

Spirited Art From The Skagit Valley

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"Skagit Valley Artists," through Aug. 23 at the Valley Museum, in the Gaches Mansion, 703 S. Second St., La Conner. 1-206-466-4446. 1 to 5 p.m. Friday-Sunday.

The idea was too good not to bring back for an encore.

Beginning in 1937, when Morris Graves found a burned-out house he could live in for free and invited Guy Anderson to share it with him, the Skagit Valley was a haven for artists. It was quiet, it had a fertile, misty beauty, and rent was cheap.

The Skagit Valley is heartland, filled with strong spirit. Something about that spirit is reflected in the art that's made there.

Back in 1974, the Seattle Art Museum noticed that a handful of interesting artists lived in or near the valley and celebrated them in an exhibition. Graves no longer lived there, but Anderson did. So did Richard Gilkey and a dozen more painters and sculptors.

Their art leaned toward the lyrical and the philosophical. It was tied to the earth in a simple, elemental way. Theirs was said to be the best-attended Northwest group show in SAM's history.

But afterward, SAM pretty much forgot about them.

The Valley Museum of Northwest Art, in the restored 1891 Gaches Mansion in La Conner, did not forget. Fueled more by tradition than any big-city fetish for the new, the Valley Museum operates in sync with thoughts written by Robert Sund, in a catalog for a 1992 version of the Skagit Valley Artists show.

Sund speaks of "how trivial the products of compulsive reality have become," and says, "Without benefit of tradition, culture flounders, society weakens, people become alienated from themselves, and the artist may be as confused as anyone."

Indeed, anyone might be confused by the new show, since there's not much to tie it together other than a nostalgia for reunion.

Only five of the 16 artists in the original "Skagit Valley Artists" show still live there. Guy Anderson, Clayton James, Richard Gilkey and Robert Sund hold fast in La Conner and all four are producing mature work that must rank with the best of their careers. F.L. Decker is nearby, in Blanchard. Several of his stained-glass windows, with strong, simple designs, are in the show.

Max Benjamin and Philip McCracken live on Guemes Island now, as they did then. But Pacific and Charles Laurens Heald have gone to California. Paul Havas, Charles Krafft, Jon Gierlich, Larry Beck and Virginia Shaw (a.k.a. Aurora Jellybean) live in Seattle.

Two of the original artists are missing from the show. Art Jorgenson couldn't be found. R. Allen Jensen, who lives in Stanwood, is in the catalog, but no art by Jensen is on the walls.

"I didn't want to go backward," Jensen said. "I'm not concerned about the regionalist issue. I wasn't involved with it then (in 1974). I was trying to make art. This environment kind of gets in my way."

The idea was that each artist should be represented by a piece that dated from the time of the first show, along with a couple of recent art works. Time has been kind to their talents. With the exception of Shaw, who had stopped producing art and became involved again for the sake of the show, these artists are living testimony to the power of ripeness.

The words "quiet" and "cheap" scarcely apply to La Conner any longer. But it's well worth a drive north to see this show, and breathe in history.
