

805 LIVING

NOVEMBER 2013

GIVE THANKS
Give Back





ART HISTORY

Focus on the Masters documents creativity in Ventura County.

BY JOAN TAPPER

HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN CREATIVITY? What forces of personal history prompt a spark of inspiration? What is the impetus behind an artist's work, whether it's a painting, a poem, or a musical composition?

These are the kinds of questions that photographer and documentarian Donna Granata explores through Focus on the Masters (FOTM; focusonthemasters.com), the organization she founded two decades ago to showcase the works and lives of accomplished contemporary artists in Ventura County.

The California native had graduated from Brooks Institute and was embarking on a career in advertising photography when a serious fall forced her into a yearlong convalescence. With time on her hands, she looked through her files and found photographs she'd made of ceramicist Beatrice Wood and abstract expressionist Gerd Koch as well as several other artists. "I started looking at the photos as historic documents," says Granata. "I'd always loved art history, and I wanted to turn my energy to something positive."

The result is a staggeringly broad archive and library of artistic achievement by painters, musicians, sculptors, and poets, among others who worked in, visited, or contributed to the cultural legacy of Ventura County. The FOTM offices, behind the Ventura City

Hall, house file cabinet after file cabinet of correspondence, show reviews, letters, memoirs, sketchbooks and other biographical material, audio- and videotaped interviews, works in progress, publications, slides, photographs, and music samples for about 180 artists who have been profiled in-depth and another 1,300 creative souls who are being tracked for the future. There is also a collection of art—paintings, sculptures, pottery, assemblages—and Granata's own insightful portraits.

Each year FOTM highlights 10 artists who are chosen by their peers for their mastery of their medium, level of recognition, and contribution to the cultural history of the community. "We call for nominations in late summer or early fall," says Granata, soliciting opinions from "museum curators, art directors, and friends in the know, and we have a jury for the final decision." The list always includes "five women and five men, and we select a variety of expression."

Past masters have included *Mad* magazine cartoonist Sergio Aragonés, Beatrice Wood, *Life* magazine photographer Horace Bristol, and composer Miguel del Aguila, as well as Gerd Koch, who became an adviser and board member early on. "It's important to document artists at different stages," Granata says, not just those



Focus on the Future

The 10 artists to be profiled in-depth in 2014 will be announced around the end of the year.

Through December 17, an exhibition of 50 portraits entitled *Continuing Dialog: Chronicling the Lives of Artists* will be on display at the McNish Art Gallery at Oxnard College.

LEFT TO RIGHT, FROM OPPOSITE: At the home of artist Keith Puccinelli, he and Focus on the Masters founder Donna Granata select photographs of artwork to be digitized for the archive; Granata photographs a subject for the Focus on the Masters Portrait Series; Granata gives a tour of the Focus on the Masters Archive and Library during an annual open house.

at the culmination of their careers but also “artists who are on their way, who are forging new ground.”

The subjects also have to be willing to go through a rigorous process of information gathering that includes hours of taped interviews. “We collect incredible data,” she says, adding, “early family photos, pictures of mentors,” published articles, even handwriting samples, since, in a digital age, “authenticating handwriting is a huge issue.”

It’s not just about recording a life history, however; it’s about a creative history as well. “We’ll look at thumbnails of work together,” Granata says. She might ask a painter about the subject of his canvas or a sculptor about what he was trying to achieve. “There’s an intimacy and incredible trust.” After the interviews, she creates a photographic portrait of the artist, and the process culminates with a public Artist Spotlight interview in front of an audience.

Even after that, though, artists often contribute ongoing work to the archive, and for those “with a monumental body of work, we’ll go back and do another in-depth interview” after a few years, Granata says.

The material is a gold mine for national and international writers, poets, critics, and art historians. Sometimes there are

Antiques Roadshow moments, too. “One gentleman came in with photos of old cars, and I recognized them as vintage,” Granata says. “On the back, they were hand-captioned and labeled with the word ‘Lange,’ ” suggesting they were the work of the famed Depression-era documentary photographer. “Dorothea Lange’s writing is distinctive,” and, indeed, FOTM was able to help the owner have the collection appraised and secured in appropriate institutions.

As part of its outreach, FOTM also provides an eight-week “Learning to See” program for schools. Targeted to seventh- and eighth-graders, each lesson highlights the work of a Ventura County artist and encourages students to create work in that artist’s preferred medium. In addition, there are art camps, a juried scholarship exhibition for high school seniors, and exhibitions.

The bill for all this is paid through membership, grants, individual contributions, and fundraisers. Plus there’s a cadre of hardworking volunteers who update the voluminous files and keep up with the ever-changing technology of documentation. For 20 years, says Granata, the program has just kept getting better and better. “Art is a universal language,” she says, “and a by-product of what we’re doing is documenting creativity.” ♦