

Hidden History Story - Artists' Colony

Art has always been a big part of Morro Bay culture which is why many people consider Morro Bay to be an Artist Colony. Before the artists in Morro Bay formed an official association and had designated spaces for art shows, art was frequently presented on trees, fences, or other public areas to capture a public interest in the art. The individual who propelled Morro Bay to become an Art Colony was Charles Robinson. According to the former Morro Bay Art Association President, Flo Bartell, "Charles Robinson was the first professional artist to relocate and promote Morro Bay as an artist community".¹



Fig. 1: Photo of Charles Robinson painting irises. Image courtesy of aaa.si.edu.



Fig. 2: Photo of Morro Bay American Legionnaire Ray Kaltenbach with woman in front of art gallery. Image courtesy of morrobayartcenter.org.

With more and more artists following Charles Robinson and moving their art to Morro Bay, there was a need for a better-organized group of artists. This group was formed on September 17, 1951, when the first meeting of the Morro Bay Art Association was held. This meeting consisted of 17 artists who were interested in working with the California Art Association to create their own branch, the Morro Bay Art Association. They each contributed dues to ensure the successful establishment of a new local Art Association. One month later, the Morro Bay Art Association was created.²

The first art show put on by the Morro Bay Art Association was held in 1952 in one of the founding member's personal art studios. The show featured twenty-three paintings from six different artists. After the first show, many shows were held in public places such as fences, schools, patios, stores, and sidewalks.

In 1954, the association came up with the idea that the best way to attract more people to their art shows would be to create an art festival. The first festival was held in 1955 and was a huge success. In 1959, the annual festival was taken over by other groups in Morro Bay and renamed the "Rock-O-Rama" festival.³

¹ The Tribune. "60 Years of Artful Culture in Morro Bay." *Sanluisobispo*, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 6 Nov. 2011.

² "Art Center Morro Bay." *MBAA - Morro Bay Art Association*.

³ The Tribune.

The Morro Bay Art Association got their first building dedicated to a Morro Bay Art Center in 1956⁴. The building was located near the Old Library on Main Street. This building served as a place for art shows, events, and meetings. By having a public building, they were able to reach more of the population in Morro Bay and increase its reputation as an art colony.

Unfortunately, the first building burned down in 1962⁵. However, this did not diminish the art scene in Morro Bay. The artists simply went back to the way things were done before, hanging art in public places such as trees or fences until the next building was built.

Nine years after the fire, the Morro Bay Art Association relocated into a new building which they called the Art Gallery. This building is still the home of the Morro Bay Art Association and is located on Main Street but has been renamed as the Art Center. In present time, art is still very prominent in the Morro Bay Community. Walking through



Fig. 3: The original design of the Morro Bay Art Association Art Gallery is shown in the image (left). The other photo shows of the current design of the same building now renamed the Art Center (right). Images courtesy of morrobayartcenter.org (left) and facebook.com/artcentermorrobay (right).

the streets of Morro Bay you will see both historical and present murals that display how Morro Bay is still a true Artist Colony. The Morro Bay Art Association is also still running with two large galleries with their mission statement, “To champion art as essential to life and give our community a creative voice.”⁶ The types of art displayed have branched out much more than what was there in the past, such as abstract and interactive exhibits. There are currently over 200 members within the association, and it is open for

⁴ “Art Center Morro Bay.”

⁵ The Tribune.

⁶ “Art Center Morro Bay.”

anyone to join. They offer several classes and workshops for all ages to spread the message of how important art is.⁷ One interview with painter Denise Schryver demonstrates the significance of art to the community. Schryver passionately depicted her painting of the waters of Morro Bay by saying, “I’m inspired when I have an emotional reaction to something [...] I would like people to learn about [the ocean] and protect it.”⁸ These galleries have inspired many and led to the creation of several more all around the city of Morro Bay.

⁷ “The Art Center in Morro Bay.” *San Luis Obispo County Visitors Guide*, 24 Aug. 2011.

⁸ Cooley, Ryah. “Central Coast Painters Raise Money for Estuary, State Parks.” *New Times San Luis Obispo*, 17 January 2019.

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