

# The State of the Art in Alaska (early 2005)

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When my husband and I eagerly visited Boston galleries last summer, we found a portrait artist not quite as good as Jane Terzis and a photographer whose works were less provocative than those by Mark Daughhetee. The art offerings were disappointing, but not surprising. On every trip, we have seen works similar to those by Alaska artists, but less satisfying. In conversations with friends, I find I am not alone in this experience. Larger communities can offer more art, but not necessarily better art.

Being able to see quality art takes more than having a population of professional artists. There has to be a societal commitment of support as well, or the art will migrate elsewhere. Despite limited public funding, artists and art lovers have helped create support that similar to, but smaller than, offerings in other states. As consolations, Alaska offers a few opportunities that are difficult to find Outside.

## **Two Big Highlights**

Alaska has three major museums as well as several smaller museums with growing art collections. These museums emphasize works by artists with personal ties to the Arctic and North Pacific regions. In contrast, many art museums Outside focus on works by nationally or internationally known artists while often overlooking the accomplished but less celebrated local artists. Even if Alaska's museums were to see fully funded wish lists for new acquisitions, I think they would continue their commitment to regional art. Therefore, the opportunity to be represented in permanent public collections is greater for Alaska artists than for many Outside artists. Being represented in these collections means that examples of the artist's work will be valued and viewed by future generations.

The ability to acquire new works for permanent collections has gotten a tremendous boost in the last few years from the Art Acquisition Fund of the Rasmuson Foundation. These generous funds allow museums to specifically purchase contemporary artworks. The Anchorage Museum of History and Art has acquired works by artists not previously represented in the collection, including Monica Lyall, Kate Wool, Lisa Ballard, Don Mohr, Rika Mouw, and Rachelle Dowdy. It has also purchased works that represent further professional development for artists already represented, such as Sonya Keliher-Combs, John Kailukiak, Stephen Gray, and Jeff Patrick.

The small population unique to Alaska has allowed artists to have larger roles in decisions that affect the visual arts. Artists have sat on commissions, councils, grant committees, and art selection committees as well as boards for nonprofit entities. Outside Alaska, these seats are most often filled with educators, organizational professionals, collectors, and contributors.

Artists have played large roles in helping to develop successful organizations that reach out beyond Alaska. For example, the Alaska Design Forum, Bunnell Street Gallery, International Gallery of Contemporary Art, Out North Contemporary Art House, Alaska Photographic Center and Alaska Watercolor Society have all provided workshops, events, or exhibitions that bring in Outside artists, speakers, and educators.

These two unique opportunities—to be represented in permanent public collections and to strongly influence decisions that affect the visual arts—are high points for Alaska visual artists. Other opportunities form an ever-changing list that includes recent gains (such as The Annex art space in Fairbanks)

and losses yet to be replaced (such as the Visual Arts Center of Alaska and the work of retired art archivist Diane Brenner).

### **The Value to the State**

A constant problem for the visual arts in Alaska is the perennial lack of recognition for its value, causing some decision-makers to be reluctant to provide appropriate public funding. Putting aesthetic debate aside, let me express the value of art in a way that even art adversaries can appreciate. The visual arts contribute to Alaska's economy, and many non-artists in Alaska benefit from those contributions.

Artists working commercially, such as photographers Hal Gage and Sheryl Maree Reilly and illustrators Duke Russell and Ray Troll, are also very successful in the fine arts; all four are represented in private and public collections. Other artists are producing custom furniture, ceramics, glass, jewelry, and clothing. These artists own stores, consign works, and create craft fairs. They also exhibit their most unique pieces in galleries and museums. For example, works by Marie Herdegen, Terri Atwell, and Tamara Johannes have been accepted in the Earth, Fire and Fibre exhibitions.

While art lovers are buying original artworks, Alaska collectors are purchasing much more, with each collector emphasizing different criteria. I know one collector who prefers contemporary works on paper while another is running out of storage for his textile collection. Because collectors have such differing preferences, a broad variety of art is being purchased and conserved. While these sales may have a modest impact on Alaska's economy, the public gains another way. In 1998, Lucinda Barnes of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago stated that approximately eighty percent of the art in American museums (including those in Alaska) was donated from private collections. Many collectors with valuable art will eventually share the wealth by donating to public collections.

The visual arts also attract federal funds. The Alaska State Council on the Arts (ASCA) relies mostly on state monies and funds from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Since the Culture Wars of the 1980's, extreme conservatives have repeatedly tried to abolish ASCA state funding, ignoring the bargain it represents. It is a federal requirement that Alaska have a state arts council through which to receive NEA funds. Each Alaska taxpayer contributes less than one dollar annually toward the NEA, but gets back almost double those tax dollars in NEA grants. This should be a no-brainer; if pork is good, so is artistic pork.

The visual arts are an integral part of Alaskans' most popular economic solution: Tourism. Years ago, I saw an Anchorage poll that put the development of tourism near the top of a list of public concerns. Ironically, funding for the Anchorage Museum placed near the bottom. Yet a majority of tourists will visit our museums, galleries, and cultural centers, extending their vacations and spending more money to do so.

The economic contributions from the visual arts to other non-profit programs need to be recognized. It makes sense that visual artists would contribute to causes benefiting the visual arts. But artists are constantly asked—and relentlessly expected—to also donate their art for auctions to benefit groups and causes that do not really benefit the visual arts. In Alaska, these causes include radio stations, YWCA, Hospice, Catholic Social Services, bird rescue, and fishermen's memorials. One of the most outstanding examples is the Anchorage Clay Arts Guild's annual "Empty Bowl Project," which has raised tens of thousands of dollars to benefit Bean's Café.

The visual arts community in Alaska is an altruistic group that rushes in when needed. In 1985, Tom Sadowski and accomplices mocked the prevalent presumptions about donated art with a postcard called, “Seven Reasons You Should Do It For Free.” (My personal favorite was “God gave you this gift. Why are you selling it?”) Claims that art donations look great on resumes or further art careers are overblown. Most artists know that, yet they continue to donate.

The Alaska Percent for Art directs that, generally, each state construction project use one percent of its costs to acquire public art. This law helps prevent Alaska communities from looking like industrial parks or big-box store sanctuaries. Not all construction costs are included in the equation and some construction projects are excluded. This is a lenient program; there are no fines for noncompliance or any specific department responsible for enforcement. That has led some entities to not take the program seriously. The University of Alaska Anchorage has randomly ignored the program since the mid 1980’s; the latest example of this is new Consortium Library. Others, like the Anchorage, Fairbanks, and the Mat-Su Valley school districts, are enthusiastically involved. The Municipality of Anchorage and Homer also have their own public art programs.

Some art adversaries think the Art in Public Places is merely to provide a windfall for artists, similar to believing that driver licenses are merely to provide a windfall for driving schools. Professional artists awarded these contracts incur the same financial risks that face other businesses involved in competitive proposal processes. Public art programs are more a windfall for the public. Long after the electronics have been surplus and the office space retrofitted, the art retains or even increases in value.

The visual arts share some public funding with educational goals. The ASCA Artists in the Schools residencies allow schools to choose visiting artists to introduce new skills and ideas to both teachers and students. ONSTAGE (Out North Student Theatre Artists Gaining Experience) allows a culturally diverse group of teens to collaborate with professional artists to create new works, with the students leading the way.

### **The Bottom Line**

Alaska’s visual art entities and artists make economic contributions that benefit Alaska in a wide variety of ways. They deserve and need more generous public funding, and the generosity of the Rasmuson Foundation and other sources are not reasons to be stingy on public funding.

Besides better meeting the needs of existing programs, new funding could help bring major exhibitions to Alaska from the Lower 49, exhibitions that have garnered huge audiences. More funding is needed to increase permanent or special events staff so art entities can extend hours and programs. Funding is desperately needed to publish information and help maintain web sites; Googling “art” and “Alaska” should better represent what Alaska offers. Moreover, increased funding would show appreciation to the bargains the visual arts have been giving Alaska for years. It’s time to say thank you.

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