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Tour of the Arts Creates Enthusiasm and Inspiration

By Colleen Kesterson & Andi Bourne

A lone coyote sat on Barber Creek Road as cars went by enroute to Bob Korn's open studio during the Tour of the Arts. The coyote loped onto the roadside as the cars passed, but quickly returned to stand in the road. He was probably wondering what was creating so much interest.



Artist Russ Abolt showing his sculptures. The sculpture in front is called Washington D.C. Photo by Colleen Kesterson.

Alpine Artisans' Tour of the Arts was held at seven working studios, three galleries and one museum in the Seeley Swan and Blackfoot Valleys Oct. 12 and 13. The public visited with artists about their work, toured their studios and purchased artwork.

At Bob Korn's studio visitors chatted about his craft as he worked at his pottery wheel.

Condon resident Cookie Beers said, "I like to support the local artists. It is so great to see all these talented artists tucked away on the back roads."

Potomac resident Amy Vann started her first Tour of the Arts at SwanWoods with friend Allyson Nelson. They listened as Jerry Swanson explained the process for making the various wooden bowls he and wife Martha create.



Visitors were welcomed into Merrily Dunham's Rockin' Horse Studio on Guest Ranch Road. Photo by Colleen Kesterson.

"It [Tour of the Arts] has been awesome," Vann said. "We've seen all different kinds of art in places you would never find [without the map]. There are some really talented artists I never knew about."

Most of the tour goers were not able to visit all the galleries. Some pick a few galleries/studios each year to really focus on. Jan Mielke and Char Erickson visited Littlebird's Flying Popcorn Ranch. They said it was recommended as a "must see."

"I didn't know it was so personal," said Whitney Ranstrom from Big Fork. "All the artists have such a passion [for their work] and have a story to share." Ranstrom and her friends from California and Nevada were only able to make it to three studios before they ran out of time.



Jerry Swanson shares the process of making SwanWood bowls with visitors at his studio. Photo by Andi Bourne.

A couple from Helena, Art Noonan and Alicia Pichette exclaimed that the Abolt's Inspiration Garden was, "A garden of the gods in the mountains. The value of art is shown in an outdoor setting. It is whimsical."

Onlookers observed a demonstration by artist Russ Abolt showing how he shapes wood to make his natural sculptures. Visitors then walked a short distance to Abolt's log home where they could visit a variety of guest artists' booths.

"Rose, go get your Dad," said Colleen Harrington, John Mercer's wife at Swan Valley Images. "There is a bus!" Missoula Senior Citizens rented a Beachliner bus for the tour. They stopped at many of the studios and purchased artwork that caught their eye.

Jo Ogden and Jeff Wischart were guest artists at One Hand Clapping Studio and Gallery. "Being involved in Alpine Artisans allows for peer mentoring," said Wischart. "There is a mutual respect and admiration."



Bob Korn working at his pottery wheel in his studio during Tour of the Arts. Photo by Colleen Kesterson.

Lynne Perry, an artist from Ferndale, agreed, "They are a unique, energetic group, that I am proud to be associated with."

Ogden enjoys the opportunity to be around such talented artists and to be able to promote her work while supporting other artists.



John Mercer discussing his photography with guest Ted Muhs. Photo by Andi Bourne.

According to Ken Dvorak, Alpine Artisans' president and owner of One Hand Clapping Studio and Gallery, there are many benefits of the Tour of the Arts. First, it gives artists an opportunity to sell their artwork. Second, it provides artists the opportunity to talk about their art. Third, it gives artists "name exposure", especially with the additional shows in Missoula and Big Fork. And finally, it allows artists to support each other and the work that they do.