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Art of economic impact

Though still far behind L.A. and New York, the bay area is among the fastest-growing creative centers in the nation.

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Among filmmakers, photographers and fashionistas, the Tampa Bay area eats the dust of Miami, Los Angeles and New York.

But these so-called creative industries have begun to rev up the regional economy in a big way.

Just ask the owners of the animation studio tucked in a small storefront in downtown Tampa that makes Finding Nemo-style 3-D cartoons. And students at the International Academy of Design & Technology, whose photographs adorn billboards and whose designer T-shirts cost \$125 a pop. Or University of South Florida artisans making \$4,500 limited-edition art prints gobbled by New York connoisseurs.

“All these are incredible drivers of economic development,” said Peter Kageyama, president of CreativeTampaBay, a collection of business owners in artistic fields.

Kageyama was among several dozen business and government leaders who boarded a motor coach Tuesday on a “Creative Industries” bus tour arranged by the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce.

If you thought arts and culture were just nonprofit fluff, think again. With an estimated 24,500 people employed in creative fields, Pinellas and Hillsborough counties ranked far down the list of the nation’s 50 most populous counties. But among the fastest-growing creative centers,

Pinellas and Hillsborough came in third and fourth, respectively.

With some notable exceptions, Tampa-St. Petersburg remains an also-ran for Hollywood film productions. As Tampa film commissioner Krista Soroka pointed out on the bus tour, the state has been stingy with financial incentives and local nightlife is too tame for many directors and cast members eager for thrills while on location.

Tridimensional Studios in downtown Tampa is working hard to change that image. Owner Kevin Scolaro’s team makes 3-D animations for the Christian Broadcasting Network’s Storyteller Cafe series. The company recently delivered a duck animation for an ad agency.

Scolaro is so swamped, he runs two shifts out of his E Cass Street studio. And still that’s not enough.

“We’ve been so busy we’ve outsourced some work to India,” he said as animators dappled 3-D flesh on images that require dozens of frames for each second of screen time.

In Tampa’s West Shore district, the International Academy of Design & Technology occupies a 130,000-square-foot office building serving 2,200 students.

The private institution, part of a chain owned by publicly traded Career Education Corp., trains aspiring fashion designers, music producers, photographers, interior decorators and others. The instructors are part-timers who work in their respective fields.

Fields admits most of the clothing designer graduates flock to fashion centers like New York or Miami. But the Tampa Bay area keeps a growing share of photographers. An example of student work towers from billboards advertising a morning radio show on 93.3 FM. Clear Channel Corp. hired digital photography instructor Paul Pelak to snap young women in sleepwear for a jokey ad.

“The first camera was an opportunity for photographers to say, ‘Hey, you’re pretty, can you take your clothes off?’ That hasn’t changed,” Pelak said.

The bus tour ended at USF’s Graphicstudio, part of the university’s research park off Fowler Avenue. Run like a business, the studio turns out lithographs and photo engravings. Some of the better-known artists fetch thousands per print. In the past few years, the studio has netted an average of about \$900,000 a year.

In the view of Deanne Roberts, the chamber member who helped organize the tour, a creative economy is replacing a knowledge economy. With nearly everything transformed into indistinguishable commodities, clever design will set products apart.

To bolster her observation, Roberts lifted a colorful tin of Altoids breath mints and compared it to a typical roll of peppermint candy. Guess which one can charge three times more than the other.

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