



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

A bloom on the landscape

Art + Artists - 2000

The results of Roy Rydell's art and work can be seen all over Santa Cruz County

By KATHY KREIGER
Sentinel staff writer

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HE DESIGNED the old Pacific Garden Mall, and needlepoint pillows featuring the principal characters in the Watergate hearings. He designed lavish gardens for the Scotts Valley retreat of film director Alfred Hitchcock, but was just as eager to give a neighbor a bit of advice on a back yard arbor. He helped raise millions of dollars to build the Museum of Art and History but he also supports the arts in a much more personal way: buying the work of other artists. And his interest in preserving historic structures dates back to the days when they were just old buildings. Through it all, he continues to fill sketchbook after sketchbook with his own drawings and paintings. But to really understand Roy Rydell, 84, artist, landscape architect, historic preservationist and patron of the arts, you need to walk downtown with him. That's when you'll see the number of people who come up just to say hi, to shake his hand, give him a hug, ask about his health, or compliment him on his work.



That's when the influence of his 50-plus years of living and working really hits home: in the numbers of people who know and love him.

PORTRAITS: In the top photo, Roy Rydell peeks through a bouquet of dogwood blossoms on his Bonny Doon property. At left is a portrait of Rydell by Danusha Lameris De Garza now hanging at the Eloise Packard Smith Gallery at UCSC.

"He's a remarkable person," said real estate broker and fellow historic preservationist Harriet Deck, one of those who worked with Rydell raising the \$3.5 million in private money to build the Museum of Art & History. "He's a great visionary and is very innovative. ... He's really fearless. He just loved this community and was very committed to it."

This weekend, two overlapping exhibits will feature separate faces of Rydell's influence in making Santa Cruz a special place to live and work.

Opening today at the Museum of Art and History is an exhibit focusing on Rydell's importance as a landscape architect. (Drawings from the Hitchcock projects will be in the show). "A Design in Mind" is a companion exhibition to that of Carmel landscape Florench Yoch's "Personal Edens." Like Rydell, her clients included those from the Hollywood mogul set, and like Rydell, her work drew on European influences

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but was always firmly set in the regional and natural history of the site itself.

Open through Sunday afternoon is an exhibit of drawings Rydell did with his weekly painting group. "The Peripatetic Studio" is on display at UCSC's Eloise Pickard Smith Gallery. The show includes the work of Rydell and the other seven members of a group that has met for the past two years at each other's homes.

"It's a visual thing, about everything," Rydell said this week, musing about the wide range of things he's done in his career. "And it's important that history be recorded. I don't really know why. Maybe because I haven't had children. In a way, it's a contribution to the community that a lot of people feel they're doing by educating their children and contributing to society."

Community projects weren't something he planned on doing.

His first involvement with the community came with the Rural Bonny Doon Association, in his neighborhood, then in saving the Octagon Building.

"One thing leads to another," he said. "When you get involved in community things, people start asking you again."

"I'VE ALWAYS KNOWN him as an amazing gardener, an amazing architect and an amazing artist," said Anne Easley, who grew up next door to Rydell and his late wife Frances and is now in the painting group.

The daughter of Page and Eloise Smith, Easley began her art career drawing on the eggs of her father's chickens. Now her work includes pen-and-ink sketches of chickens and colorful still-lives of fruit and vegetables.

Working with the group has been a way to inspire each other without formal critiques.

"Roy is so good with interiors. He makes them look easy. He has an incredible eye," she said.

"There's a graciousness about his drawings, an elegance," said Smith gallery curator Linda Pope, who has known Rydell for years, too. "It's pleasing, not overdone, not overstated. He has that in his garden, too."

Remember that Rydell has been working at his art for close to 75 years, here, and in Europe and in Southern California.

"When you look at his work, new and older, and I have, you realize it covers the history of contemporary art," Pope said. "Surrealistic. Impressionistic. He was in Paris when things were really fermenting. Then

he came to (southern) California and was involved in designing stage sets. Then he finished at USC in landscape architecture and really made that his living, of which Santa Cruz benefited tremendously."

Beyond his design work, there has been the time, the energy, the money and hard work he's given the place he's lived since 1949.

"He's always been very generous to the community," she said.

Pope offered another observation from her stance as a former gallery owner and longtime member of the arts community.

"There are a lot of artists who don't buy other artists' work. Roy has a huge collection of things by other artists. He has supported the arts by buying things."

If Rydell's most significant contribution to Santa Cruz in the field of landscape architecture was the old Pacific Garden Mall, a lesser-known legacy are the many local landscape architects who got their start in his Cedar Street offices.

That's where Janet Pollock met her husband, architect Mark Primack.

"He grew up in the '30s," Pollock said of Rydell. "He brought an all-encompassing view of design to the garden. His gardens were theatrical, and rich and fairly highly constructed, with a lot of ornamentation. Some had a stage set feeling to them. They weren't built to last forever. He was a Renaissance man. He was always drawing and painting. He had an especially good sense of the three-dimensionality of design, and a pretty broad plant palette for a landscape architect as well."

Landscape architecture was a career Rydell fell into, starting as a sort of apprentice to a pair of Swedish women gardeners he met here early on.

Engineering, aircraft and Vogue magazine were among the broad range of things he studied, Pollock recalled.

"He doesn't fit any mold," she said. "He has a good opinion and high self-esteem. He's a gentleman. I don't think I've ever seen him get angry."

"He was a real model and for years we didn't see it, for Mark and I. Both in our homes and our esthetics. We were rebellious and modernist in those days but as we've gotten older, we've opened up and taken the blinders off to all the world has to offer. Roy always had that."

"He was a collector of art, of books. His home had beautiful bottles and displays, and they were always changing. The house was very colorful and rich, which was unusual."



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Roy Rydell was instrumental in the establishment of the Museum of Art and History and has an exhibit in it.

A glance at Santa Cruz's beautifully preserved old buildings may give the impression that historical preservation has always been important here.

Not so.

Rydell was one of the movers and shakers in saving the Octagon Building, now part of the Museum, when it was the county's former Hall of Records. His work as president of the Santa Cruz historical trust was only part of his regard for history.

The details were important, too.

For example, his inspiration for a graceful gate and elaborate wooden finial at Abbott Square came from one of the grand historic houses on Ocean View Avenue. The gate was one of the few things saved from the wreckage of the quake, and will be on display at the Museum show.

"Abbott Square was the jewel of all he did," said landscape architect Paul Rodrigues, who worked in Rydell's office for several years after arriving here in 1979. "It was like a little urban haven in the midst of town. It was always green and lush. It was the only urban downtown space, other than City Hall, where people gathered."

Art, history, design, landscape architecture and friendship all came together in the Bonny Doon home where Roy and his wife Frances lived for decades.

It was an abandoned school house when they moved in. Over the years,

they remodeled it, added on and built gardens and terraces. It became the center of a lively and art-filled life.

In 1975, Rydell retired from his practice as a landscape architect. Two years ago, Frances died. Over the past year Rydell himself has undergone treatment for cancer.

Friends rallied to his side, organizing daily "lunches with Roy," and his recovery continues. Last month he traveled to New Orleans, and he meet with his weekly painting group.

Rydell's influence also is evident in the work of SCOPE, a group that promotes good community design, organizes tree planting and helped get rid of the billboards around town.

The group's awards for excellence in design were a big event in past years, but as the members got older, the practice declined.

Plans are in the works now to re-

vive those awards, said SCOPE president Derek Van Alstine.

A downtown piece of sculpture in Rydell's honor is also on the front burner, hopefully in the sculpture garden area set aside on Pacific Avenue directly across from Church Street. The group hopes to have plans ready by its Sept. 28 dinner, and welcomes help from anyone who wants to get involved in raising money and getting the plans approved.

"It just seemed appropriate to us that it be in front of where the Cooper House, which really was the heart, certainly the emotional heart of downtown, was," said longtime SCOPE member John Lisher. And he hopes it will be a fountain. "It's living and moving, rather than inanimate. ... Maybe not a traditional high-spewing, or Trevi fountain, but something very calming and more representative of how I think of him."

Lisher said the group consulted Rydell, who is still a member himself, to see if he wants to meet with the chosen artist.

"He said, 'Absolutely not. I couldn't do anything for me. I wouldn't want to influence the artist.' He meant that," Lisher said. "You wouldn't honor yourself. He's never tried to bring the focus to himself."

Two shows highlight Roy Rydell's work

WHAT: "Personal Edens: The Gardens and Film Sets of Florence Yoch" and "Roy Rydell: A Design in Mind"

WHEN: Today through June 25

HOURS: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday and 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Thursday

WHERE: The Museum of Art & History, 705 Front St., Santa Cruz

COST: \$3 general; \$2 County residents; free to Museum members, students, children. Free 11 a.m.-5 p.m. first Friday of the month and 5-7 p.m. the first Thursday.

INFO: 429-1964 and at www.santacruzmah.org

WHAT: The Peripatetic Studio

WHEN: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. this weekend only

WHERE: Eloise Pickard Smith Gallery, Cowell College, UCSC

COST: Free admission, (free parking on weekends only)

INFO: 459-2953