

Pittsburgh Society of Artists — History and Mission

By Jay Ressler

The Pittsburgh Society of Artists Guild, which has nearly 300 artist members today, was founded in 1965. A pioneer in public art, sculptor Peter J. Calaboyas (who is a lifetime PSA member) said, “I proposed to Bill Poppe that we initiate a new art group.” “We all wanted more opportunities to exhibit our work,” recalled Cynthia Cooley. A hardy band of eight met above the Elbow Room in Shadyside on the second floor which had a gallery in that space. Other founding members included Rita Brown, Phillip Mendlow, Nichofor Gromiko, and Ester Fineman. They set dues at \$8 a year, established membership criteria, and began taking names.

Calaboyas was the group’s first president and Cooley, renowned for her bold paintings of hot metal in Pittsburgh’s steel mills, was the PSA’s first secretary. Both are still active in the arts. Calaboyas has a 2010 show in Chicago and Cooley has had work in recent PSA shows at Pittsburgh Center for the Arts.

PSA’s first exhibition was inside the PNB Bank at Craig and 5th Streets in Oakland in January 1966. With the friendship and support of bank manager Ken McDowell, PSA held an art sale in the parking lot later that year and a second exhibition in the bank the following year. The parking lot sale “was a great success,” according to Calaboyas. By 1967 the group had doubled its membership and outgrew the bank.

Among the facilities used by the group in the early years were the Studio Shop, the University of Pittsburgh Book Center, and the Allegheny Center on the north side. “We had meetings and a couple of annual shows there, but hopes of lots of shopping traffic never materialized,” remembered Cooley.

PSA was officially chartered with the State of Pennsylvania on August 21, 1967. Its Mission Statement reads:

Pittsburgh Society of Artists is dedicated to the vitality and growth of the visual arts in the Pittsburgh area. Formed for the specific purpose of exhibiting original works of art by its members, Pittsburgh Society of Artists has as its goals the encouragement and support of art in all its forms, the fostering of a true appreciation of art, and the furtherance of social activity and good will among its members and the people of Pittsburgh.

At that point PSA applied with the Arts and Crafts Center (now PCA) to become a resident Guild.

The first annual in the Center was in 1970. The 1971 Annual was on the theme of “Liberation as I See It.” One member showed his motorcycle. Cooley presented a collage composed of halves of a tennis ball painted pink which she called “Women’s Liberation Tic Tac Toe,” apropos the “no bra” fad of the time.

PSA also maintained a gallery in a warehouse on the Southside for some time. For a few years PSA had a connection with the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio, which hung its shows in its satellite gallery in Salem, Ohio.

AAP Centennial President Kathleen Zimbicki was PSA president in 1981-82 and served on the board again in 2009. Among recent past presidents are Pat Pirt, Dee Granger, Judy Charlson, Paula Klein, Heather Powell, Vance Engleman, and Claire Hardy. Marianne Marino started a newsletter, “PSA Voice,” which she edited for many years. It is still published quarterly.

After 40 years the PSA Guild still proudly calls the PCA “home.”