

Salem Art Fair's entry fee, less-local emphasis stir debate

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Art lovers enjoy a beautiful afternoon during the annual Salem Art Fair and Festival at Bush's Pasture Park on Saturday, July 17, 2010.

There are at least two diverging views of the Salem Art Fair & Festival, which is packing Bush's Pasture Park this weekend:

-It's a 60-year tradition. It's a great time to meet up with friends in the park, buy crafts from favorite local artisans, listen to free music and buy good food. It's heresy to fence off even part of the park. Let those who want to, donate money toward it, but don't charge admission.

-It's a major fund-raiser for the Salem Art Association, which serves the Mid-Valley through the Bush Barn Art Center, the Bush House Museum, artists' support programs and community art education for schoolchildren. Impartial selection of artists — sometimes at the expense of locals — has helped the fair break into the top 50 such events nationwide. It's time to charge a firm admission fee, with a fence to enforce it.

You wouldn't guess there was controversy on Friday, as guests streamed in to the fair's two-hour free opening under sunny skies. But those differences have been simmering for weeks in casual conversations and in posts on StatesmanJournal.com.

The main points of contention: the first-ever mandatory admission fee and the gradual shift to fewer local artisans and more regional and national ones.

Free vs. admission

The Salem Art Fair & Festival is a major fundraiser for the sponsoring art association, but up until 2000, the event was free. The next year, volunteers began asking for a \$2 donation. By 2006, they asked — albeit without pressure — for \$5.

Hoping to snare more donors, officials erected a 1,700-foot-long fence in 2004. Community reaction was so swift and strong that the fence came down before the fair's opening parade.

This year, the first with executive director Sandra Burnett on board throughout the planning process, the fair has both a fence and a firm \$5 admission charge (\$7 for the full weekend). It is being collected at marked entry gates with paid security workers at hand.

To Burnett and others at the art association, the admission charge is key to keeping the arts in Salem alive.

In the past year, said Burnett, the art association's board has trimmed expenses for its programs.

"To continue to serve Salem as the primary resource in the arts, you have to make better use of your fund-raising opportunities," she said last week.

The years of polite requests for donations weren't particularly effective; last year only about 13 percent of art fair visitors tossed money in the donation cans, according to the art association's figures.

Burnett's goal: to increase the gross gate revenue from \$50,000 to \$100,000. Even with added expenses for collecting the money and some drop in attendance, she figures, the art association will be closer to balancing its \$1 million budget.

John Lake, a Salem Art Association board member for four years, said the board went over the art association's books a year ago and "cut personnel to the bone."

"If we lose a program, why are we here?" he said. "Instead of decreasing expenses, we need to increase revenue."

One of those who disagrees with the entry fee is Britta Franz, a longtime art association supporter. She served a total of nine years on the board in the 1960s and '70s, when the entire organization ran on volunteer power.

"The proof is in the weekend," she said last week. "I'm looking forward to being proved wrong, that the entrance fee will not deter attendance. They have proven they need the money. But it's a big disappointment."

Chris D'Arcy of Salem, who attends arts events statewide through her work with the Oregon Arts Commission and Oregon Cultural Trust, said the proposed fees seemed reasonable for the experience involved.

"There are opportunities to buy a weekend pass, to go for free on Friday morning … and it seems they have sought out how they would accommodate, even welcome families," she said last week.

"I'm not sure there is understanding this is a 501(c)3 nonprofit that puts on a festival in a public park. ... It is a very expensive thing to put on a weekend event that serves 100,000 people."

Thursday evening, neighborhood resident Richard Berger was relaxing with friends in the park. He said he would pay the entry fee but grouse about it to his art association friends.

"The money goes to the Salem Art Association and it does good things," he said. "But when charging, it becomes less of a community event."

After noon Friday, as security workers began politely directing visitors through entry booths, most people seemed to be reaching for their wallets without complaint.

"It's OK," said Norma Hines of Salem, who bought a \$7 multi-day pass. "They were sort of doing it before (by asking for donations)."

Her friend, Pat Blake of Wichita, Kan., said, "If I was poor I might not do it ... but we're not poor; we can afford it. We'll see lots of nice things."

However, Milan Apeltauer of Stayton stepped up to the entry booth, heard about the fee and

did a quick about-face.

"For one thing, I don't have any money on me," he said. "I'm just on my lunch break, and I wanted to see what was there. I wanted to come back later this night with my wife, but now I'm not sure if I will."

Locals vs. out-of-towners

While the art association has been pressing fair visitors to pay something, and then a little more, another trend has quietly been taking place among the aisles of artisans: Their numbers have gradually shifted to reflect more regional and national artists and fewer from the Mid-Valley.

For the fair's first 26 years, anyone could participate. In 1977, the art association started choosing the artists through a jury system, to the consternation of many.

Nancy Lindburg of Salem, an artist who served as the art association's executive director from 1973 to 1978, said, "We realized our gift to the community was to do the very best we could as to presenting works of art. ... You have some people juried in, some juried out. It's not fun to be juried out, but there's always the next year."

In 1978, by Lindburg's calculation, 68 percent of the participating artists came from the Willamette Valley. By the 2000s, that proportion had reversed dramatically. In 2001, 22 percent of the artists listed home addresses in Marion, Polk, Yamhill, Linn or Benton County. By this year, that figure had fallen to 9 percent.

Part of the recent years' change could be due to the 2007 switch to charging a flat fee of \$500 per booth instead of taking a percent commission on art sales. The change favored artists with high sales, but it priced some small sellers out of the fair.

The art association also dropped the practice of inviting back a certain number of top sellers. Instead, the entire process is conducted by a blind jury that doesn't consider where artists live or whether they have shown at the art fair before, according to Burnett, the art association director.

That system has helped the art fair attract more artists — 670 applied for 200 booths this year. More competition means higher-quality art, a factor that was instrumental in raising Salem's rating in the closely watched Art Fair Source Book.

Said Burnett, "It is a point of pride for Salem that we have an art fair with that ranking. It brings more tourism dollars ... it attracts more and more artists, high-ranking artists."

Galleries curator Catherine Alexander said that only 20 Salem artists applied for the fair this year. "We can only work with who applies," she added.

Both Alexander and Burnett pointed out that the Bush Barn Art Center is showing work by local artists during July. The main show, "Radius 25," is a juried show of artists who live or work within 25 miles of Salem.

"Showing our local/regional artists in all three galleries is a recognition of how important this window is," said Burnett. "There are a lot of people here to look at art from out of state."

One artisan who disputes that point is Dave Posedel, co-owner of The Mud Pie Pottery Studio and Gallery in South Salem. He and his wife have shown at the art fair nearly every year since the mid-1970s, but they failed to get juried in this year.

"It's hardly a comparison, being in the art fair and being in 'Radius 25,' " he said. "We sell in the thousands of dollars at the art fair. To suggest 'It's same thing, you have same opportunity,' is apples and oranges. It's a wonderful outlet, I appreciate they are doing it the same time as the art fair; but to say it balances it out, doesn't hold water."

Posedel said his wife, Cheri, would still go to the festival to dance with the Cherry City Cloggers. He planned to stay home, he said: "I'll encourage people to come to our gallery, without trying to be bitter about it."

Another artist, Joanne Mills Bentley of Salem, commented tartly, "I don't want to be a critical person but I do think this is better for the Chamber of Commerce than the city of Salem. The Chamber of Commerce will love it, those (out-of-towners) will spend money and fill the hotels, and as an artist I know they will barter like crazy."

However, two local artists who were juried in to the fair praised the current system.

"It's a complicated issue," said Ann Altman of Silverton, who was selling a range of her work, from original acrylic paintings at \$1,000 to notecards for \$3. "I think it's nice to have a balance of things you might expect to see and fresh new things you haven't seen before ... I think they should do whatever they must to make it the best show possible."

Her neighbor in Aisle 19, cabinetmaker George Essaides of Salem, agreed. As customers peered at his \$30 breadboards and a \$3,200 solid hickory trestle table, he said, "When I was juried in they told me no one would know who I was, they would look at the quality of the work. That is what needs to be, to maintain the quality of work. A lot of artists come here because the quality of work is so stellar."

Time will tell

Which side will influence the fair in the long run? One answer may come from the clipboard surveys being taken this weekend by art association staff and volunteers.

Another will come when the gate receipts are counted. Art association supporters figured they could lose a substantial number of attendees and still come out ahead by charging a firm admission fee.

Said Burnett: "In order to sustain this organization, which has been going for 91 years, this was a step which had to be made."

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