a psychotherapist who lives on Central Park West. "No one knew where he was."

News Flash: The beloved designer has been found and is back on Columbus, this time as a vendor at Greenflea, the venerable and eclectic Upper West Side flea market. Happy reunions between the ebullient entrepreneur and his squealing patrons take place every Sunday at Stand E5, and business is booming once again. Mr. Vascon, who had dejectedly returned to his native Brazil after his Columbus Avenue store folded, followed by his other two branches, came back eight months ago to start over at Greenflea.

With megastores driving up rents, flea markets like this one offer a glimpse of the struggles of the city's small-business owners, and as a result, New Yorkers can find several old favorites in this market. Remember Eurotrash, the poster store on Columbus? Rents up to \$20,000 a year forced the owner, Pierre Aranz, out of business last year. But he too has opened up at Greenflea and works alongside his "assistant," his 7-year-old son, Valentin. On the other side of the site are Myriam Bedolla and Elias Matos, the former owners of the SoHo jewelry store Lestroi's, which closed three years ago.

Greenflea is a kind of mini-America where dreams are both built and dashed. Vendors represent all kinds of professions — there are doctors, nuns, actors, hairdressers — and from many countries, including Ghana, Israel, Turkey and Indonesia.

Because Greenflea advertises around the world, immigrants frequently obtain stands even before they arrive in New York. Among the vendors are people hoping to rebuild their businesses, to make money until they can find steady jobs, or to test-market merchandise before opening their own shops.

"Few people planned on doing this," says Judith Gehrke, the executive director of Greenflea. "It is something on the way to doing something else."

Business can be brisk. According to Margaret Lerner, the assistant manager of Greenflea, some vendors earn "thousands in a day," although others may take home as little as \$20. There are days when nobody is shopping, days that Elaine Bestmann, a vintage jewelry dealer at the market, describes as "shiva calls."

New York's history of open-air markets goes back to 1641. The city's oldest existing market, the Annex Antiques Fair, has existed for 35 years and includes four outdoor markets and an indoor one.

Greenflea, which got its name from Greenmarket, a part owner, was started 18 years ago by parents trying to raise money for a pair of public schools. It has two locations: Public School 183 at 67th Street between First and York Avenues, on Saturdays, and Intermediate School 44 on Columbus Avenue between 76th and 77th Streets, on Sundays. The two markets raise \$250,000



Photographs by Linda Rosier for The New York Times

At Greenflea market on Columbus Avenue, vendors come from the world over. Places represented include Senegal (top) and (from left) Egypt, Brazil and South Asia.

SHOPPING

Wallets Open

Besides the two Greenflea markets, New York has several other well-known flea markets.

Annex Antiques Fair and Flea Market (four lots at or near West 26th Street and the Avenue of the Americas) The city's best-known flea market. High-quality selection of goods, including vintage jewelry, clothing, records and antique furniture. No T-shirts here.

The Garage Antiques (112 West 25th Street) Part of the Annex. A two-story garage filled with vendors selling antique furniture, housewares, books and clothing.

Chelsea Antiques Building (110 West 25th Street) An entire building filled with dealers, many of them veterans of the outdoor markets. A bit pricey, but it offers comfortable one-stop shopping.

Grand Street Antiques Fair (Grand Street at Broadway) Lots of vintage clothing, dishware, antique furniture and the like.

to \$300,000 annually for the two schools.

The West Side market, the far more popular site, is considered relatively downscale because it features crafts and other new merchandise along with antiques. But this makes it ideal for many new vendors.

At the West Side Greenflea, 300 vendors fill the school's playground and first floor

during the prime seasons, fall and spring. Rent for a table starts at an affordable \$23 a day.

"Early on, there was too much jewelry and cheap clothing," Ms. Gehrke said. "People would say, 'It's a market where you can only sell socks.'"

Old-timers have well-established niches. One regular is Richard Meneely, the "business card guy," who doesn't quite look the part in his faded cap and traditional printer's bib. But his business cards are not the local stationery store variety. They are custom made, printed on everything from wood to homemade paper, using old typesetting methods.

His neighbor, Richard Miller, who has been at the market for 15 years, sells letters, stamps and military whatnots. He often shares the stand with his wife, Eileen, who sells vitamins from the other end of the table.

Luis Da Cruz, who once worked with Pierre Cardin in Paris, has been selling custom-made draperies for two years. Barry Honigman's stand sells kitsch (a Charlie the Tuna lamp) as well as fine antiques.

Jamie Marchezya and Brian Yadlow, both newly arrived from Chicago, are hoping their hand-painted Mexican sinks will catch on. The young couple, who used to work together at the Men's Warehouse clothing store, discovered the sinks in a factory while on vacation in Mexico. Serita Sethi, who sells chunky jewelry set with precious stones from India, Russia, and Nepal, is test-marketing her goods. "I'm doing this to build a client profile," said Ms. Sethi, an Indian from Kuwait. Only one sock vendor remains.

With merchants from so many backgrounds in such close proximity, international relations can get tense. Last year, open warfare almost erupted when an Arab and an Israeli selling identical merchandise were accidentally assigned adjacent spots on the same day. The two argued viciously for hours, cursing in Hebrew and Arabic, while other Israeli and Arab vendors took sides.

A legendary feud between two vintage jewelry dealers, who worked on opposite ends of a table in the cafeteria, lasted two years. At its height, the two stopped speaking and erected a partition between their tables. "The average age here is 4 years old," Ms. Gehrke said.

While lifers here have made a living, most at the market hope for the kind of success that the Lord of the Fleas has found. Jeremy Archer gave himself that title while a vendor at Greenflea, and it later became the name of his clothing line and the store where it was sold.

Other Greenflea triumphs: Candleshtick, a candle store that set up shop on Broadway, and Bombalulus, a children's clothing store that got started at Greenflea and other markets and opened up two stores a few years ago, one of them next to the market.

Mr. Vascon, who will continue to work at Greenflea for several more months, is the latest success story. Last month, he signed preliminary papers so he could lease a space at 140 West 72d Street between Columbus and Broadway, just a few blocks away from his first store. The new store will replace a self-service laundry.

"It is my American dream coming true," he said, adding, "or coming back."