



Judianne Shannon

The San Dieguito Art Guild & Off Track Gallery: 67 YEARS OF ARTISTIC SUPPORT AND EXPRESSION

"I love that Encinitas is a hub for artists," says Grace Swanson, historian of the San Dieguito Art Guild (SDAG). First founded in 1965, for nearly 70 years the Guild has provided a supportive community and learning resource for North County artists. Having had previous locations in Del Mar, Leucadia and Encinitas, their home since 2010 is the Off Track Gallery in the Lumberyard in Encinitas. There, members are able to display and sell their artwork through the gallery, meet the public, learn gallery operations, and participate in monthly art shows. SDAG and the gallery are volunteer driven, with members serving on the Board of Directors, performing administrative functions, and managing the gallery. According to Judianne Shannon, President of SDAG, the guild's remarkable longevity is due to the passion and dedication of its members, many of whose talents and interesting backstories help contribute to the

vibrant local art scene.

Long time SDAG Board member Cheryl Ehlers is the personification of that vibrant art scene. Like many guild members, Cheryl is a retired professional—she worked for engineering firms building sterile "clean rooms" for aerospace and life sciences—but her energy and drive seem more like a college student. She is a ubiquitous presence in North County art and in addition to SDAG, worked for the City of Encinitas Cultural Arts Department, and currently serves as President of the Carlsbad-Oceanside Art League. Her lifelong interest in art combined with her extensive business background enable her to mentor artists and organizations that might lack commercial experience. She sees the learning opportunities at SDAG as invaluable for artists. A talented artist in her own right, Cheryl recently won a commission to provide two paintings for a new Scripps Cancer Center.

Other members also bring diverse experience to SDAG and contribute to the diversity and learning opportunities there. Guild historian Grace Swanson, a longtime member who began as a watercolor artist, now specializes in decorative gourds—an art form she was first exposed to in Nigeria, where she was born to missionary parents. Decorative gourds are found as utilitarian objects throughout the developing world, used as water containers, bowls, dishes, and spoons. Grace's fascination with them is both artistic and anthropologic. For Sue DeWulf, a fifth-generation ceramic artist and retired art teacher, SDAG represents a kinder, more nurturing environment than many other galleries. Her complex and intricate ceramic sculptures are technical assemblies combining pieces from different, often antique, molds. For Lily Pourat, aka "Lily the Potter," SDAG is about freedom of expression. A native of Iran, she sees art as a

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Cheryl Ehlers



Pottery by Lily Pourat



Sue DeWulf



Gregg Sindici

universal language that can bridge cultural and language barriers. In 1979, when she was 16 years old, the Islamic Revolution shuttered universities for women and freedom of artistic expression was curtailed. "Even the suggestion of a woman's shape in your pottery could mean trouble," she recalls, and she hopes that the current women's protests in Iran will bring about change. Pottery became essentially impossible in Iran, as a woman couldn't show her hands at the potter's wheel. Lily was eventually able to emigrate to the U.S. and has been a member of SDAG for 12 years, but her

Middle Eastern roots are clearly visible in her art. Not all SDAG members are lifelong artists—some only recently started or have discovered latent talents. Gregg Sindici is a former Navy Pilot and retired attorney who had always been interested in architecture and design but believed because he couldn't draw that he had no talent. After retiring, his wife encouraged him to pursue his interests and he began abstract painting. Fortunately, he has a refined sense of color and textural composition, and his dynamic abstract expressionist works have won awards and been displayed in multiple

galleries and venues. Gregg believes everyone has some artistic talent and just needs to learn how to express it. As several members point out, SDAG can provide that nurturing environment for beginners, as well as for seasoned artists. With nearly 200 members and a full calendar, including two major fundraising events, monthly plein air excursions for painting outdoors, monthly art shows, and various community activities, SDAG is on track to continue enriching the local art scene to the 70-year mark and beyond.