

Vashon Studio Tour's Humble Beginning

By Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly

This year, the Vashon Island Art Studio Tour, taking place December 7-8 and 14-15, features forty five artists including jewelers, ceramicists, sculptors, photographers, painters, glass artists, printmakers, and “much more.” This twice-annual event (the other Tour occurs in the spring) had its beginnings thirty-three years ago as the Vashon Potter’s Tour originated by six Island potters.

In 1979 six Island potters organized a holiday pottery sale in each of their studios and each potter advertised separately to their customers. During the next year they decided to combine mailing lists and created a postcard (shown here) to advertise their sale. John Sage, one of the potters, worked with each potter to put their mailing list on his Apple II computer, to sort them into one mailing list, and to print labels. It took over two days for the computer to sort the files and print the labels. This was still the early days of personal computers.



Original Potter’s Tour 1980 – Paul Macapia.
Left to right Larry Watson, Greg McElroy, Irene Otis, John Sage,
Janice Mallman, and Patricia Cummings.

When John Sage “discovered” this photograph earlier this year, it struck us as a great opportunity to get the group back together, “re-create” the photograph, and collect their memories of the first Potter’s Tour. The group met with Terry Donnelly and me on a cool, windy November Saturday, took photographs, learned how the Potter’s Tour helped create an amazing connection among these artists, and learned what led them to create the original Potter’s Tour thirty-three years ago.

As they reminisced about their experiences the stories flowed freely. Pat remembered that when they mailed their first postcard in 1980, she had over 1,000 messages left on her home answering machine (this was before voice mail). Greg reflected on the year the ice storm was so severe that many island roads were closed because of black ice, and still folks came to their studios. John Sage recalled that the potters all “had identical white-and-blue signs painted by Kaj Berry that we put up out on the Island Highway directing people to our studios.” Rosalie Sage, John and Janice’s daughter, remarked when she was five years old that she liked the tour because “Mom will be making Christmas tree cookies with green stuff on them.” Janice Mallman commented “the big thing was the idea that we could all be selling our pottery at the same time and we didn’t feel a sense of competition. We never felt like rivals just comrades sharing an intense love of clay.” Pat Cummings best captured the special bond between these potters when she commented, “During the year we socialized, helped deliver pots to our off island galleries, did fairs together, bought supplies together, and in general offered support. I look at that picture from 1980 in front of the Blue Heron, and feel like I am looking at a family photo, because that is how it felt.”

The Potters Tour continued to flourish through the 1980s and 1990s. In the mid-1980s, the potters began to handout Barnworks brochures to help publicize the Barnworks exhibits. Other potters soon joined the Potter’s Tour – Jeff and Donna Tousley, Liz Lewis, Tom and Julie Koster, and Kim Newall – and by the late 1990s, other artists joined as well and the Potter’s Tour morphed into what it is today, the Art Studio Tour.

Of the six original Potter’s Tour potters only Irene Otis is still an active potter. As she puts it, “Amazing to still be glazing after all these years!” Larry Watson moved to North Bend, Oregon in 1982, where he still works as an artist. Greg McElroy changed careers in 1995 and began teaching at Vashon High School. Pat Cummings went on to earn a Masters in Applied Behavioral Science and moved to Port Townsend in 2007 where she is a therapist at Dove House Advocacy Services. John Sage began working for King County in 1988 and stopped producing pottery. Janice Mallman began working for Vashon Allied Arts and also stopped making pottery. Greg McElroy, who recently retired from teaching, has begun to clean out his old studio to start working with clay again.

Patricia Cummings, now Patricia Bolen, still has all her equipment, and plans to return to pottery at some time in the future. John Sage has become a well know Island photographer, with his Finchhaven.com web site. And, Janice Mallman has continued to work for Vashon Allied Arts for the last 28 years, currently as the Gallery Curator, and in her off time creates original collages and monotypes for lamps, cards and framed works.



2013 Potters at the Blue Heron - Terry Donnelly.

Greg McElroy, John Sage, and Janice Mallman standing, Irene Otis and Patricia (Cummings) Bolen sitting on the bench sweetly holding hands.

As you consider your plans for the 2013 Art Studio Tour, taken a moment to think about where you were in 1980, and send your thanks to the six innovative and creative ceramicists, who, in 1980, got this all started with the first Potter's Tour.