



Association of Wisconsin History

by Mary Ann Inman

AWA, formerly Wisconsin Regional Art Program (WRAA), has changed its name twice as it has evolved. For historical purposes, it will be referred to as the association. The association was founded mainly as a support group for the Rural Art Program (RAP), begun in 1940 by UW-Madison's Dean Chris Christensen and Prof. John Barton. These visionary men believed the lives of rural families could and should be enriched with art. They recruited John Steuart Curry to UW to be an artist-in-residence who would spend time traveling about, encouraging citizen artists and crafts people. By 1945 the RAP had held its first exhibit in Madison of works by non-professional artists from around the state. The program became so popular that Prof. James Schwalbach was hired to coach rural artists and set up exhibits. He and Curry's successor, Aaron Bohrod, attended a dozen shows per year, teaching and judging. The plan for a regional artists' association was first proposed by a handful of artists who were excited by the early RAP and wanted to help UW Extension reach out to even more Wisconsin artists, stating this goal explicitly in their by-laws.

Incorporated in 1954 and continually managed by a volunteer board, the association began producing the newsletter *Contour Notes* which linked the UW's Art Program to artists and to the new art clubs then springing up across the state. The association thrived, *Contour Notes'* moved to tighter focus on WRAP and association events and began collecting and distributing merit/service awards, currently totaling \$5,500. Membership has fluctuated, but for the past 15 years has remained in the 400-500 range. In 2000, in anticipation of future state budget cuts, the association began building an endowment to help the UW Madison's WRAP. Since 2015, the endowment--worth about \$180,000--has paid \$6,000-\$8300 annually to support WRAP. WRAP currently averages 22 shows /year with numbers depending on access to exhibit sites and coordinators.

In 2004, our nonprofit received its first grant from the Wisconsin Arts Board. The funding provided new opportunities for the association to establish its own identity. The association began new programs, publications, celebrations, and fundraisers: Bridging Generations children's art instruction and exhibit program (2004); Evening with the Arts annual reception for members (2008); Statewide Teen Art Mentor Program (STAMP), providing subsidies for teen regional exhibits (2009); Tiny Treasures miniatures artwork competition (2010); Timely Treasures program calendar (2011); and an annual State Exhibit color catalog (2012).

Recently, under new leadership, the association has been renamed to eliminate long-standing confusion with WRAP's name, and to establish an identity separate from WRAP. AWA designed a new logo, and enhanced customer/member interactions by switching to a website that facilitated online registrations, membership renewal, payments and similar transactions. On October 31, 2020 DCS discontinued support for the WRAP programs. AWA is positioned advantageously to keep the 80-year-old program alive and well.

updated 9/17/2020