

A work in progress

ASU influential
in boosting
Arizona's
expanding art
scene

By Oriana Parker



ASU Professor of Art History Betsy Fahlman

Artists have been flocking to the Southwestern United States, and what is now Arizona, for a very long time. The extraordinary light and unparalleled landscape captivated Englishman Thomas Moran (1837-1926), who immortalized the Grand Canyon in works he created during the late 1800s that now hang in the Smithsonian's American Art Museum, as well as Germany's Max Ernest (1925-1991), who painted in Sedona during the late 1940s.

However, despite its reputation as a great place to make art, the state has historically been less well known than some other locations in the United States as a place to sell one's art, or to be a part of an arts community.

"The state never has had an art community like the art colonies at Taos and Santa Fe, New Mexico," said Betsy Fahlman, professor of art history and author of a number of books on Arizona's art history. "Nor did we have museums or collectors or art schools." The first art show in the state was at the State Fair in 1915 – you could see a work of art and then see the champion pig!

Fortunately, the current art scene in Arizona has taken a step up since the state fair days of 100 years ago. And Arizona State University has played a significant role in the creation of a fertile artistic environment in the Valley of the Sun and across the state.



Joshua Roffler, senior curator at the Tempe History Museum.

Enlarging the “Big Picture”

One of the major influences on Arizona’s evolving art scene in the 20th century was the work of ASU professors, many of whom were recognized artists in their own right. Professor Thomas Harter (1905-1981), who taught at ASU from 1934 to 1975, often taught painting classes at Petersen House, a 1892 Victorian house on the corner of Southern Avenue and Priest Drive, where he and family lived for almost two decades. Harter’s own paintings reflected his struggle to accept the growth of the area surrounding the university; during the time his family lived in Peterson House, Tempe’s population grew from 8,000 in 1951 to more than 60,000 in 1968, an increase of more than 700 percent.

“His art expresses both a joyful celebration of nature, as well as his fury over its destruction in the wake of urban development,” said Joshua Roffler ’04 M.A., senior curator at the Tempe History Museum, who oversaw a 2010 exhibit entitled “Tom Harter: Picturing Change in Tempe.”

Many of Harter’s students went to become important artists and influential art educators. One of the most well known was the African American painter J. Eugene Grisby, Jr. (1918-2013), whose work was shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Library of Congress, as well as being the subject of 65-year retrospective at the Phoenix Art Museum. After studying with Harter at ASU, Grisby himself became a professor of art at ASU in 1966 and taught at the university for more than two decades.



The brightly colored public art sculpture on the Tempe campus, “Celebration,” was created by alumnus Jerry Peart ’70 B.F.A.

Other ASU faculty also spurred the artistic development of today’s artists. Jerry Peart ’70 B.F.A., the creator of almost 40 large-scale public artworks throughout the United States, is represented on the Tempe campus by his brightly colored sculpture installation, “Celebration.” Peart created the sculpture in 1984 and ended up teaching at the university during the spring semester of that year, filling in after one of his mentors, Professor Ben Goo, retired.

“I was greatly influenced by Goo,” Peart recalled. “Though I started off in architecture, I switched to fine art by taking one of his courses. The course involved taking something made with parts, reassembling it and adding color. I used an old transmission! This inspired me to become a sculptor.”

As an undergraduate, Peart was also profoundly impacted by Professor Rudy Turk’s classes. “I considered him (Turk) a second father,” he said.



"Air Apparent," which was installed near the Biodesign Institute on the Tempe campus in 2012, was the work of nationally known artist James Turrell.

Painting with an updated palette

Today, Arizona and Phoenix in particular are regularly honored by inclusion in the influential "Year in Review" public art recognition program administered by the Americans for the Arts Public Art Network. Some of the attention springs from the Valley of the Sun's continued population growth, and the infrastructure that was created to accommodate them, according to Fahlman.

In 1986, the Phoenix City Council passed an ordinance that allocates one percent of the Phoenix Capital Improvement Program to enhancing the design of public buildings, infrastructure and spaces. More than 180 projects, ranging from new parks, community centers and canal trails, to bridges, streetscapes, overpasses, transit centers, recycling centers and other key infrastructure, have been part of the beautification initiative.

"Because Phoenix is a 'young' city, percent-for-art programs have flourished, inspired in part by the wonderful infrastructure projects," said Fahlman. Phoenix's Sky Harbor has one of the best airport art programs in the country, she adds, due in part to financing from the percent-for-art program.

Individual artists have also enhanced Arizona's stature in the art world, especially lately. James Turrell, creator of the 2012 artwork "Air Apparent" that has been installed near the Biodesign Institute on the Tempe campus, also is in the process of constructing an elegant naked-eye observatory complex at Roden Crater, a natural cinder-cone crater located outside Flagstaff. Designed for the viewing of celestial phenomena and designed in the spirit of place such as Machu Picchu in Peru and the pyramids in Egypt, the ongoing project has helped focus attention on the state as an artistic center.

ASU's Mark Klett, a master of the photographic discipline known as rephotography, has continued to bring attention to Arizona environments through his work throughout his career. Klett, a Regents' Professor of photography in the School of Art within the Herberger Institute of Design and the Arts, is the author of many books, including the popular collaborative work with Byron Wolfe entitled "Reconstructing the View: The Grand Canyon Photographs," which took historical photographs of the canyon from a variety of sources and placed them into artistic dialog with their own photographs.

Picturing the Arizona art scene of tomorrow

While the state has an admirable past and an intriguing present functioning as an incubator for working artists, what measures can be taken to continue increasing Arizona's stature in the art world?

Recent alumna Claire A. Warden, a 2010 graduate with degrees in photography and art history, said the key was to continue to build an infrastructure within the community that makes it possible to be a homegrown creator.

"We need to create an environment that encourages artists to stay in Arizona instead of leaving for Los Angeles or New York," said Warden, who has exhibited around the nation, as well as in Spain, France and Israel. "Museum support programs have already initiated a dialogue encouraging more individual art collectors in Arizona and this is certainly something we should continue to nurture, because it directly supports the artist and art organizations."

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