

Living

Art & Artists - 1980

Beleaguered league

Art League fights its stodgy image

By LAURIE SLOTHOWER
Sentinel Staff Writer

In the beginning, they were "The Jolly Daubers" — a group of (mostly women) students who accompanied artist Frank Heath on painting excursions to the beaches, the San Lorenzo Valley, up the coast to Davenport.

As history has it, Heath would hire a horse-drawn bus wagon to cart the ladies on day trip to the country, parasols, lunch buckets and paint boxes in tow. In 1919, the group was formerly incorporated as the Santa Cruz Art League.

Decades that followed were the glory days, socially, for the great-grandmother of Santa Cruz art groups. There were sidewalk sales on the Mall, the annual statewide art show and the Beaux Arts Ball, a fancy-dress costume party considered the premier social event of Santa Cruz in the 1950s and 1960s.

Today, the artists' community is flourishing. Santa Cruz County has its own art museum; galleries have sprung up in the basement of the County Government Center, the bus station, and the Loudon Nelson Community Center. Privately galleries such as the Art Center and Dancing Man continue to flourish, or at least hold their own. UCSC and Cabrillo College have burgeoning visual arts departments. And the Cultural Council, a private, profit arts organization with a \$570,000 budget, helps fund everything from Shakespeare/Santa Cruz to SPEC-TRA, an arts-in-the-schools program considered a model of its kind by the National Endowment for the Arts Foundation. Even corner bakeries and cafes have local artist's work on display.

And the Art League?

The league president talks about "shaking up" the membership, and members talk of letting modern art hang next to watercolor or oil renditions of old barns, oaks, and land-



Sheryl Organ: 'The Last Supper is one of our come-ons, but it hasn't paid off.'



Cary Gray is a dauber.

Photos by Bill Lovejoy

Other changes in the works: the hiring of an assistant curator, a man from Southern California who has worked in films; additional painting classes; efforts to lobby college and high school students into joining.

Organ talks about sponsoring a "theme exhibit" in February; a paint-a-thon for all the members to get together; and a T-shirt sale. Paving the parking lot is a top reason for

Some directors wanted the League to set aside an area of the gallery for modern art while another group wanted to show only representational art.

A vote was taken to change the bylaws to allow only representational art. It was defeated.

"But the directors who were in power did not want modern art, and they ran it the way they wanted to," said Millie Piraino of Santa Cruz.

Piraino was president of the league five years ago. She and another director resigned in protest in 1981 over the League's unwillingness to let other kinds of art be shown.

"It caused quite a stir at the time," said Piraino. "In the last few years, they've allowed a few paintings of modern art, but that's about all."

"They're rather desperate and they're grabbing at straws. I suspect it might be too little, too late."

Like most private, non-profit organizations, The Art League has had to scrape for funds.

Membership, hovering at 200, is down from the 1960's high of 300, but is above its all-time low of 160 members.

A decision by directors to take

members and from contributions, according to one history writer.

All it needs to stay afloat is to pay the Last Supper curator, another half-time gallery employee, property taxes and utilities.

"We're not going broke," says Price. "The Art League has isolated itself from the community for so long, it's going to take some doing to change."

□

TALK to people about the future of art in Santa Cruz County and one name you seldom hear mentioned is Santa Cruz Art League.

Santa Cruz needs "a major gallery" to sell art in Santa Cruz, but the Art League is not it, Grova said.

"They have a lot of potential but the Art League is only open to a certain kind of art," Grova said. "It's holding them back, because it could be a nice facility."

She mentions another weakness: Most exhibits are not juried, anybody who is a member can hang their work. The paintings are hung randomly from wall to ceiling.

The league members, says Grova, are mostly amateur painters. And because they won't screen artists,

scapes. A few young faces are among the mostly-retired coterie of men and women enrolled in art classes.

But in many ways, it's as though time has stood still at the drafty Art League building at 526 Broadway.

Members of the group have little contact with other art galleries. Directors scratch their heads in wonderment at other art organizations which are doing well and wonder why the Art League isn't.

Whither the Art League: is time passing it by?

□

THE Art League is going through hard times. It is having problems financially, although directors say it's nothing they haven't handled before.

And it is having problems spiritually. The League president and a handful of members are trying to pump life into an organization known in the community as a social club for Sunday painters ... a group whose rock-ribbed opposition to modern art has separated it from the Santa Cruz mainstream.

For that reason, some directors are talking about making changes in the Art League.

"We're trying to get this Art League up on its feet again," enthused president Shryl Organ, a retired interior decorator who moved to Santa Cruz three years ago from Stockton. "We have to shake up the members. We don't want all these little old ladies coming to meetings so they can have a tea party. We want to sell paintings."

fund-raising.

Directors acknowledge that the Art League is viewed as a stodgy, somnambulistic group which allows only "representational art" to be shown in its galleries.

Organ says that is no longer the case.

"Last year we had *three* nudes in our statewide show," Organ says. "One of them won first place in watercolor."

Modern art is also welcome, says Organ. "A lot of our artists are very traditional, but we welcome all kinds of art."

Former director Jim Price says the group excluded modern art not because of any rule, but because of the preference of previous directors.

A policy manual for choosing paintings specifically excluded abstract art as late as 1983. That sentence was deleted from later manuals, Price said.

"We have a reputation as being very conservative, and it has hindered us greatly," said Price.

What is art? Debate over that time-honored question stirred much controversy in the past.

The Santa Cruz Art League provides a marketplace for artists and their work. According to its by-laws, all dues-paying members may hang their paintings in the gallery. The League gets a 25 percent commission off sales.

In the 1950s, one faction tried to get the Art League to open its walls to abstract art. "They were labeled Communists," offered one member. End of discussion.

The issue came up again in 1981.

The Last Supper hasn't panned out as they had hoped.

The Last Supper Committee used to rent a room in the Art League gallery for the Biblical scene, said treasurer Lloyd Organ (Shryl's husband). When the League took it over, it not only lost the \$5,000 a year rent, it had to pay for a curator to watch over the exhibit.

The League is in no danger of folding tomorrow, said Lloyd, "but it skates dangerously close to insolvency."

Because of dwindling income, the League has had to dip into its cash reserves in the last two years. "It should be able to live off the income from the trust fund," Lloyd offered.

Income from the sale of paintings also is not what it could be.

"The gallery isn't doing well," said Shryl Organ. "We sell maybe three to six paintings a month."

"We get busloads and busloads of religious groups to see the Last Supper, but they don't go in to see the gallery," she said. "The Last Supper is one of our come-ons, but it hasn't paid off."

Last year for the first time, the League applied for a grant from the county Cultural Council. It was turned down because the request was for operating expenses, said executive director Beverly Grova. She encouraged members to seek money for a special exhibit.

The Art League is a leg ahead of many arts organizations, however, because the volunteer organization owns its own building.

The gallery was constructed in 1948 for \$26,000, raised by League

grants, which insist on quality control.

"They do a wonderful thing for the community ... the question is whether they can survive doing just that or if they'll have to do something different," Grova said.

At one time, the Art League was the mainstream of the artist's community, said Charles Wolters, artist and art instructor at Soquel High School.

But now, the League is "outside of it. The people who exhibit in the various art spaces locally don't have anything to do with the Art League."

People in the Art league "are locked into a way of thinking that's kind of gone by the wayside," Wolters said.

□

SHRYL Organ doesn't understand why more people don't patronize the Art League.

"Why won't the public buy original art?" she asks rhetorically.

"We need super-salesmen. Why, the other day a man was in here to sell us some insurance. I made sure he walked out with a painting under his arm."

She doesn't understand why the county Art Museum and the galleries at the university are doing so well.

"You go into those places and you see one or two good pieces in the show, but a lot of it is, well ..."

But she's confident everything will work out all right.

Representational art, she said, is "making a comeback. It's still what people want to buy. Modern art is more like poster art."



Representational art is standard for George Colbus and his art students.