



No one in Santa Cruz has done more to bring art to the community than Chuck Hilger, who is retiring as director of the Museum of Art and History after 20 years. Hilger stands on the Museum's rooftop sculpture garden behind a Jamie Abbot work entitled 'Gamer,' which was purchased by the Museum Trustees and Friends to honor Hilger for his years of service.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

HIS ART IS NOW HISTORY

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After a wild and historic 20 years, Museum Director Charles Hilger steps aside

By **WALLACE BAINE**
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✓ **C**huck Hilger is undergoing a pronoun change.

In mid-conversation about the future of the Museum of Art and History, the museum's longtime but soon-to-be former executive director swings awkwardly from "we" to "they."

"We're going to pursue that with ... 'We.' I'm still in the 'we' phase. I keep doing that.

"But it's still a 'we,' and probably will

be for a while. I certainly plan on helping out whenever I can if not anything more than be a shadow on the wall. I spent 20 years here. I don't want to just go away."

After 20 years at helm — a period in which the museum experienced a wild cycle of near-death and re-birth — Hilger is ready for retirement. On June 13, he'll walk out of the beautiful museum building on Front Street as director for the final time.

But he does so on a wave of gratitude and good cheer. Last Sunday, the muse-



Chuck Hilger heads up the stairs to his third-floor office at the Museum of Art at the McPherson Center in Santa Cruz.

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Hilger

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um threw him a party, the day was proclaimed by the city of Santa Cruz as "Charles Hilger Day" and Hilger had to address a crowd whose sheer size took him aback.

"The time came for me to go up there," he said. "And I look out on the crowd, then I look up at the second floor landing on the stairs, then on the third floor landing, and it was full of people and I was thinking 'Oh my God. I was going to say something important. But now I don't what I was going to say.'"

"Chuck was our guiding force," said former museum board president Earleen Overend, who introduced Hilger that day. "He was here when this museum was just a dream, and he had to overcome all these astounding hurdles, while never compromising the excellence of exhibitions."

Hilger, who will say only that he's on the "other side of 60," became the museum's director when it was just a room in the Santa Cruz Public Library. He spearheaded the museum's move to the old jail building on Front Street, weathered the Loma Prieta Earthquake which almost killed the museum, helped bring about a gorgeous new 22,000-square-foot building that remains one of downtown's jewels and negotiate a tricky merger with Santa Cruz's Museum of History.

Hilger insists on heaping praise on his ever-evolving board of directors and the Cultural Council of Santa Cruz County for the dramatic successes the museum has experienced in his tenure ("I just happened to be director at the time). But it's probable that the museum as we know it wouldn't exist without him.

"He was always such a visionary," said Overend. "But he was also always willing to do the menial, backbreaking tasks of getting things done."

This is really the second retirement for Charles Hilger. In 1989, he was named Santa Cruz County's Artist of the Year — a prestigious honor afforded in the past to such luminaries as Tandy Beal and Lou Harrison — for his widely respect-

ed work as a visual artist working in the medium of paper.

Hilger was already the museum's executive director at the time and the honor marked his swan song as a working artist. "I was just beginning to pare down at the time. I had to make the decision because I just couldn't pursue that career full time and do this job the way I wanted to do them."

Twenty years ago, Hilger was perfectly happy working as an artist when he was recruited to serve as a board member of the nascent art museum. He was part of the search committee for a new executive director and — like Dick Cheney in 2000 — took the job himself expecting it to be a temporary position.

But he soon got involved in the museum's efforts to raise money for a move. When the 1989 earthquake devastated downtown Santa Cruz, Hilger figured the arts should take a back seat to more pressing needs and suspended aggressive pursuit of a new museum.

But after a visit to Santa Cruz from President George H.W. Bush, the federal government made redevelopment funds available for downtown and Hilger pursued a negotiation with the feds for a new building. The beautiful new Muse-

um of Art at the McPherson Center opened in 1993.

"We were in awe," he said, remembering the day a decade ago when the new museum opened. "I remember there were 700 people here, people lined up on Front Street and all the way down Cooper Street just to get a look at the place. After working so hard and so long to get there, it was an incredible feeling."

Hilger first brought up the idea of his retirement to the board two years ago. He was also part of the search committee to find his replacement; the MAH's new director, Paul Figueroa of Charleston, S.C., starts June 16.

He'll take the rest of the summer off and do some traveling, but has no plans to leave Santa Cruz. He'll pursue a few consulting possibilities and maybe some workshop teaching.

"When I first started doing this, I only expected to be a year," he said. "Then, it became two years, three years. All of a sudden, I'm standing on a stage and it's 20 years later. Man, it went so fast. It was a flash."

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