EARLY HISTORY OF THE WORKING ARTISTS FORUM

"HEAVEN HELP YOU IF YOU DON'T HAVE A PASSION!"
Martha Hudson, The Traveling Brushes

Indeed…it is passion which is at the heart of the Working Artists Forum! Today the Forum is a nonprofit organization of over one hundred professional juried artists from the Eastern and Western shores of Maryland, as well as neighboring states. Artists produce two dimensional works in a variety of mediums including watercolor, oil, pastel, acrylics, gouache, and drawings. A working artist is defined as one who consistently creates works of art that are for sale. Early members asserted," We are NOT Sunday painters"! To join, artists must be juried into the organization, pay dues and attend meetings.

A kernel of an idea for the group began in 1979 when a small cadre of local artists began using the Academy of the Arts (to become the Academy Art Museum in the 90's) as studio space. They painted there and did critiques together. In March of 1981, the group had their first formal meeting and became associated with the Academy of the Arts under Jim Plumb, the Academy Directer. About twelve members began to brainstorm and with persistence, patience and very hard work began to lay the groundwork for the collaborative and professional coterie of artists which exists today! Those early members were eager for more exposure, more shows and more exhibits of members works; improved communication and exchange of ideas among area artists; and expanded art education with input from outside the Eastern Shore as well as demos by accomplished artists in the community and elsewhere.

At the second meeting, the name Working Artists Forum was recommended. The WAF would be defined by the serious advanced artist. Some priorities for membership would be screening,

amount of interest, instruction, ability and experience. Through the years, consideration of a name change was reviewed several times. Some suggestions were Tidewater Painting Club, Academy Art League, Academy Professional League, but the discussion was always tabled and the name stuck!

That same year objectives and rules were established. An artist could become a full time member of WAF as follows:

1. By submitting examples of current work along with a brief resume and obtaining the WAF screening committee approval.
2. By meeting the definition of a working artist as stated: A working artist shall be defined as one who consistently creates works of art in various media and upon application meets the standards of the screening committee.
3. By paying dues.
4. By becoming members of the Academy of the Arts.

These rules and objectives were reviewed and amended several times.

The goals of the WAF were to develop and explore through communication, exposure and education.

The first exhibitions at the Academy of the Arts took place during the summer of 1981. A regular exhibition site was established in an upstairs studio at the academy with signage downstairs announcing the WAF exhibition. They painted the walls and pegboard used for hanging

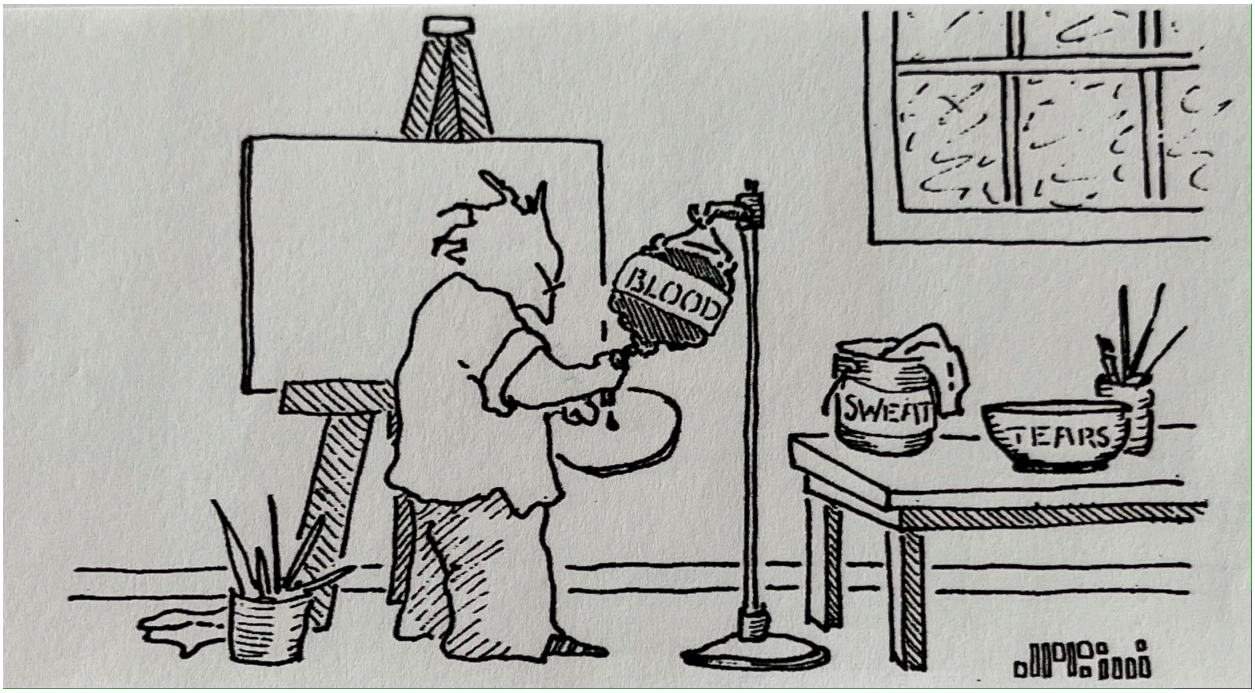
paintings themselves! The upstairs site officially opened in January of 1982.

Every meeting included critiques as well as plans for shows, workshops, portrait demos, a series of life classes, landscape field trips, trips to museums, paint outs and speakers. Besides art, the speakers covered a wide range of nuts and bolts topics including framing, gallery relationships, business considerations and keeping track of expenses, tax write-offs for the home studio, and chemical hazards that an artist could encounter. They talked about how to sell their work. Books were recommended such as ; *Art Marketing Handbook*, *On Your Own,* and *How To Sell Your Paintings*. They were collaborative, encouraging and supportive to one another. “Success is a trip, not a destination. Make your art trip a pleasure cruise with a very good rudder.” Meetings rotated between the Academy and various artists homes. Alternate day and evening meetings were suggested to accommodate artists who had full time jobs. Men were encouraged to join. They also had lots of bag lunches and covered dish suppers!

Display space for members was scouted out in local businesses, banks, restaurants, hospitals. The owner of the Golden Corral on Route 50 requested paintings to hang in her restaurant. Ten artists volunteered. Eventually easels were obtained and a rotating schedule was established for artists to display their paintings in local banks.

Members began to insist on more juried shows. Venues for shows began to open up in the area and other Eastern Shore locations. Members were encouraged to have a slide registry of their work ready to advertise their talents for museums, shows and clients. The quality, standards and reputation of WAF artists began to grow. Over the next decade, the association began to evolve

and membership expanded**.** A cartoon which depicts an artist dipping into pots of blood, sweat and tears aptly portrays those early years!



WAF was closely connected to the Academy of the Arts for the first ten years. The role of the Academy was to meet the needs of the local art community by sponsoring art groups and pooling resources to procure major art programs. There were ongoing discussions regarding the possible clash of WAF goals and requirements of the Academy as a lot of time, energy and commitment is necessary to produce and market art! Nurture and management of the group sometimes intruded into painting time and sometimes there was conflict with the academy regarding timing of exhibits. Another drawback of the Academy was that it is an education institution for the community, not a marketplace. Alternate meeting places were explored. Continued individual commitment was essential in consideration of any separation from the Academy. Do it yourself

gallery responsibilities were a concern. But there were also many advantages to the Academy, especially the education committee offerings such as bus trips to DC and Wilmington museum galleries, speakers and workshops. In 1987, it was decided to apply to formalize affiliate status with the Academy. The Academy would sponsor the WAF, support activities and work together to further goals. Budget was approved for the speaker program and exhibition opportunities would continue.

In the 90's, with about 60 members, WAF split from the Academy of the Arts and in June 1991 became incorporated as a 5013c non-profit organization, Working Artist Forum INC. The articles of incorporation stated that WAF was organized exclusively for charitable and educational purposes. It would promote education, growth and excellence in art at the professional level in communities of the Eastern Shore of Maryland. The document was signed by Perry Foster and Jean Smith. These ladies , along with Mary Talbot Rieckert were currently in charge. All were top mid-Atlantic artists, and had artwork hanging in many private and corporate collections including The State Department and World Bank.

Service became an important component of the organization. To benefit The Academy Art Museum (formerly the Academy of the Arts), they sponsored a miniatures show. Members judged children's art. The group participated in the Hospice benefit, The Festival of Trees by decorating a Christmas tree with miniature paintings. The tree was auctioned for $2200.00! Several members created a number of mural triptychs for the The Talbot Senior Center and Cambridge Hospital. Some artists participated in a show to benefit the Maritime Museum, the

site for many plein air outings! Art works were donated to Dixon House and also for auction to benefit the St. Michaels' Fire Department.

Many early members contributed to the successful beginnings of WAF. Founding members were Mildred Droege, Mary Ekroos, Teresa Frederick, Esther Henry, Martha Hudson, Barbara Jablin, Bette List, Georganne Masten, Dorothy Newland, Mary Rieckert, Jean Snyder, Betty Wise and Joyce Zeigler. Their names pop up consistently in the early years.. organizing, encouraging, troubleshooting and being involved. They held leadership positions, taught and held workshops in many locations, exhibited widely, and won awards. Martha Hudson exhibited in a cultural exchange show which traveled to Japan. Mary Talbot Rieckert taught a workshop in the Shenandoah Valley at the request of former students. They organized painting trips to Berkley Springs, WV., to Ireland in '88, on a skipjack for several days around the Chesapeake and a painting canoe trip among many others! They were dedicated to the excellence and success of the professional artist!

It is worth mentioning a group of six artists who evolved from the WAF and are truly a microcosm of so much of what the WAF is today. Four of them are charter members but they all were very involved with WAF in the early years when their friendship began.
A video about this special group of artists revealed the following information.

In 1984 Martha Hudson invited six artist friends to a weeklong painting trip on Smith Island. The experience was so rewarding that they formalized the relationship and Betty Ruhl coined the name The Traveling Brushes. They were truly passionate about plein air painting, loving the

impressionist style. Over fifty painting trips were arranged from Maine to North Carolina. Their trips spanned thirty four years. Joyce Zeigler describes packing all her painting gear and supplies in her suitcase and if there was room she'd throw in some clothes! The women had distinctive styles and used different media. They consistently critiqued one another and these award winning artists had joint shows every two years.

All were natives of the Eastern Shore. Their love of their surroundings , so rich in wildlife and natural beauty, is apparent in their paintings and in their comments. There are marshes, rivers, creeks and coastlines with new discoveries and stimulating subject matter. " There are scenes everywhere just waiting for paintbrushes, " says Roberta Seger. Roberta is happiest in or near the water. "The sounds," she says. " There is a symphony in those marshes. Art is total escape." What is it about the Eastern Shore that has attracted artists for hundreds of years? " It's the light," says Martha Hudson.

" The water reflects the sky and it just bounces back and forth." Mary Ekroos describes their wonderful spirit of camaraderie. Barbara Jablin, winner of the silver medal in the mid-Atlantic watercolor show, is thrilled to be painting again after taking a break from her art career to raise her family. All the women expressed a deep and abiding desire to be known and remembered as an artist..to leave a legacy.

And their legacy lives on! That special aesthetic of the Eastern Shore continues to attract artists and is the perfect backdrop for the Working Artists Forum. From 2013 to the present, under Betty Huang's leadership, membership has increased from 87 to 103. "These diverse and fabulous artists are committed to expanding the mission of WAF," states Betty. Currently, WAF members exhibit widely, win awards, teach classes and workshops and participate in art events

not only throughout the region, but also nationally and even internationally. Monthly meetings promote camaraderie and networking through discussion of upcoming events and includes a demo by a well known artist. The WAF maintains a strong art presence on the Eastern Shore through partnership with the Avalon Foundation, the Academy Art Museum and Waterfowl Festival. A robust schedule of exhibits has been fostered from Eastern Shore locations such as Heron Point, Chestertown; WAF artists in The Tidewater Inn , Easton; the Academy Art Museum, Easton; Talbot County Library, Easton; Waterfowl Festival, Easton; Maritime Museum and other galleries, St. Michael's; Chesapeake College Show; Dorchester Art Center; Kent Island Federation of Arts ; Salisbury Art Space and in 2022 The Art League of Ocean City. From 2016 to 2022 exhibits began to expand to the western shore to include these locations; Woods Church, Severna Park; West Annapolis Artworks and Framing and Quiet Waters in Annapolis; The Strathmore Mansion in Bethesda, Md. and in 2022 The Columbia Art Center, Columbia, Maryland. But for the past 18 years, the Local Color Exhibit in conjunction with Plein Air Easton, has been the annual, ongoing crown jewel exhibit of the group.

In 2004 the Easton Plein Air Festival came into being. Many WAF artists wanted to participate but all were not plein air artists. During that time, Jeanne Saulsbury started brainstorming with The Avalon Foundation and other local art groups. As a result, WAF, in conjunction with Easton Plein Air and the St. Michaels' Art League presented the first Local Color Show in the Gold Room of the Tidewater Inn. Over the years, the show expanded to include artists from the entire Eastern Shore and became more diverse. It was open to artists doing studio as well as plein air work. These changes elevated the professionalism and status of the exhibit considerably. The educational component of the display has also increased in size and dimension by providing

demos by top artists, free and open to the public. The demos are an integral part of the show and are well received by artists and the public alike. In 2010, The St Michaels Art League discontinued show sponsorship, though their artists continue to participate. The Working Artists Forum, in conjunction with The Avalon Foundation, has continued to produce the Local Color Exhibit. Christ Church Parish Hall, as the current venue , has proven to be a convenient, central location. The show has become an integral part of the Easton Plein Air Festival.

The WAF fosters the visual arts in local schools with gift cards to supplement art supplies in elementary schools on the Eastern Shore from the proceeds of the Local Color show. This project has expanded in the recent past from three to six counties and includes thirty three schools. The gift card amount has also tripled from $50 to $150 dollars due to the success of the Local Color Exhibit. At one school, students were so happy to receive this boost that they burst into spontaneous applause!

Since the earliest days of its inception, the Working Artists Forum has continued to grow in size and stature, striving to maintain standards of excellence and professionalism.