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Plein Air's
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Plein Air Festival drawing on county's natural appeal

Robert Eberle paints Anderson Dock. Contributed photo

Painters have always been drawn to places of exquisite natural beauty, seeking to capture their essence through expert use of composition, color and light. In the mid-1800s, working in natural light became particularly important to the impressionists, yet these artists were essentially confined to their studios due to limitations in their chosen medium and available techniques.



A Bridget Austin piece.

Then, the revolution. In the 1870s, the newly invented French box easel and tube paints arrived on the art scene and changed everything. The tube paints meant that painters no longer had to grind and mix dry pigment powders with linseed oil. The French box easel meant portability; it had telescoping legs and a built-in paint box and pallet, and it folded up to the size of a briefcase. Painters could now take to the outdoors comfortably, and they did so in droves.

En plein air painting — painting the landscape in the open air — had strong champions among French impressionists, including Pierre-August Renoir, Camille Pissarro and Claude Monet. American impressionists and a number of celebrated Russian painters, including Vasily Polenov and Konstantin Korovin, joined them, and in their wake, the popularity of plein air soared into the 20th and 21st centuries.

Peninsula Arts School

Wisconsin's Door County has been celebrated for its picturesque landscapes for more than a century, when tourists first began joining resident farmers, fishermen, lumbermen and shipbuilders on the Peninsula. Artists soon followed, and what was once a fledgling art colony has transformed Door County into a premier cultural destination.

The Peninsula Art School in Fish Creek, founded in 1965, has added to the Peninsula's reputation with its year-round arts programming and Guenzel Gallery exhibitions. In 2007, it broke new ground with the first annual Door County Plein Air Festival, inviting select artists from around the country to paint, show and sell their work in a classic artistic tradition.

"The Door County Plein Air Festival creates awareness of Door County as a regional and national arts destination," said Cathy Hoke-Gonzales, executive director for the art school. "Recognizing that many visitors come to Door County because of the breadth and scope of the arts, as well as the environment and landscape, it (showcases) all that we have to offer. For artists and gallery owners,



Karen LeValley in Sturgeon Bay. Contributed photo.

it brings in new collectors and art buyers who may not be familiar with the scope and quality of Door County's arts community."

Cinnamon Rossman, community relations director, noted that plein air festivals were extremely popular 20 years ago, and while they continue to take place nationwide, few such events exist in the Midwest.

"The festivals primarily happen on the coasts, in the desert Southwest and in the Rocky Mountains," she observed. "The Midwestern festivals are mostly small community events."

She said this offered a unique opportunity to Peninsula Art School, whose festival is now one of the largest in the region. It has also garnered acclaim from the nationally recognized artists who attended last year's event, many of whom had never before visited the Door Peninsula.

"The painters commented that this is one of the best-organized festivals they'd participated in," Rossman said. "It's different here — it's a less competitive atmosphere. People are more open." The artists also found unique challenges

in the natural environment.

"It's a different challenge for them," Rossman explained. "The humidity is a factor, and the quality of light is different. And it's easy to use too much green!"

Building the Festival

For each year's festival, Peninsula Art School must select approximately 40 artists out of the hundreds who apply. For the



Peninsula Art School. Contributed photo

art school, this is a manageable number; it ensures that festival awards and sales aren't spread too thin among participating artists.

According to Hoke-Gonzales, artists are invited to participate based on artistic merit and professional accomplishments. When reviewing individual artist's work, the selection committee looks at its overall quality, originality, composition and use of color and light.

"We also strive to represent a variety of mediums — pastels, oils and watercolor — and styles," she said. "Finally, we work to bring in artists from diverse geographic backgrounds."

Rossman noted that each artist must demonstrate some aspect of his or her work that lies beyond the norm.

"We're looking for artists with a different spin on things," she said. "The artists need to be creative with subject matter and use of palette."

For 2008, festival artists include Rodrica Tilley of Montrose, Pa.; James Hempel and Mike Nielson, both of Milwaukee; Brett Weaver of Sewanee, Tenn., a nationally recognized up-and-coming artist and one of the festival's youngest participants; and JR Baldini of Niagara Falls, N.Y., executive director and founder of International Plein Air Painters. Other participants hail from around the Midwest and as far away as Georgia, Oregon, Arizona, Utah and Alberta, Canada. Collectors, Rossman said, will want to keep an eye on these artists — and the festival provides an unparalleled opportunity to view their work, watch their artistic processes and hear what they have to say.

"It's important for the artists to be interested in speaking to the public," she said. "It helps the festival be all it can be."

2008 Door County Plein Air Festival

Peninsula Art School designed the Door County Plein Air Festival to be much more than an art showcase. As some of the country's finest painters lift their brushes to capture the Peninsula on canvas, the public has a number of opportunities to join in.

From 11 a.m.-2 p.m. July 20-23, visitors may watch the plein air artists painting at local businesses and galleries. The art school will provide a list of painting sites, and the volunteer "Plein Air Stars" will help answer questions and staff the information desk. July 22 from 11 a.m.-2 p.m., Fine Line Designs Gallery in North Ephraim will host the free "Rendezvous" reception, in which artists will paint the gardens and grounds, while visitors enjoy iced tea and light hors d'oeuvres.



Kids try their Plein Air technique. David Frykman photo

July 23 from 7-9 p.m., the public will enjoy "An Evening with the Artists" at Maarhaven, where they will tour Tom and Virginia Maher's private art museum and sculpture garden, meet the festival artists and enjoy wine and light desserts. Hoke-Gonzales encourages the public to get tickets, as the Mahers' extensive contemporary art collection rivals that of many museums.

July 24 from 10 a.m.-3 p.m., the public may participate in a trolley art-history tour of Fish Creek, visiting the plein air painters at Edgewood Orchard Galleries, Clark Park and Weborg Point, where they will enjoy a picnic lunch. Tickets are available.

July 25, palette sponsors may preview and purchase paintings at a fixed price during the Collector's Preview from 5-6 p.m. The Gala Auction is scheduled for 6-9 p.m. Artists will display their top works for judging and sale by silent auction, and art collectors and enthusiasts will enjoy wine, hors d'oeuvres and music by the Birch Creek Ambassadors. Tickets are available.

July 26 from 9 a.m.-11 p.m., the quick-paint competition and live auction will take place at Fish Creek's Clark Park, during which artists will have two hours to create paintings that will be sold at noon. Later that day, from 6-8 p.m., Peninsula Art School will unveil the Door County Plein Air Festival exhibition; the free opening reception will include wine, hors d'oeuvres and live violin music by Carol Christensen. The exhibition and sale of works runs through Aug. 2.

The Future of the Festival

Even as it plans the 2008 festival, Peninsula Art School is already looking to 2009 and beyond.

"We're looking for big names from around the U.S. and a higher and higher quality of work," Rossman said. "We'd also like to see more community involvement with other arts organizations. We want to expand it further, developing partnerships in Sturgeon Bay and Southern Door. It's possible with national organizations, too — the Nature Conservancy, the Land Trust — because the environment is a critical aspect of plein air landscape painting."

"We want the festival to be a destination for collectors," she concluded, "for them to recognize the caliber of the work that's here."

For more information about the 2008 Door County Plein Air Festival, request a free guidebook and purchase event tickets, call (920) 868-3455 or visit www.doorcountypleinair.com.