

A Bit of History on the 50th Annual South County Art Association's Holiday Sale

The South County Art Association is celebrating its 50th annual holiday sale this year. It will be the 50th time that the Association will be displaying and selling the pottery, paintings, jewelry, cards, and other art of its amazingly talented members. Marking the milestone anniversary made me wonder how the tradition began, so I tracked down some of the folks who were involved at the beginning. Anniversaries are a time to remember and reminisce. That is exactly what I encountered when I spoke with John Cardin, Tom Ladd, Susan Shaw, Nancy Lyon and Judith Strickland, all of whom were around in those early years.

Fifty years means that all of the folks I spoke with were pretty young in the 1970's; 20 and 30 somethings. Everyone I spoke with is still making art. Some are still working at the Art Association's studio. Others have gone on to create their own studios and shops. Every one of them spoke of the importance of the SCAA. It was instrumental in each of their lifelong journeys as artists.

I spoke with John Cardin, currently a quilt artist, who started as a potter. Every other person I spoke with said "you have to talk to John Cardin, he was there at the very beginning." After I heard that several times, I gave him a call. When I told John he was the first person people thought of in connection with the early years of the Holiday Sale, he laughed. Even though John is very humble about it, the tradition of the SCAA holiday sale in fact did begin with him.

John told me that the reason the sale started was very simply because the Association needed money. As a non-profit then, which it still is today, the SCAA relied on membership dues, donations and an occasional grant. The costs of running the Association were beginning to exceed its revenue. The potters, which 50 years ago made up the majority of the Association's members, met to see how they could help. John said they agreed to hold a sale with a portion of the profits going to the Association and the rest to the artists. Everyone was happy. Potters were able to market their work, and the Association gained some needed funds. Advertising was simple, just some signs along Rte 138 and word-of-mouth.

John participated in the sale for about its first twenty years, the length of time that he was a potter. He told me he still enjoys attending the sale to see the beautiful art on display.

Next, I searched out Tom Ladd at his personal studio and shop. I know Tom because he was the instructor of one of the first pottery classes that I took at the SCAA. He is a master of his craft. I was eager to tap into Tom's memories of the late 1970's when he was a young man, just out of college, getting involved at the SCAA.

Tom is one of those people who keeps things. He went to one of his cabinets and pulled out lists of the artists who participated in past sales. He showed me one of the early posters that advertised the sale. He had been in charge of designing the poster. It featured the profile of a large vase. The first holiday sales were just pottery sales. Painters and other 2D artists held a 'little picture show' at some later date. But as the success of the holiday sale grew, the 2D artists were invited to join as well. It has successfully continued in that manner for about the last 30 years.

Tom remembered how crazy-busy the sale was in the '70's and '80's. In those years, the sale was limited to just three days and folks were anxious for its opening. The line to get into the building ran down the sidewalk, with customers waiting patiently for their opportunity to get in.

At the end of the sale, the artists would place their unsold pieces on a table and they would swap pieces. Since Tom keeps things, he went over to one of his display shelves and showed me a cup that John Cardin had made decades ago and that Tom had swapped with. The artists no longer carry on the tradition of swapping art, but it is a running joke that SCAA members are the most enthusiastic customers at the sale. I know, I made several purchases. It is hard to resist. The art is beautiful and it entices.

Next on my historical journey, I stopped by Susan Shaw's studio and shop. Susan is not only an accomplished potter, but a very talented painter as well. Settled into the woods, her shop provides a beautiful display of her talent. Susan said she moved to South County in 1976 and got involved at the SCAA in the 1980's. She served on the Board of Directors, and for a time took over as the coordinator of the organization's many classes.

While on the Board, Susan concluded that it didn't make sense to do all of the challenging work of setting up the sale for just a 2 or 3 day event. So in the late '80's or early '90's the Board decided to start the sale on Black Friday and continue it for three weeks. Naturally, that provided the community a greater opportunity to attend the sale and many folks visited several times during the sale's longer duration.

After my conversation with Susan, I contacted Nancy Lyon. Nancy is also a potter and continues to teach classes at the SCAA, although she too has her own private studio. She is a nurturer at heart and is always willing to share her knowledge, talent, and memories of the sale.

Nancy says she began participating in the holiday sale sometime in the mid 1970's. She also remembers the long lines of people waiting to get inside. Everyone wanted to be the first to see the work of the many participating artists. Today ninety-plus artists take part in the sale. Their art represents a wide range of styles and talents.

Nancy also remembered the food! She said the artists would always bring in excellent food to share. The atmosphere of the sale was festive and party-like, with much excitement among the artists to see how much of their work they would sell. That level of excitement continues today.

Next I spoke with Judith Strickland, another potter from the very first years of the sale. Judith continues to work in the SCAA pottery studio so I see her regularly. Judith could not emphasize enough how exciting the atmosphere was in the hours leading up to the opening day of the sale. She talked, like the others, about the long lines. She said the line at the beginning of the sale formed well in advance of the doors' opening. She said it was hard to keep up with all of the enthusiastic purchases made in the first hours. Like Nancy, Judith said it was great fun. Judith taught pottery classes years ago, but today is content to get into the studio to make pots, and of course to sell them at the holiday sale.

An amazing coincidence happened one day when I was glazing some of my pottery and contemplating my research of the holiday sale. A very tall, white haired gentleman walked in and wanted to talk to someone about donating some kiln shelves and kiln bricks. He said his name was Robert Huey, but that everyone knew him as Stubby. Stubby was in RI on a mission to clean out and sell his deceased parents' home in Bristol. In the basement, he discovered his long-ago stored kiln shelves and bricks. That made him remember the SCAA, where in the early '70's he got his start. He put the shelves and bricks into the trunk of his car and drove to the SCAA.

We were thrilled to accept his generous donation. Kiln shelves and bricks are expensive and we always need them, but for me the fun was in talking to Stubby about the '70's at the SCAA. Stubby's memories were vivid. He made good friends at the SCAA and learned a lot about clay. He had glowing things to say about John Cardin, and when I later mentioned Stubby to John, the feelings were mutual. Judith Strickland said that watching Stubby at the potters wheel was like watching magic happen. After graduate school, he settled in Washington state and became a public school art teacher. He continues to make pots to this day. I mention this chance encounter with an old friend of the SCAA to demonstrate that the impact of the SCAA on folks is long and deep. Stubby proves that.

Here we are now 50 years into the South County Art Association's holiday sale. As is our current tradition, we open our doors at 10 am on Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, and we close them three weeks later. This year's sale will feature some of the longer participating artists, along with some newer artists. There will be potters, painters, photographers, stained glass artists, jewelry makers, and more. Please come and visit us! The South County Art Association is a friendly place and we are always looking to make new friends!