

TEXAS HIGHWAYS--TX ST. A&C FAIR—MALLORY

**Kerrville's Official Texas State Arts & Crafts Fair
Celebrates its 30th Birthday...**

Deep in the Art of Texas

OR

Kerrville's Official Texas State Arts & Crafts Fair celebrates...

Artful Days of May

Story and photos by Randy Mallory

To paint the portrait of the Official Texas Arts & Crafts Fair, sketch in 200 or so of the state's top artists, displaying their works--from pottery to paintings--under the cover of long white tents. Add the color of a country fair--roasted corn, woodcarvers, country music, and roving jugglers. Then brush in blue skies, shady oak trees, and a meandering stream--a landscape worthy of the Texas Hill Country.

Each year, when late-spring wildflowers yield to verdant pastures, folks from across Texas flock to Schreiner College campus in Kerrville to paint themselves into just such a scene.

They peruse top-quality arts and crafts, listen to music, participate in crafts demonstrations, and munch on food across 16 rolling acres along Quinlan Creek.

This annual Memorial Day weekend pilgrimage (May 25-28 this year) puts art lovers together with art makers in a mutual appreciation society.

Fair regular Bob Kuchera of Houston has attended the last 10 fairs: “I like the variety and uniqueness of the artists’ works. You see pieces here that you won’t see anywhere else. It’s the grand-daddy of arts and crafts fairs.”

Watercolorist Edith Maskey of Comfort exhibited at the first fair in 1972 and has missed only one since: “Talking with customers is singularly gratifying. You get so attached to your works, it’s like giving away puppies: When it’s time for them to go, you like to know they’re going to a good home.”

Last year, some 22,000 visitors provided “good homes” for more than \$600,000 worth of artists’ works. Designated in 1995 by the Texas Legislature as the state’s “official” arts and crafts fair, the Kerrville artfest sets high creative standards.

First of all, it’s a juried show: A jury of fellow artists and independent jurors picks no more than 200 exhibitors from each year’s applicants. Artists also must live in Texas and must make their own works--no mass-produced or commercial goods. General work categories include: painting, sculpture, pottery, leatherwork, jewelry, fiber, glass, graphics/drawing, metal works, mixed media, photography, and woodcraft.

Kerrville’s reputation for quality has garnered kudos from several national arts and crafts trade publications, says fair executive director Annette Butler. To keep the show fresh, at least 20 percent of exhibitors are new each year. But artists have such good experiences at Kerrville, adds Annette, that a high percent want to return year after year.

Frank and Chris De Lapp--who make whimsical soft fiber sculptures at their studio in the aptly-named community of Art, Texas--have exhibited at 25 Kerrville fairs. "We show all over the South," explains Frank, "and this is the only Texas event we attend."

Adds relative newcomer Donald Pimpler of Cameron, who has exhibited his off-beat recycled metal sculptures at two Kerrville fairs: "I do a dozen shows a year, and this one really seems to attract people who are ready and able to buy."

Indeed, where quality artists go, quality patrons follow.

Joel and Carol Klein of San Antonio, for instance, have attended 15 of the last 20 fairs. "We bought one piece of stained glass at our first fair," says Joel, "and continued buying over the years, everything from original paintings to sculpture to fiber pieces." The Alamo City attorney (and host of a travel show on San Antonio's KENS-AM 1160 radio) became such a fair devotee, in fact, that he ended up on its board of directors. "It's a win-win situation," he notes. "Talented artists get a great place to exhibit, and visitors get to see the best of what Texas has to offer."

That's just what the Texas Tourist Development Agency had in mind in 1970 when it created the fair, patterned after successful events in Canada and West Virginia. In 1975, the Texas Arts and Crafts Educational Foundation took over what the state began. Today, led by an 18-member board of community representatives and artists (and an army of 250 volunteers), the foundation makes a lasting artistic statement.

In addition to the fair, the foundation provides \$4,500 in “Young Arts” scholarships to Texas high school students who compete to show their prizewinning creations at each year’s fair. The foundation also offers occasional fellowships to Texas artisans to study and preserve traditional craft skills.

Recent fellowship winner Terry Theis of Harper demonstrates the ancient European craft of weapons engraving to fairgoers crowded around his booth. Nearby, another demonstrator, Dale Myres of XXXX, shows off sourdough cooking, while playing a lively tune on his harmonica. Across the fairgrounds, other crafts demonstrators make brooms, hook rugs, tan hides, spin thread, and pound metal on a blacksmith’s anvil.

A few artists hold their own demonstrations. Virgie Raven Hawk Villarreal of San Antonio beads Indian artifact reproductions at her booth. She also performs songs on her handmade Indian flutes. She tells one impressed observer, Gene Divita of Houston, “If you buy a flute, I guarantee I’ll teach you to play in 30 minutes.” He takes the offer, and the strains of his first lesson blend with the foot-tapping sounds of western swing music coming from a nearby stage.

The fair presents almost non-stop entertainment at two stages, in fact—ranging from country and folk music to gospel and hits from the Sixties.

Throw into the entertainment mix a couple of roving comics who juggle, ride unicycles, and even swallow swords, and the grounds sometimes resemble a three-ringed circus.

Kids can go “hands-on” at their own area, complete with petting zoo, face painting, caricaturist, and clowns. Adults can sample half a dozen varieties of Texas wines and Hill Country cuisine at the annual Texas Wine Tasting, an event added to the fair in 1998.

Visitors of all ages can, of course, feast the day away on a menu of everything from jambalaya and peach cobbler to bratwurst and bread pudding--plus the obligatory sausage-on-a-stick, fresh-squeezed lemonade, and funnel cakes.

Sitting in a low-slung rocking chair made by Austin craftsman Ed Werlan, visitor Arlon Fields of Orange expresses surprise at the range of activities. “I graduated from Schreiner College 40 years ago, and recently heard about all the neat stuff to see and do at the fair. I didn’t realize what a big deal this is.”

It’s a “big deal” for Arlon’s alma mater, too. “Schreiner College has had a delightful relationship with the fair over the years,” says longtime president (now interim president) Dr. Sam Junkin. “The fair has helped the college develop its interests in the arts and should continue to do so in the future.”

The fair remains a big deal for exhibiting artists, of course--not only because of sales, but also because it helps them do what they love: make art.

“I’ve been exhibiting at Kerrville for 18 years in a row,” says artist Melanie Fain of Boerne, as she hangs a finely-detailed butterfly lithograph in her booth in the fair’s stone pavilion. “I have many customers I count as friends, and they come each year to see what new work I’ve done. I can’t imagine myself doing any other kind of work.”

And, come late May, thousands of fair fanatics won't be able to imagine spending Memorial Day weekend any other way but viewing works of art along a shady creek in the heart of the Hill Country at the Official Texas State Arts & Crafts Fair.

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Suggested author's note:

Tyler photojournalist Randy Mallory is currently working on an article on artists and attractions in the other (western) half of Kerr County.

RESOURCES:

1. Texas Arts and Crafts Educational Foundation, Annette Butler, 830-896-5711; www.tacef.org; tacef@hilconet.com
2. Bob Kuchera, 281-333-3588 or 281-890-0398 (not sure which, I'll call for right one and let you know)
3. Arlon Fields, 409-746-2082
4. Virgie Raven Hawk Villarreal, 210/341-5823
5. Gene Divita, 713-869-4110
6. Melanie Fain, 830-537-4364
7. Donald Pimpler, 254-697-6171
8. Frank De Lapp, 915-347-5042
9. Edith Maskey, 830-995-2873
10. Joel Klein, 210-734-4488
11. Dr. Sam Junkin, 830-896-5411