

60 years of sisterhood

From the Sarasota Herald-Tribune, May 25, 2014

By Carrie Seidman, Herald-Tribune / Friday, May 23, 2014

It was 1950 when Martha Hartman, a recent graduate of what was then the Ringling School of Art & Design, won her "first first-place" in an exhibition sponsored by the Sarasota Art Association. Hartman, at the time she was living in a trailer with her husband, fellow alum and artist Bill Hartman, and their two children, earmarked the prize money for groceries.

That was the plan, at any rate, until she learned that the (male) powers that be had decided to award her a certificate instead of the promised check.

"They were thinking: 'Oh, little Marty Hartman is so thrilled she won, she won't care about the money. We'll just give her a piece of paper instead,'" says Hartman, who recently celebrated her 92nd birthday. "Believe me, you could have felt the heat. That was not right. Not right at all."

So when, two years later, Hartman and her husband opened Sarasota's first gallery, they decided to even the score by producing a show featuring only female artists she had personally selected.

Sixty years later, the Petticoat Painters, the group that formed as a result of that 1953 show, holds the distinction of being [one of] the longest continuously exhibiting women's art groups in the country. There has been at least one exhibition annually, sometimes more; mixed media work from the organization's 20 current members is on display through Friday at the Selby Gallery at RCAD.

"For people to buy your work, you've got to show your work," says the petite Hartman, who makes up in feistiness what she lacks in size. "You've got to get your name and your art out there. We had such a hungry bunch and they wanted not just the prizes, but the prestige. And they were all so excited, they were women and they were being offered a show!"

The name that has stuck with the group for six decades was initially a joke aimed at sarcastically dismissing the very gender bias Hartman encountered.

"We figured we needed a name and someone said, 'How about the Petticoat Painters and we all had a good laugh,'" recalls Hartman. "And then someone brought it up again and we all laughed again. And then we just left it.

"I will say, one thing it did for us was make us gutsy and determined not to be just petticoat painters, but to be taken seriously."

The 1953 show, intended to be a one-off, was such a success Hartman and her husband decided to produce an annual women-only event. But as a mother, gallery owner and artist, she needed help to organize and sustain it. That first group of seven artists formed a loose organization that could assess member dues (now \$50 a year), assist with publicity and scout locations. Hartman researched and wrote the bylaws and constitution but "didn't consider myself good enough" to be included; she joined two years later.

Membership, by invitation only, was capped (and remains) at 20, a number that allows for a one-piece-each show in small galleries, or multiple works in larger spaces. Candidates are considered for inclusion based on technical excellence, a distinctive style different from any other artist's in the group, and a history of working full-time in the field.

Those rules still stand, though Hartman bristles a bit at a laxity she feels has crept into the organization. Several years ago, as a reminder, she began including a copy of the constitution in welcome packets for new members.

As vacancies evolve, Judy Axe, one of the founding members and a friend of Hartman's who lived across the hall at college, died last fall at 91, leaving one — members vote in replacements, by a two-thirds majority approval.

"It's a secret ballot," says president Madelaine Ginsberg. "We don't want any enmity."

According to Hartman, who recently retired as the organization's historian, there have been more than 90 artists throughout the group's history. Current members range in age from the 50-ish Ellen Mason to 94-year-old Alice DeCaprio.

Ginsberg oversees formal business meetings three times a year but most members also enjoy a more casual and social monthly breakfast meeting at O'Leary's, field trips to museums and exhibitions and occasional sessions where one artist shares an area of expertise with the others. (Ginsberg will be doing one soon on "how to expand your creativity.")

"We are a very congenial group," she says, "although also quite strong-minded and opinionated."

Ginsberg says the organization's name is still debated regularly.

"Every year it comes up," she says. "There have been some very provocative suggestions. But we go around this issue over and over and we never come to any conclusion but the one we have, which is well known. It's our brand. Maybe we should start wearing petticoats."

Shout Out Communications' Marcia Christ is at work on a documentary about the Petticoat Painters that she plans to enter in next year's Sarasota Film Festival and also hopes to bring, along with an exhibit of members' work, to the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. She has interviewed the group's current members and sorted at length through Hartman's archival records of newspaper articles and show catalogs.

"These are very strong women who are dedicated to and passionate about their art," says Christ, who moved to Sarasota last year from upstate New York state, where she was creative director for an advertising agency. "They are also very supportive and protective of each other. And I don't think that's all that common in the real world, much less the art world."

Some have questioned whether there is still a need for a women's artist group in today's more gender-friendly world. Ginsberg grants that no one could possibly get away with withholding a first-prize check from a woman who fairly earns it these days. But she still has "never yet heard of a husband whose wife is an artist and who does everything else at home so she can devote all her time to art."

As for Hartman, who has two small watercolors in the show but for the first time holds no official Petticoat Painters title, she has no doubt.

"Is there still a need?" she asks rhetorically. "Is there still a need for the woman artist to reach her fullest potential?"

"I'm terribly proud of what we've accomplished and the Petticoat Painters have been the love of my life. But we've still not reached our maximum potential. There's a need for any group that will continue to move women forward."