



The MarlinFest Jump Up offers a large selection of handcrafted fun.

The Arts & Crafts Movement

By Andrea Milam

The Virgin Islands hosts an exciting array of local culture at annual festivals

Virgin Islanders find beauty in their Caribbean home that extends beyond the picturesque vistas, turquoise seas, and verdant green hills. They transform mundane calabash gourds into remarkably beautiful bowls. They paint images of their island peers, expertly capturing each line and shadow to reveal the soul within the subject. They perform traditional dances that have been a part of their consciousness for generations. And luckily for visitors, they love to share their creativity at arts festivals that take place on all three islands.

One of the largest Virgin Islands arts festivals takes place on St. Thomas at Tillet Gardens, a lushly shaded courtyard framed by an eclectic collection of restaurants, craft shops, a community theater and more. Art in the Garden Arts & Crafts Festival happens in November each year, with two full days of exhibitions by local artists and craftspeople selling their one-of-a-kind wares made from a wide range of materials including leather, coconut, wood and even light bulbs.

The Children's Art Table allows the younger set to explore their own creativity, while live performances including everything from steel pan music to skits by Tillet's onsite Pistarkle Theater to martial arts demonstrations all make for a compelling and dynamic environment. "The public can come and talk to the artists themselves, and find one-of-a-kind works," says Tillet Foundation Executive Director Lynn Berry.

St. John has its own fair where residents of the smallest of the three main U.S. Virgins display their creativity across a wide range



Bill Johnson displays his handcrafted woodwork at the Art in the Garden Arts & Crafts Festival.



Cultural dancers perform traditional West Indian dances at the St. John Arts Festival.



of media, from music to dance to crafts. The festival was started 14 years ago by Frank Langley, a part-time St. John resident who wanted to bring the essence of Caribbean culture back to an island town that he saw transforming before his eyes. “In Cruz Bay, you’ve got bars, restaurants, and everything you’d find stateside,” says Langley. “I started the festival to try to bring the spotlight back to the people of St. John.”

The St. John Arts Festival takes place each February at the Frank Powell Park in Cruz Bay across from the ferry dock. The festival kicks off with Children’s Day, featuring performances by local children’s choirs, steel pan music with the Love City Pan Dragons and even jump rope displays by the Love City Leapers. On subsequent days Quadrille dancers liven up the park with their brightly colored madras costumes while local bands play reggae, African-inspired percussion, and time-honored scratch music.

Throughout the four day festival, local craftspeople sell their creations in the park. You’ll find calabash bird feeders, locally made jewelry and clothing and even crafts made from the local “monkey-no-climb” tree. The festival wraps up with a movie presented by the St. John Film Society at the Giff Hill School auditorium.

Arts and crafts are on display at the MarlinFest Jump Up in Red Hook, St. Thomas. Held each August at American Yacht Harbor, it’s the grand finale of this deep-sea fishing tournament that benefits the Boy Scouts, ensuring plenty of fun fishing tales as boats come in from their day on the water. In the Virgin Islands, “jump up” means “party,” and that’s exactly what you’ll find at this fundraising event, where Caribbean dancers perform alongside local craftspeople selling their

handmade creations. “There’s a lot of activity going on that day,” says MarlinFest director Captain Jimmy Loveland. “It winds up at night with a Caribbean show featuring dancers and mocko jumbies.”

Art also serves as a fundraiser on St. Croix, where the Good Hope Country Day School Caribbean Art Exhibit, held each February, raises money for this private school. The exhibit features painting, sculpture and other media from close to 100 local artists. Now in its 28th year, the event is arguably the most prestigious and established of its kind on St. Croix with a large gathering of creative works by island professionals. The exhibition kicks off with a preview and cocktail reception, and continues through the weekend. Artists split proceeds with the school to benefit the GHCDs scholarship fund.

You’ll also find fine art on St. Thomas, where the annual Caribbean Colour exhibit takes place each May. The event is an excellent display of the diversity and creativity to be found among Virgin Islands artists. This exhibit, hosted by the nonprofit ArtVI Advocates, features a theme for artists to incorporate in their works for the event. Last year’s theme, Seeing Red, encouraged artists to use this primary color symbolically or literally. Both student and adult art is exhibited at Caribbean Colour and works are judged in two categories: two-dimensional, including paintings, drawings, photography, and flat mixed media; and three-dimensional: sculpture, clay, found objects, collage and relief and mixed media. The public votes for ‘best in show’ at the exhibit’s opening night reception.

Whether your imagination is captured by fine art, creative crafts, or lively dance, you’re sure to have your curiosity piqued at one of the territory’s many arts festivals.