

Minnesota's Oldest Art Colony

Nurturing Creative Spirits

by Ada Igoe

When I come up here, and I see that great big straight horizon line, all the crooked thoughts in me straighten out."

This is what Birney Quick, painter and founder of the Grand Marais Art Colony, reportedly once said of Lake Superior.

The sense that the rural, rugged landscape of Grand Marais refreshes the artistic soul prompted Birney to start a summer art colony in the small fishing village on Minnesota's North Shore in 1947.

In the beginning, the Art Colony was an extension of Birney's teaching duties at the Minneapolis School of Art (now Minneapolis College of Art and Design), providing students an eight-week residential summer course focused primarily on outdoor landscape painting.

Today, the Grand Marais Art Colony is a year-round nonprofit arts organization serving artists of all ages, interests and abilities.

During its 64-year history, the organization has grown and evolved, but that sense of the Art Colony as a place where artists and artisans can set aside external

worries and express themselves through art remains at its core.

"I think the North Shore is so magical," says Sharon Frykman, a glass instructor and current Art Colony board member. "I've always believed that art offers healing, so I believe that the North Shore is a good place for people to come for healing and the Art Colony is a good place for people to create in a nurturing space."

Colony Director Amy Demmer says the Art Colony not only provides support for local artists but also gives artists throughout the state and region a place for artistic retreat.

"That's an opportunity that people don't get very often in their lives," says Amy.

Most people agree that the opportunities the Art Colony provides artists today are to the credit of Birney and his original vision.

"I think Birney was really an amazing person," says Amy. "He was so personable, and I think he found in Grand Marais a really visually inspiring place. I think that this location was just fertile for creativity and then you



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COURTESY GRAND MARAIS ART COLONY

The Grand Marais Art Colony provides studio spaces for a wide range of artistic endeavors such as pottery, printing, glasswork and painting, or many artists, like David Hahn here, prefer taking advantage of the Big Lake. Facing page: Potters Joan Farnam and Ann Ward.

had mixed in this great personality. Now we're into almost a third generation of artists who continue to receive support from previous generations of artists. He really laid the groundwork for art to continue to grow in this community."

As the years have gone by, it's become difficult to imagine the Grand Marais community without the Art Colony.

Byron Bradley was Birney's partner at the Art Colony for more than 25 years.

He recalls that even in the earliest days of the Art Colony, one of the organization's big assets was the support of local residents.

"A number of the townspeople took classes and got interested that way," says Byron. "They were taking part and helping to promote it. We got a lot of help."

In addition to offering classes, Birney and Byron fostered local interest in the arts through a variety of events. Birney's connections with the greater

Minnesota art community allowed the Art Colony to bring jazz musicians, members of the Minneapolis Symphony, and dance troupes to Grand Marais for performances. Each Monday night, Byron and Birney hosted a fish fry and art demonstration. At the end of

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The Grand Marais Art Colony hosts summer and winter “plein air” events that get painters into the landscape as well as provide a number of workshops and activities. The 8th Annual Plein Air Painting Competition & Exhibition will be August 27-September 6.

the summer, the Art Colony put on an exhibit of the students’ work at the local high school. Saturday art classes for local children helped develop art skills and appreciation among the younger generations.

“I suppose a lot of things like that sort of slowly added up to something,” says Byron.

The Art Colony became Birney and Byron’s private summer business when they separated from the school of art in 1959. In 1963, the two purchased the old Catholic church on the Grand Marais hillside, which remains the Art Colony’s home today.

Until 1981, Birney and Byron, along with fellow art teacher Harvey Turner, ran the colony. As the art world around them changed and shifted, they modified some of their classes to accommodate the increasing enrollment of amateur artists. But it was Birney’s death in 1981 that truly signaled the end of an era and left the Art Colony searching for a new direction.

“Byron kept the art colony going for a couple years (after Birney’s death), and then he decided that they were going to close the doors,” remembers Sharon Frykman.

Sharon had first attended the Art Colony in the summer of 1978, and in 1981, she moved to Grand Marais permanently. In 1984, she

wrote a grant to hire herself for 10 weeks to help transition into a nonprofit, community-supported organization that could purchase the Art Colony building from Byron and from Birney’s wife, Marion.

“I was amazed when we decided to buy the building how open the community was,” she says. “Many businesses just got out their checkbooks and started writing checks. It was phenomenal because the Art Colony was recognized as an important institution in the community.”

Sharon’s 10-week position with the Art Colony lasted four years. During those years she helped to guide the Art Colony into its new role as a non-profit and worked to attract teachers. In 1988, Jay Andersen became the Art Colony executive director.

“The first thing I did was write a grant so we could get a furnace,” says Jay.

That single move helped shift the Art Colony into a year-round organization. Through the ’90s, the Art Colony hosted dance classes, worked closely with the local high school and gained statewide recognition. Jay remembers that during those years, the Art Colony particularly excelled at making art an everyday aspect of people’s lives, especially those

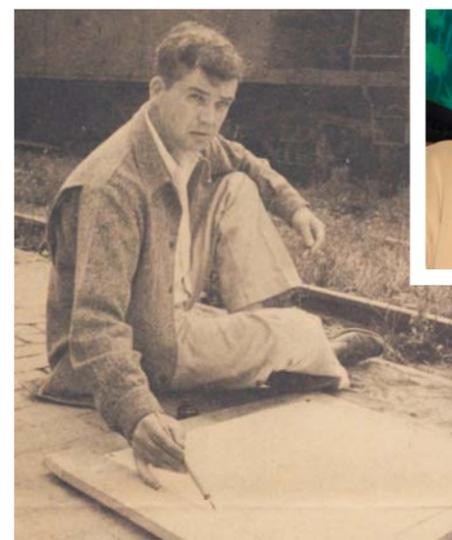


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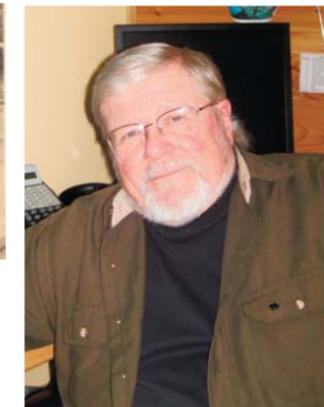
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From left are the late Birney Quick in a photo from his newsletter *Potboiler*; Byron Bradley; Jay Andersen and Amy Demmer.



ADA IGOE

who were “on the cusp of not knowing whether they should or could consider themselves artists,” he says.

After 12 years, Jay stepped down, but the Art Colony has continued forward. In 2005, the colony built a large addition to its original building through an outdoor deck. The new building contains a small reception-gallery area, two private visual art studios, and separate studios for print making, clay and glass. The original building continues to host classes and special events and also houses administrative offices and a library.

The expanded space has allowed groups like the Art Colony Potters, made up of Joan Farnam, Ann Ward, and Bre Schueller, to form. The trio sells the pottery they create in the Art Colony studios at the Farmer’s Market in downtown Grand Marais during summer months.

“It’s great working in a community studio,” says Joan. “I have absolutely no desire to have my own studio.”

The shared studio space gives artists a place to interact and connect in a larger artistic context, says Ann.

“There are artists of all abilities and backgrounds working together,” Ann says. “We can bounce ideas and problems off of each other. The clay studio’s located right below the print making studio and there’s painting in the upstairs studios. I can get myopically focused on the clay world, but there’s all this other art going on, on top of me.”

The community clay studio has also given rise to the popular Empty Bowls fundraiser for the local food

shelf, which the Art Colony sponsors each November. The event features a soup meal served in bowls created in the Art Colony clay arts studio. In the month leading up to the event, several open studio sessions are held, giving community members a chance to “get addicted to clay,” says Joan.

Empty Bowls is just one of six major events the Art Colony hosts annually. The others are a spring theme exhibit, summer and winter plein air painting events, an annual members show each fall and the summer Grand Marais Arts Festival, now in its 21st year.



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Art Colony artists encourage artistic endeavors at a young age with programs like this summer's "Kids Masterpieces," June 14-16.

Meanwhile, the Art Colony offers many classes in print, clay, glass, painting and writing, as well as children's activities. Students taking classes at the Art Colony receive 24-hour access to the studios.

"We're going to continue to develop more classes. We really want to strengthen our community of artists and provide more support," says Amy. "The Arrowhead region is pretty isolated from larger urban areas where there's maybe more support and more opportunities. We would really like to continue to support artists and provide for their needs as well as continue to inspire and nurture more people in expressing their creative selves."

As the Art Colony moves forward in the coming years, Sharon says the board will explore artist-in-residence programs and will continue to

work to make Grand Marais increasingly attractive to artists.

"We want to continue what we're doing now, but we also want to define more how to bring back the serious artists to the Art Colony," Sharon says.

Regardless of how the Grand Marais Art Colony evolves, it will remain an inclusive environment, welcoming artists of all walks of life and skill levels, says Amy.

"We want everyone to have an opportunity to get their hands in there and get their hands messy with paint, or muddy with clay," she says, "to just make art with reckless abandon."



Ada Igoe recently earned a First Place Award for writing from the 2010 Minnesota AP Broadcast Awards for a segment in her "Of Woods and Words" broadcast on WTIP Radio.

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