

ART GUILD OF PACIFICA

H I S T O R Y

Eisenhower was President. Elvis reported to the army but he still rocked the radio. Cars sported fins like tropical fish. The San Francisco Giants made their debut. And millions of kids twirled inside Hula Hoops. Meanwhile, the Pacifica Postmistress, Juanita Lombardi, (who was selling stamps for 4 cents each) noticed something odd. An amazing number of talented artists lived in this newly incorporated city of Pacifica. Juanita made it her mission to gather these artists together and twenty-two of them became charter members of the Art Guild of Pacifica in September of 1958. In appreciation for Juanita's vision and her work, the Guild chose her as their first president.

One of those members, Don Carlson (who did everything from teaching art and jewelry-making to bottling Zinfandel in a winery he'd built under his house), constructed display flats so that members could display their work in shopping centers and in outdoor venues.

The Guild was off and running.



Sea Bowl, site of AGP's first formal exhibition

From its start, the Guild stressed art education as well as promotion of the arts. They invited artists to lecture and demonstrate their techniques. They worked with local school children and volunteered to help the city in other capacities. Originally the Guild only exhibited paintings and sculpture but, over the years, ceramics were added to the mix. And in time, fabric artists and photographers were also invited to display their work.

At first, the Guild held meetings in rooms provided by community-minded businesses such as Central Foods Market and Sea Bowl. Indeed, the Guild's first formal exhibit was held at the bowling alley. Later, after the new library on Hilton Way added a community room, the Guild began holding their meetings there.

"A pattern developed," recalls Roberta Ewald of those early days. "A big open-air spring exhibit (would be) followed by a formal show in November. Sydney Clark and I organized a citywide Art and Music Festival on Mother's

Day weekend, with folk dancing and a Marine band at our huge exhibit at Sanchez Adobe, as well as concerts in churches and art events throughout the city."

By 1969—as Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon and nearly half a million young people descended on Woodstock—membership in the AGP had grown to 80. Formal shows were moved to the Pedro Point Fire House. Engraved invitations were sent out, requesting semi-formal dress. Guests included civic dignitaries and art critics. Opening nights quickly became one of the city's crowning social events.

Yet by 1977—the year *Star Wars* burst into theaters and *Roots* mesmerized TV viewers—

the fizzle was slowly disappearing from the AGP.

Membership had declined through competition with a new group, the Pacifica Arts & Heritage (which eventually



Pedro Point Fire House

concentrated on performance artists and morphed into Pacifica Performances). Still, a few members struggled to keep the AGP going. Even the year of the big flood in 1982, couldn't stop the annual show. A rain-soaked Rod and Sydney Clark arrived for the reception and Rod announced, "I must really love these people to get out in weather like this—or else I'm crazy." We prefer to think it was the former. It was Rod, in fact, who fashioned together a set of bylaws for the board of directors, which helped the Guild to expand into the future.

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Still, by the year Iran-Contra dominated the news and *Moonstruck* charmed moviegoers—1987—the AGP was only limping along. Mary Harris recalls Roberta Ewald decided to throw a big party at her house, inviting all the artists she could find. The result was a fresh start for the AGP and a wonderful exhibit at the Terra Nova Church Center. The Pacifica Tribune wrote an article about the Guild’s recovery and entitled the piece “Art Guild, like Lazarus, Revived from the Dead.”



Sanchez Art Center, current home of the AGP

In 1996, the city of Pacifica acquired the Sanchez Elementary School property. Patty Jones, the AGP president, and local artist Andrew Leone pooled their ideas for turning the abandoned school into an art center. The Guild, as a long standing community art group, was granted a lease by the city and, after forty years, the Guild finally had a home it could call its own.

According to Debbie Grech, “The first tasks were covering up unsightly graffiti, converting the school’s library into a state-of-the-art ‘jewel’ of a gallery, painting the interior hallway, and peeling off layers of wallpaper in the office before giving it three coats of paint. At the same time, those Guild members renting studios were busy sprucing up their own dilapidated spaces. Art Guild members worked side by side, propelled toward a common goal—to transform a rundown old building into a premier art center.”

In January of 1997—the year *Titanic* swept into theaters and *Harry Potter* made his debut on bookshelves—the Art Guild held its first meeting in its new home. The following month, a grand opening was held with the “Arts on Fire” exhibit during the Valentine’s Day weekend. A crowd estimated at 800 patrons turned out. The event was reported on TV and in newspapers, including the San Francisco Chronicle and Examiner, which ran full-page stories.

The following year Andrew Leone designed a mural for the front of the Sanchez Art Center and members of the Guild came together with other members of the community to bring the mural to reality. The mural gave the center added visibility and confirmed

to anyone driving by that a new excitement had taken root in Pacifica. Volunteers also created the mosaic archways along the East Wing with the help of Jude Pittman and Kathy Miller. And an Education Room was created for meetings and workshops.

This year we celebrate our 50th anniversary. That is an awesome feat for any organization and a testament to the strength of the arts in Pacifica over the last half century. We’ve overcome a few setbacks through the years and have flourished because of the vision, inspiration and hard work of our membership.

Today we have over 200 members and continue to bring art education and enjoyment of the arts to our community. The Sanchez Art Center houses three galleries and displays an average of eighteen exhibits each year, including the annual “Arts on Fire” show, the “Bay Area Annual” exhibit as well as the “Art Guild’s Annual Exhibit.” Art Talks occur several times a year, allowing people a chance to listen and interact with exhibiting artists and curators. And, over the last couple of years, the annual “Open Studios/Open Walls” exhibit has brought new excitement and patrons to the art center.

We’d like to take this time to thank our members, both the current ones and those who’ve been a part of our organization all the way back to those initial twenty-two members in 1958. Thanks to all of you for your hard work and inspired art throughout these last fifty years. With luck and the continuing involvement of our members the Guild will one day celebrate its 100th anniversary.

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