

CHAPTER 3: CONNECTIONS

JRAL's current President, Mary Kent, has aptly described the James River Art League as being all about connections. A group of artists might be called "organized anarchy," but it is our sense of connection with those who share a love of the artistic process, and our sense of connection with the community within which we create, that bonds us. That has been true for 50 years. So this year, 2014, we celebrate our beginnings, our history, and the shared connective experiences that hold us together.

Thirty-eight artists founded the League in 1964, colleagues in an art class who didn't want to lose their connections when the class ended. They held some organizational meetings, drew up a charter and a mission statement, and created a small treasury into which each paid \$5 to help pay for stamps and stationary and a few exhibition supplies. By 1968 there were 48 member artists, then 60 in 1980, 56 in 1987, 39 in 1996, 49 in 2007, 73 in 2010, and 103 in Fall 2013. A few decades later dues had grown to \$30, still reasonable, considering inflation.

The first official JRAL meetings, held in the evenings, were in the Westover Hills Community Center. As the number of members increased, in 1976 the League moved to the Church of the Good Shepherd on Forest Hill Avenue, where it stayed until 1992. At that time, member surveys determined that declining meeting attendance was the result of nighttime meetings, so the membership voted to change the meeting time to 9:30 am. This required a venue change, so in January 1993, meetings moved to the Bon Air Library.

When members decided to change the meeting time to mornings, they also voted to reward meeting attendance with an added bonus: ample refreshments. One long-time member recalls that "back in the day" the menu consisted of a tray of crackers and some squirtable cheese-in-a-can!

Although the change from nighttime to daytime meetings was an attempt to increase attendance, it might have created a similar problem in reverse. Schedule conflicts arose for some members, especially those who had full-time jobs, and membership numbers declined considerably by the middle '90s. However, during the first decade of the new century, that trend again reversed. By January 2010, with 73 members on the rolls, a larger meeting venue was needed; the League moved across the James River (for the first time) to St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in western Henrico County.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of these many changes is the fact that a core of JRAL members was determined to stick together. The League grew, shrunk, grew again, and evolved from a small group of like-minded friends into a full-fledged and respected

art organization, with members coming from all around Greater Richmond, and even further afield into Central Virginia. JRAL took on a life of its own, and became, perhaps, greater than the sum of its parts.

Volunteerism Is Its Own Reward

With the growth of JRAL, mutual responsibilities also grew. And that word “mutual” is key to JRAL’s success. The Art League is an all-volunteer army. The founders chose a few officers; very soon thereafter committees and Committee Chairs were needed to help guide the work of the League. The committees evolved out of necessity, and created opportunities for all members to serve the group, as well as achieve personal growth. Without active and energetic leaders, there would be no James River Art League.

Each JRAL officer, committee chairperson, and committee member responds to the needs of the League as a whole, and helps the various functions run smoothly. These volunteer leaders, with permission of the full membership, guide the Art League through its yearly journey of meetings, guest speakers, field trips, exhibitions, special events, and general business. They donate their time, their considerable talents, and their enthusiasm, to ensure that JRAL members enjoy their mutual time together, and fulfill the League’s mission to encourage the creation and appreciation of the visual arts.

Without a doubt, members who volunteer to assist in any aspect of the League’s activities gain as much as than they give. They make valuable connections with fellow enthusiasts, set the tone for JRAL programs, exhibits, and community activities, and develop their personal strengths. Volunteerism is definitely its own reward!

The Art League began with five officers: Director, Assistant Director, Recording Secretary, Corresponding Secretary, and Historian. By 1966-68, a Treasurer and Parliamentarian had been added, and the Executive Board included nine Committee Chairs: Program, Gallery, Contact [Exhibits], Publicity, Membership, Communications, Telephone, Hospitality, and a “Member-at-Large.”

Revisions to JRAL’s Constitution in the early ‘80s changed “Director and Assistant Director” to “President and Vice President,” but otherwise the Executive Board looks much the same today (although at some point the member-at-large concept was discontinued). A restructuring of the League Constitution and By-Laws in 2012 consolidated or renamed some positions and formalized two new committees: Communications and Community Outreach.

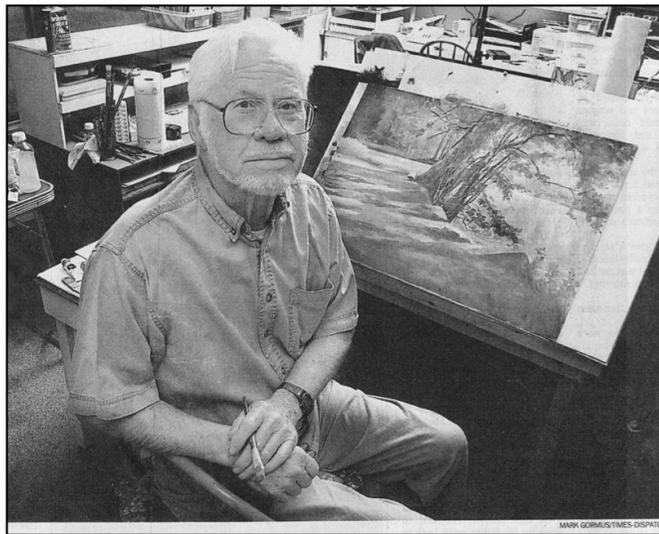
James River Art League Past Directors/Presidents 1964-2014

Louise Bono	Spot Crenshaw	Spot Crenshaw (2 nd time)	Sally Booth
Charlotte Boyden	Vicky Eggleston	Louise Bono (2 nd time)	Gigi Vranian
Hope Davis	Ruth Burke	Mary Ellen Thomas	Betty Eddowes
Helen Crighton	Stanley Watkins	Beverly Baker	Jane Cox
Elise Strotmeyer	Betty Brinser	Anne Sampson	Lois Shipley
Frank Mann	Anne Wilcox	Suzanne Counts	Mary Kent
Mary Vandewalle	Helen Crighton (2 nd time)		

William Youngblood

Some members throughout the 50 years of the James River Art League have earned a special recognition by history. One of those influential members was William Youngblood. A Charter Member, Youngblood was a talented, ultimately nationally recognized artist, and a tireless worker for JRAL. He helped to organize exhibits, gave frequent demonstrations at League meetings, and served as the group's first Treasurer. He designed the League's first logo — an artist painting on the banks of the James River — and that logo remained the symbolic icon of JRAL for more than 40 years. Throughout those years, Youngblood was a frequent exhibitor, an award-winning artist, and an active League member. Several times he and his wife opened their home and studio for JRAL visits.

Youngblood was the subject of several feature stories in area newspapers during his years as an active artist, including a 1991 article about their resident artist in "Powhatan Today," and a May 2001 feature titled "Drawing On Experience — Artist's Work Reflects His Life" in the Richmond Times-Dispatch. The latter story by Betty Booker discussed Youngblood's "hardscrabble" upbringing, the experiences which were "drawn into hundreds of paintings hung, stacked and stored in his Powhatan County studio."



William Youngblood in his studio, May 2001

Touching on his work as an architectural draftsman for the CCC during the Depression, as a Richmond sign painter for Sears, his army service during World War II (and the hundreds of his wartime sketches), and his post-war career with Southern States, these news stories emphasized Youngblood's pride in being a self-taught artist. He was quoted that his JRAL membership encouraged him to paint more, and gave him the opportunity to exhibit and sell his paintings. "I've had a good life," he told the Times-Dispatch reporter; "I don't regret retiring to paint. I've had a good time. I live off Social Security and sell a painting once in awhile."

William Youngblood died at the age of 93 in 2009. The League newsletter's memorial to him gave tribute to his service to his country and his community, and his artistic achievements, highlighted by his signature membership with the Virginia and Georgia Watercolor Societies. "JRAL is the vibrant and thriving organization it is today due, in part, to the energy and contribution of early members like Youngblood."

To honor his service and his memory, the Art League created in December 2009 the William A. Youngblood Award, and presented it to five JRAL members for their long time membership and service to the League: Betty Brinser, Lunette Edwards, Mary Beth

Ols, Helen Sanders, and Margot Titmus. These members were cited for “the highest quality commitment to the development and sustenance of the Art League through many years of active membership.”



Betty Brinser, Helen Sanders, Mary Beth Ols and Lunette Edwards, 2009 William Youngblood Award recipients



Margot Titmus, 2009 William Youngblood Award recipient

In January 2014, the Youngblood Award was again presented to a committed JRAL member, Gigi Vranian, “in recognition and gratitude for your many years of outstanding leadership and dedicated service to the James River Art League.”

There are other founders and early members whose names pepper the Archives of the James River Art League because of their leadership. Ensuing years saw new leaders coming forward from the growing membership to help the League continue its mission, as well as to increase JRAL’s artistic reputation with their creative work.

The growth of the James River Art League since 2000 can be directly attributed to the women and men who have led during the new century, as well as to the active members whose enthusiasm for JRAL and its mission inspire area artists to join the League. Connections between friends have evolved into a network of colleagues who share a common bond. The creative process, usually a solitary endeavor, has engendered lifelong friendships and an association that is beneficial to its members and the community in which it thrives.



Gigi Vranian, 2014 William Youngblood Award recipient

Variety Is The Spice Of Membership

The goals of the James River Art League were clear from the very beginning; included on our original to-do list was “to endeavor to have informative and interesting programs, with guests or league members to give lectures and demonstrations.” Members wanted to learn from each other and from the expertise of guests, to expand their knowledge of the creative process and inspire their own artistic endeavors.

Richmond's own Charles (Chuck) Larivey has the distinction of being a Charter Member of JRAL, its first Associate Director and Program Chair, the first program speaker in January 1965, and a returning guest speaker in September 2012. In both of his presentations, Larivey discussed the business of art...how artists can set goals for creating a marketable product, and then market that product in an effective way.

"As we grow, opportunity has a way of presenting itself," Larivey has said; he stresses that artists must learn not to limit themselves, but to recognize and react to possibilities.

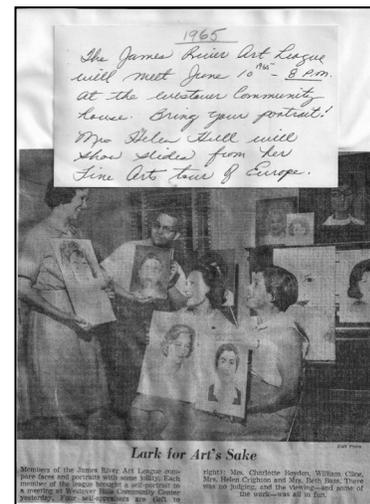
JRAL members have enjoyed countless presentations, demonstrations, artist challenges, and critiques by members and visiting artists throughout the League's 50 year history. Together we have visited museums, toured art galleries, watched films, and discovered sites for painting *en plein air*. We even had in 2011 the opportunity for a guided tour of Sydney and Frances Lewis's Monument Avenue home and private art collection, a highlight of the League's vast menu of past programs.

Annual program schedules attempt to entice members' imaginations and ensure meeting attendance. Demonstrations of every medium and genre have been presented; the insight of commercial artists has been sought; the processes of framing, printing, and studio organizing have been offered; critique sessions have been arranged; travelogues have been shared; and even performance art has been explored.

Sometimes the lure of appealing programs wasn't sufficient to drag members away from their easels or other aspects of their busy lives. Often in old newsletters we run across reminders that meeting attendance is lagging, such as this blunt note from Program Chair Kitty Good in 1980: "Considering the high caliber of the speakers engaged, and the reputation James River has of being a strong league, it is extremely embarrassing to me as your program chairman to have no more than an average of 27 out of 60 members turn out for our meetings. You may be primarily interested in showing your work, but the league feels you owe it your support, in return for that privilege. That support means attending our meetings. Our speakers always present highly instructive and informative talks and demonstrations, real learning experiences. We desire your presence and support."

Group Therapy

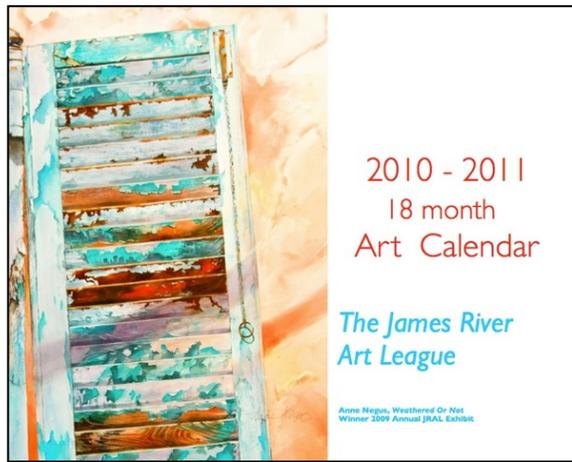
A major reason JRAL holds meetings is to discover together something new and exciting about the world of art, and to learn something about our own creative muses in the process. Artists are often exhilarated by opportunities to think out of their self-imposed boxes, thus sprung a feature program: the "Members Creative Challenge." In a way, these annual artist challenges began the first year, when in April 1965 Youngblood challenged members to design the League's stationary letterhead.



1965 Portrait Challenge

That same year, members were invited to paint self-portraits — an excellent way to capture the essence of this new group of artists. The self-portrait exercise was repeated in 2006.

Other Artist Challenges have inspired members' imaginations. The Creative Challenge for 2004 was to arrange five specific items — an egg, a spoon, a hammer, a book, and a roll of toilet paper — and paint them in any medium, to be critiqued at the May meeting by Bob Carter. Too bad the Archives don't have photos of the resulting paintings!



The challenge for 2009 was a major project: the creation and publication of a wall calendar for the year 2010. JRAL member artists were encouraged to enter into a competition with up to three seasonal paintings each, and 36 winners (three per month) were to be selected by a vote of the full membership. However, members submitted so many beautiful paintings that the project eventually resulted in a memorable eighteen month art calendar representing 31 artist members with 78 pieces of artwork. Anne Negus' 2009 blue ribbon painting,

“Weathered or Not”, at the annual James Center Atrium judged show became the calendar's cover.

In the last few years the Artist Challenges have selected a new JRAL logo, mimicked great works of art, pictured iconic places in Greater Richmond, and during this anniversary year, taken an in-depth look at “Hats!”



2012 “Famous Works of Art”



2013 “Richmond, River City”



2014 “Hats!”

Group projects such as the Artist Challenges enhance the cooperative structure of the Art League, and simultaneously spotlight the accomplishments of its individual artists. This dichotomy illustrates one of our significant strengths. JRAL is, in essence, a support group, a group of people facing similar issues who can come together to share coping strategies, to feel more empowered, to offer sympathetic understanding, and to enjoy a sense of community.

Communications Evolution

Whenever a few people form a group, one of the first things they need to do is choose a way to communicate with each other when they're not all in the same room.

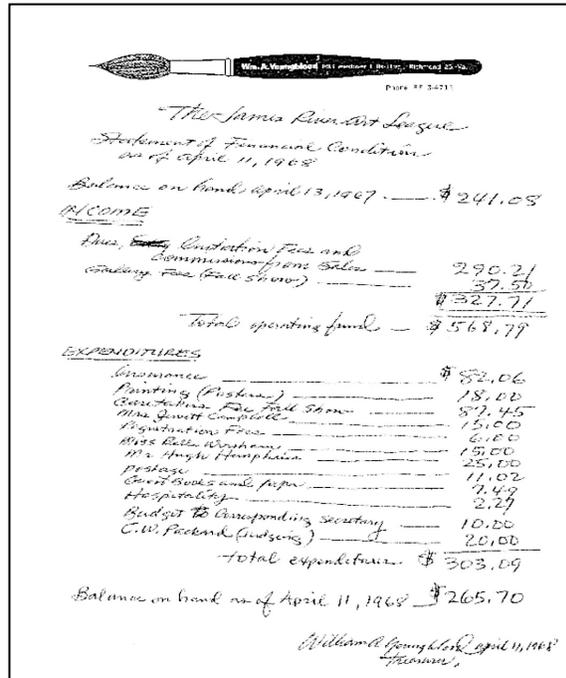
In the '60s and '70s there were hand written notes, hand typed and mimeographed newsletters, and the telephone. JRAL Archives are chocked full of documents that were ground out on clunky old manual typewriters, annotated in ball point pen to show changes, then copied by what we would today call primitive means (but we're still tempted to put them to our noses to smell the old mimeograph chemicals). An early Treasurer's Annual Report from 1968 has survived, hand written on self-designed stationary by Treasurer Youngblood.

In the next decades, mimeographs morphed into Xerox machines, telephone calls morphed into email messages, and Newsletters transformed from one or two typed pages into professional, full-color publications. In fact, today's Newsletters have become the most important components of JRAL's Archives; they tell our story in words and pictures better than any method that has gone before. In 2008, 17 members received their JRAL Newsletters via email. In two years, that number jumped to 47, or 67% of the membership. Today 81% of League members are "wired" to the point of reading the Newsletters online, saving JRAL a healthy sum in printing and postage costs.

In January 2009, we launched the League's first website. Lea Emory developed the site, and subsequent web managers have sought to make the website a primary source of JRAL information for members and the 'net-surfing public by expanding and adding new information. The site receives hundreds of visits each month.

A Facebook presence was added in 2012 to give JRAL a foot in the burgeoning world of social media, which created another information source and connection for both members and art patrons.

In 2012-13, as the Executive Board revised the League's Bylaws, a new Communications Committee was created. This committee consolidates the former functions of the corresponding secretary, the telephone committee, and the website manager, under the leadership of one chairperson to provide a more holistic and centralized approach to communications across the various channels such as email, telecommunications and internet. The creation of this new committee emphasizes the importance of communications to the League's proper functioning and acknowledges the primary ne-



1968 Treasurer's Report from William Youngblood

cessity of members keeping in touch with each other. As JRAL continues to grow in membership and focus, new channels of communications will be explored to ensure relevance for our members, patrons and partners. Social media could become a bigger part of marketing and publicity efforts, as well as create a better connection with community partners.

Networking

Perhaps there is in the beginning of this century no single theme more prevalent than the concept of networking. But humans have been gathering together for millennia to seek aid and comfort from each other, to advance their personal and professional connections, and to achieve as a group things that they could not accomplish alone. As the membership of JRAL has increased to over 100 artists, getting acquainted with fellow members requires additional effort, but it is an undertaking that reaps tremendous rewards, and reveals to us the notion that it is the shared experience that achieves the greatest significance.



Group therapy at the Muscarelle Museum, 2009



Suzie Counts and Florence Tromater at Belmont, Gari Melcher's home, in 2008



Arlene DeConti , Linda Reynolds and Paula Makielski at Wilton House 2014



Members spellbound at the VMFA 2012 Chihuly exhibit