

CHAPTER 1: BIRTH OF A NOTION

October 1964

Imagine the situation...a group of amateur artists taking a painting class together find that they are enjoying the camaraderie and supportive environment of their weekly classes, and they don't want to lose that collegiality when the classes end. Their instructor, Richmond artist Helen Hull, appreciates the enthusiasm of her students, and encourages them to form an artist group, a club that will allow them to continue developing their individual talents, to exhibit their paintings in the community, and to share the joyful experiences of creating and appreciating the visual arts. Thus the James River Art League was born. At left is the actual charter member list, typed on a mid-sixties clunky typewriter, formal in its presentation according to the style of the day. Thirty-eight artists, with their inspirational instructor as an honorary member, create an association that still flourishes 50 years later.

South Bank Art League?

The charter members of the James River Art League first met in a little white house on the grounds of Westover Hills School on Richmond's Southside in October 1964, with Louise Bono as the Acting Chairman. First things first: What do we call ourselves? The League's historical summary of 1964-66 reported, "The process of selecting a name proved to be a rather complicated and controversial matter. At first we accepted South Bank Art League, but later, conservatism overcame the bohemian in us and we settled on James River Art League."

However, there was no controversy over JRAL's *raison d'etre*, and a primary focus for an association of like-minded individuals is to get together and talk shop. From its earliest days, JRAL planned to hold monthly meetings, so that the members could learn from guest speakers and from each other, take field trips to art exhibits and museums in the region, even watch movies with art-related themes, as well as conduct the business of the League.

So how did the group plan to grow, to find more like-minded individuals? The selection of new members was one of the first issues addressed by the fledgling organization. Standards were discussed, and the charter members decided that specific artistic requirements should be met, to ensure quality of work. A committee formed to review prospective members; each applicant would submit three works of art for review, one of

which must be less than 12 months old. These standards are still the basis for new membership 50 years later.

JRAL's First Board - 1965

In January 1965, JRAL's first Executive Board was elected:

Director – *Louise Bono*
Assistant Director – *Charles Larivey*
Recording Secretary – *Ouida Tanner*
Corresponding Secretary – *Helen Wolverton*
Treasurer – *Hope Davis*
Historian – *Martha Anne Hart*

In February 1965, the first Committee Chairs were announced:

Program – *Charles Larivey* 1964-65;
Elsie McCord 1965-66
Hospitality – *Nellie Trischman*
Publicity – *Beth Bass*
Membership – *Hope Davis*
Communications – *Helen Wolverton*
Gallery – *Ann Southall*

Once organized in late 1964, the League began meeting with a slate of programs in January 1965. JRAL Charter Member Charles Larivey (today an internationally known Richmond artist) was the League's first Program Chair. He was also the speaker at JRAL's January 1965 meeting. At the time, Larivey had his own gallery, the Jefferson Davis Gallery, so he was well qualified to discuss "the business of art." According to the 1964-66 History, Larivey told the membership that there was more demand for oil paintings than for watercolors, and that the most popular subjects were seascapes, landscapes and still life. He also advised them that the best price range for selling work was between \$20 and \$30.

Which goes to show us that some things change...and some don't!

Other speakers that first full year of Art League meetings included Chairman Bono on primitive art, Honorary Member Helen Hull with a slide show of art she enjoyed during a recent trip to Europe, a Mr. Day who was the owner of an art and frame shop with tips for framing paintings, and local art teacher and League member Bernard Davis discussing the art of pen and ink drawing.

Another major component of JRAL's mission was to exhibit members' artwork. The League's exhibition debut was at the Thalhimers' "Focus on Art" in May 1965. That August saw the beginning of JRAL participation in one-man shows at Westover Hills Branch Library. Over the next year, 21 members were featured in various League-sponsored solo exhibits.

Community involvement was also important to the James River Art League from its inception. In addition to shows and exhibits around the area, JRAL charter members worked with several area schools to foster the appreciation and creation of art.

Perhaps the most significant early recognition of JRAL as an important group within the community was the 1966 invitation from the Virginia Heart Association to sponsor a poster contest within the League to promote the VHA's annual fund drive. Mary Ann Ferneyhough was selected as the winner, and her poster was displayed throughout Virginia.

Wrapping things up in May of 1966, Program Director Elsie MacCord said, "Now is the time for each of us to ask ourselves if we are satisfied with the returns on our investment of time, effort and money." Historian Martha Anne Hart expressed her answer to that group query...she reported, "I think the scales are more than balanced, through our many good times, new friends, new knowledge, and last but not least, more incentive to greater productivity."

The James River Art League apparently was an idea whose time had come.

End Of The Sixties — Creating Our Niche

By the end of the Sixties, the James River Art League was a well-established association of enthusiastic artists in the Richmond community. Monthly meetings featured speakers who discussed and demonstrated a wide array of artistic styles. The annual JRAL exhibition at the Carillon had increased from four days to ten. Additional exhibit venues were continually discovered, and while revolving exhibits at the Westover Hills Library and Hull Street Central National Bank ceased after a couple of years, replacements were found, and new "show-and-sells" at Azalea Mall and Willow Lawn were very successful.

The annual October show at the Carillon was considered the League's most important event, and in the September 1969 Newsletter, Director Helen Crighton issued a plea: "Let's try for something a little out of the ordinary this year!" She continued, "Too many paintings can be tiresome to the general public, so let's spark this show up with a little variety. If you are talented along other lines and would like to include wall hangings, pottery, metal work...etc, please do so. This is a versatile group, and there is no reason why our most important yearly event can't be a little exciting for us, for the critics, and for the public." However, although JRAL shows in those days often included sculpture, enamels, and assorted other media, and although member artists have always enjoyed secondary art forms, two dimensional paintings and drawings have remained the exhibition standard for the League.

In April 1968, JRAL hung 35 paintings at Richmond City Hall in what arguably might be called the League's first juried exhibition. Members submitted their paintings for review by Huguenot High School art teacher William Packard; the 35 works he selected were well received by the viewing public at City Hall.

Individual JRAL Charter Members received recognition and honors at events outside of League activities, highlighted by the selection of League Director Charlotte Boyden, William Cline, and Mary Anne Ferneyhough for inclusion in the Spring 1967 Virginia Artists' Biennial at the Virginia Museum. Boyden was again selected for the 1969 VMFA Biennial, as was League member Dr. Glen Allen.

In 1969 the League joined Richmond's Federated Arts Council, and participated in that group's exhibits for a number of years, until the Council altered its structure and changed its focus.

Chapter 1: Birth of a Notion

By 1970, JRAL membership had grown to 55 members, and while some Charter Members had left the group, and sadly a few had died, new members had joined this active League of area artists. While many members hung work at group exhibits and sales, "more of the membership should be attending the meetings, joining in the fun and work load of this organization" reported an item in a 1969-70 newsletter. In 1972 an Ad Hoc Committee was formed to "evaluate the present functioning of the League and to explore ways of improving it." The committee members were Skippy Anderson, Frank Mann, Barbara Newlin, Beth Bass, Pat Branch, David Cochran, Edith Schermerhorn, and Helen Sanders (who is still an active member today).



Helen Sanders, 1977

The Committee's recommendations were adopted by the full membership in February 1973. One major recommendation established the First Annual Juried Art Exhibit, held at the Jewish Community Center in October 1973; this event replaced the annual Carillon exhibition. A second committee recommendation created the JRAL Scholarship Fund to help provide art training for talented but educationally indigent young artists.

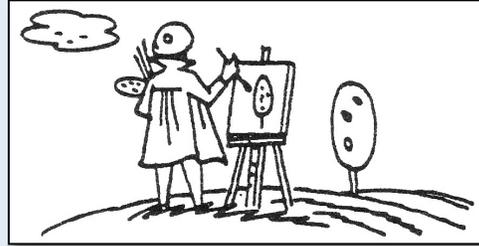
This kind of self-evaluation has become a lasting theme of the James River Art League. As we will see in other parts of this commemorative book, the member artists have continually strived to maintain and improve the group's relevance in an ever-changing artistic community. JRAL's longevity may be attributed to its collective willingness to reinvent itself.

The First Ten Years

By the end of JRAL's first decade, the League's prestige continued to increase, both as an active artists' group and through the achievements of individual members. That little seed of a notion back in 1964 had taken root and the James River Art League had blossomed into a thriving organization of Richmond artists.

Evolution of A Logo

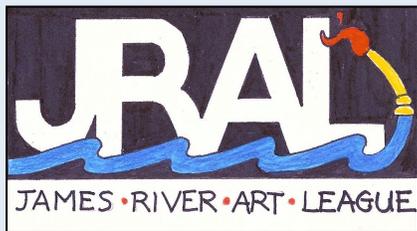
At JRAL's April 1965 meeting, Charter Member William Youngblood challenged the membership to design an official letterhead for the League. As it turned out, Mr. Youngblood's design of an artist painting *en plein air* on, it is believed, the banks of the James River was chosen in February 1966 to represent the League in its official communications. It became the enduring logo of the group for over 40 years.



JRAL Logo 1965-2011

In 1984-85, JRAL members were again challenged to create a new logo design for the League, thinking perhaps that an update was due. However, no winner of the contest was ever announced and Youngblood's design remained the symbol of the group.

In 2010-11, a third logo challenge was presented to the James River Art League. A committee selected several finalists from the entries, and included Youngblood's original design as one of those finalists. The membership voted in the spring of 2011, and selected the work of Anne Negus as JRAL's first new logo since its founding.

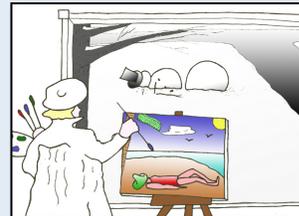


Anne Negus' original design



Final Version of Logo - July 2011

However, with a nod and a wink to Youngblood's iconic design, in 2011 Editor Mike Steele created a series of cartoons for the JRAL Newsletter, reflecting the more modern times, the seasons of the year, or current JRAL events, but still honoring William Youngblood's legacy.



Jan 2012 newsletter
(Mike Steele)