

ARMY OF ARTISTS TO OCCUPY TOWN CENTER

By William Nicoson

A motley army of jewelry lacers, fiber weavers, glass blowers, canvas stokers, stone gougers, and clay throwers, among other eminent soldiers of arts and crafts, will invade Reston Town Center at sun-up May 15 and occupy both Market and Library Streets until sunlight fades on May 16. The Northern Virginia Fine Arts Festival, managed with flair by The Greater Reston Arts Center, will stake its tents, fly its pennants and enthrall its throngs for an eighth straight May.

GRACE's Executive Director, Anne Brown, travels regularly on the festival circuit to attract the best practitioners in both familiar and arcane artistic disciplines from far and wide. Since last May, she and her deputy, Pat Haas, have visited 7 festivals celebrating the works of professionals in arts and crafts. Festival visitors look forward to browsing through new work by artists they favored in past years, and artists look forward to the kind words of admirers, whether or not coins clink in the till.

Local visitors to the festival this year, however, will miss some of their favored artists. From 823 applicants, 150 have been juried into the festival, of whom only 5 are Reston residents and 1 a Herndon resident. Yet it was a Reston artist and GRACE board member, Connie Slack, who won the jurors' grand prize. In prior festivals, local artists have been well represented, sometimes more than 20. Decline in local representation appears linked to competition engendered by GRACE's determined recruiting for national excellence and recognition.

For the first time this year, works in 8 craft disciplines (clay, fiber, jewelry, etc.) were given equal representation with 8 in art disciplines (drawing/pastels, glass, graphics/prints, etc.). A fixed percentage of applicants was chosen for each discipline, with the result that some successful applicants had lower scores than others juried out in another discipline. Reservations were made only for the 10 prize winners of last year.

Some observers believe that, like quotas for discipline diversity, reservations for local artists should be established as a percentage of participants, in the light of the large local majority of festival visitors, the local provenance of GRACE's charitable funding and the inevitably subjective character of jurors' judgments. Others argue, however, that, to establish a national reputation, GRACE and its festival must strictly adhere to criteria of excellence in jury selection and that a local quota system would undermine the stature of all accepted local practitioners.

There may be a third way. Excellence is not an annual phenomenon. An honor guard of regulars might be established based on average juried scoring at a quality level over a determined minimum of past festival years. These regulars would be invited every year so long as their average scoring remained within quality tolerance. The idiosyncrasies of judging excellence by varied annual jurors would be eased, and local participants in early years would likely be rewarded for their loyalty – within the jury system and without a quota for local residents.

This debate about the tension between declining local participation in the festival and its increasing national standing won't be resolved by next weekend or maybe by next year. What can be predicted with certainty is that visitors to Town Center next weekend will be pleased by encounters with friends, neighbors and admired artists, startled by work in unfamiliar idioms and stunned by moments of philosophical insight which only art can convey. GRACE brings all of this to us free of charge. Go for it.

William Nicoson has served on GRACE's board, as a founder of Friends of Grace and as past publisher of Connection Newspapers.