



Source: Morro Bay Art Association

Raising Up Art in Morro Bay

(with special thanks to Patricia Newton)

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Morro Bay has been a home base for artists for over 100 years. Beginning in the early 1920s, Charles H 'Robbie' Robinson and Aaron Kilpatrick began to champion this area as a compelling setting for artists comparable to locations like Carmel and Laguna Beach as a source of landscapes.

The band of artists in the 20s and 30s was highly accomplished but they remained a loosely structured group. They at one point referred to themselves as 'Associated Artists of Morro Bay' but did not form an enduring organization. One of the group, photographer Olive Cotter, started The Picture Shop in 1929 in downtown Morro Bay which eventually became the first art gallery in SLO County and a gathering place for local and visiting artists.

It wasn't until after the rupture of World War II that local artists found a more permanent way to organize. On September 17, 1951 some interested people met at Ruth Pasko's home to discuss forming an artists' guild. They included residents who had been in Morro Bay before the war, like Pasko, Charlotte and William Skinner, and Nixola Key, but also many others who had moved here postwar. EC Benson was one of the newer residents who became the first President of the Morro Bay Art Association. The *Telegram-Tribune* reported on November 23 that the Association would be accepting new charter members until January 1.

With the added energy of prewar artists like Aaron Kilpatrick (the 'dean' of local artists) the Association established a tradition of frequent exhibits and events, often with a fundraising edge to find a permanent location. Events in the 50s included solo exhibits like Charlotte Skinner's (1952), exhibits with 40 to 50 artists (sometimes in unexpected places like a wooden fence on Main Street or on the hillside at Eagle Rock); a summer art sale called the 'Browserie' (1956); an annual dinner featuring Botso Korisheli on piano (1957); and an international art event (1958).

The search for a permanent facility was a constant theme. Fred McCoy invited the members to meet at his house in north Morro Bay for several years. After cycling through temporary sites, the Association leased its first facility in 1954 at 859 Main. Along with this new stability, the Association first incorporated in 1956.

Finally, the Association got the opportunity to purchase the property at 843 Main Street using a loan from member Eleanor Randall. Members contributed renovation work and held an Open House in April 1958 (*Telegram-Tribune*, 18 April 1958).

A freakish fire a little after Christmas 1962 destroyed the building (the address '843' no longer exists). The Association was without a 'home' for almost 10 years during which members worked to raise a building fund.

The Art Center's current location at 835 Main became available in 1971. The Association had raised \$10,000 (almost \$82,000 in today's dollars!) and needed \$7,800 (\$56,500 today) more to close the deal and renovate the space. The Association raised it and therefore the Art Center is still very active in the cultural life of SLO County.

The Association's first art festival in 1955 was in multiple locations but moved to City Park over Memorial Day weekend in 1965. 71 years later, the latest festival called Art in the Park will be held in the same park over Labor Day, September 4 through 7.