

THE MILL IMMORTAL

Ninety-five years ago, the first generation of Pennsylvania Impressionists founded an arts-loving community in a former gristmill in Solebury. The Phillips' Mill Community Association continues in this spirit, rooted by its annual Juried Art Show.

By PATTI ZIELINSKI

As travelers drive south along River Road in Solebury, their first encounter with Phillips' Mill is an abrupt one. The eighteenth-century former gristmill abuts a precarious bend—yes, it's *that* building you fear you may hit if you come upon it too fast—but within this humble structure, art history was made.

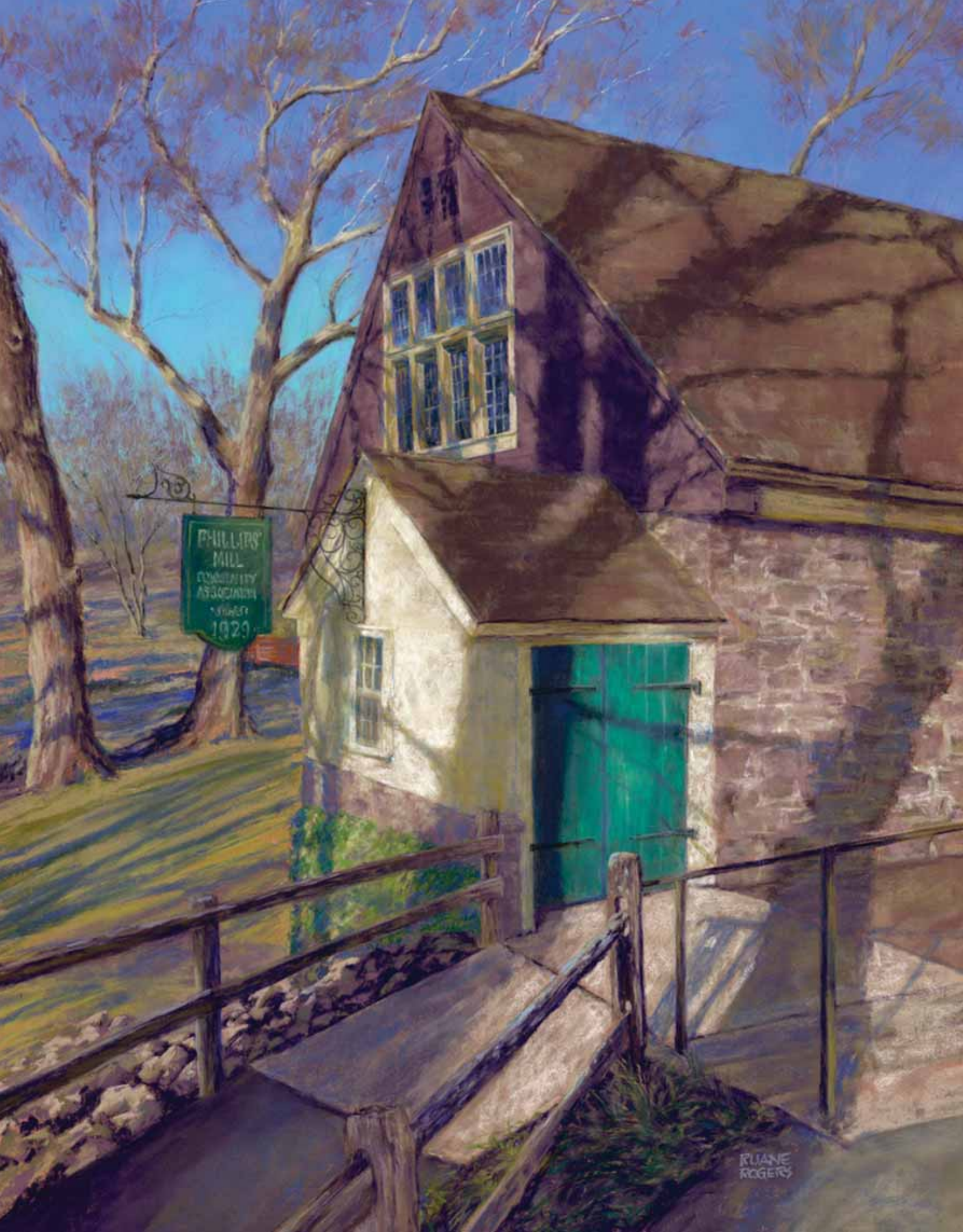
It is the birthplace of Pennsylvania Impressionism.

"A stop sign was installed after some trucks sliced off a corner of the mill while negotiating the hard turn," says Laura Womack, the president of the Phillips' Mill Community Association board of directors, while standing likewise precariously on the road's edge.

"The mill is a deceiving three stories; it looks like one story from the road," she continues, gesturing at the fieldstone façade. She steps away from the street, past a sign on the building reading 1756, commemorating the year it was built, then walks through the front door—and into the annals of art history.

March Afternoon, a 20-by-16-inch pastel on paper depicting Phillips' Mill, by Donna Ruane Rogers, of Frenchtown. Rogers' painting was chosen as the Signature Image for the Mill's annual Juried Art Show. The artist says she was inspired by the light and shadows on the mill the day she decided to enter the contest.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PHILLIPS' MILL COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION



RUANE
ROGERS

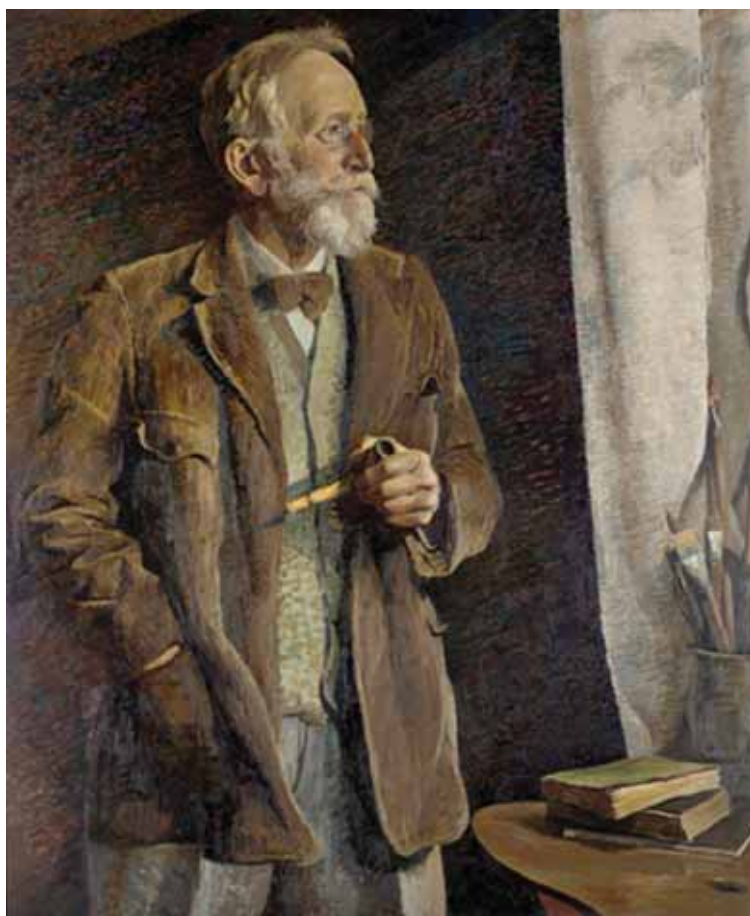


PHOTO COURTESY OF PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS

William Langson Lathrop, an oil on canvas painted in 1935 by Daniel Garber. One of the founders of Pennsylvania Impressionism, Lathrop fostered a community of artists from Philadelphia and New York City, centered at Phillips' Mill, who were drawn to the River Towns by its natural beauty.

It was within these walls, Womack explains, starting around the turn of the twentieth century, that William Lathrop, one of the founders of Pennsylvania Impressionism, fostered a community of artists from Philadelphia and New York City who were drawn to the area by its natural beauty. They would come to be known as the New Hope Art Colony. Besides Lathrop, the names of people who gathered within the mill to socialize and exhibit their art read like a veritable Who's Who of early twentieth-century American artists: Edward Redfield, John Folinsbee, Daniel Garber, Fern Coppedge, Mary Perkins Taylor, Henry B. Snell, George Sotter, Mary Elizabeth Price, Morgan Colt, Rae Sloan Bredin, and Robert Alexander Darrah (R.A.D.) Miller, the son-in-law of George Marshall, the mill's former owner.

Before it became a haven for artists, most notably for the annual Phillips' Mill Juried Art Show, the charming gristmill, nestled between the Delaware River and canal to the front and the meandering Primrose Creek in the rear, ground grain into flour for four generations of the Phillips family and remained in occasional use until the late 1800s.

In 1894 the mill became the property of George Marshall,

Lathrop's childhood friend. Nine years later, Marshall sold Lathrop the adjacent miller's house across River Road, along with four acres. Over the years, Marshall's nonfunctioning mill became a playhouse for his and Lathrop's children. At his home, Lathrop would famously host Sunday afternoon teas, dinners, and lawn parties, where he would entertain other artists. Lathrop's wife, Annie, who had a theatrical flair, had a stage built on the lawn for productions.

Wanting to preserve this community that Lathrop had formed with the mill at its heart, Marshall offered the building to the artists for \$5,000 in 1928. The artists raised \$6,000 and purchased the mill in May 1929, establishing the Phillips' Mill Community Association, with Lathrop as its first president. Its mission: to use the mill as a community center for social gatherings, discussions, exhibitions, and theater productions.

The association mounted its first exhibition shortly after buying the building, a display of 112 paintings, drawings, and sculpture. The exhibiting artists represented the cream of the early Pennsylvania Impressionists, among them Lathrop, Garber, Folinsbee, Price, Colt, Sotter, Taylor, and Snell. (Miller, though more of a Modernist than an Impressionist, was also included.) "It was a show that grew out of the fact that the mill



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MICHENER ART MUSEUM

Lathrop and his wife, Annie, often invited other artists to Sunday afternoon teas, dinners, and lawn parties at their home near Phillips' Mill.

was their clubhouse and they were just having a good time," Womack says. "What they did was create an ecosystem for all the incredible artists who are in our community now. This is our DNA."

“We ride that line between being a community association and an arts organization with a commitment to high-quality art.”

Today the Phillips' Mill Community Association is an all-volunteer organization that keeps alive the artistic community founded a century ago by Lathrop and his fellow Pennsylvania Impressionists. “We ride that line between being a community association and an arts organization with a commitment to high-quality art,” says Womack, a textile artist. “It is our straddling of those two communities, having this history of ninety-five years, and being part of the American Impressionist movement that distinguishes us. We have a patina that other arts organizations across the country do not.”

Some descendants of the early Impressionists still reside within the River Towns, including Jill Karhumaa, the granddaughter of William Lathrop, and her son, Julian, a co-owner of Farley's Bookshop in New Hope, who live in Lathrop's former home across River Road from Phillips' Mill. Among their neighbors is Eleanor Miller, the daughter-in-law of R.A.D. Miller. Dana Garber, granddaughter of Daniel Garber, lives in Doylestown, as does Elise Redfield, the great-granddaughter of Edward Redfield.

The Phillips' Mill legacy continues this fall with its ninety-fifth Juried Art Show, from September 21 to October 27, which attracts the best work of hundreds of artists living within twenty-five miles of the mill. Over the years, this signature event has weathered challenges such as a world war that depleted resources, flooding, and a fire. The show persevered during the Covid-19 pandemic by shifting online, a viewing option that the association has

since continued. “It is the most prestigious art show in our region,” says Dennis Riley, the show's chair.

The Art Show Committee—more than sixty members, including curators, artists, art appraisers, graphic designers, and businesspeople—begins meeting monthly in January. Among its first priorities is choosing five jurors for the coming year's show: three for framed works and two for sculptures and portfolios. To ensure “unbiased selection,” Riley says, the committee selects new jurors each year—artists, art educators, and curators from beyond the twenty-five mile radius. Artists from across the River Towns and beyond last year submitted 326 framed pieces, 268 portfolio pieces, and forty-two sculptures for the jury's consideration. “From those,” Riley says, “we took ninety-five framed pieces and twenty-four sculptures that were placed on pedestals throughout the building and on tables.”

Due to limited wall space—portable walls are retrieved from the attic and set up in a grid on the main and lower levels to accommodate the hanging art without having to stack works above and below each other—the show can only accept between ninety-five and 100 framed pieces. There is no limit on portfolio pieces, which are unframed and placed in portfolio bins. All displayed art

is available for sale.

The jurying process is anonymous: Jurors do not know the artists' names or the works' titles or prices. “When the jurors come in, it's an all-day affair,” Riley says. “And the results are always a surprise: Some years, we have incredible works by artists,



PHOTO COURTESY OF PHILLIPS' MILL COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

Peonies, Pansies, and Badger, an oil painting by Doylestown artist Janine Dunn Wade, who was named the Honored Artist for the 2024 Juried Art Show. Wade has been submitting work to the show for three decades. “You read about how Garber and Lathrop founded the Mill,” she says. “I want to be part of this history, which is why the honor is so wonderful.”

1929



Three paintings from the inaugural Phillips' Mill Juried Art Show in 1929 (from top): Sunlit Meadow, by William Lathrop; The Well Diggers, by Mary Elizabeth Price; and Passing Tow Mule, by John Folinsbee.

PAINTINGS FROM A PRIVATE COLLECTION, PHOTOS COURTESY OF JIM'S OF LAMBERTVILLE



and the following year those artists might not get in."

That inclusion is never a given contributes to the show's prestige. "Artists always have this dilemma: Should I enter this painting or that painting?" says Annelies van Dommelen, of Lambertville, who has been involved with Phillips' Mill for four decades and was the 2018 Honored Artist. "My best success happened when I had two portfolio pieces rejected, then realized that I could submit a sculpture. I got the sculpture prize of \$1,000. That was a big surprise."

Each year the committee presents about twenty awards, totaling roughly \$12,000, including three Patrons awards—for painting; for drawing, pastel, or printmaking; and for sculpture—as well as in categories such as First-time Exhibitor, Still Life, Bridgeview Award (for a work featuring a Bucks County scenic bridge), Interior Scene, Landscape Painting, and awards that celebrate diversity or are given in memoriam.

The show's prominence has launched artists to national galleries and auctions. "My first acceptance to the show in the '90s helped me build a career," says Solebury painter Robert Beck, whose works have been accepted into the Phillips' Mill Juried Art Show twenty-five times (and rejected, Beck notes, six other years) and hung in museums and galleries across the country. (His solo exhibition, *Here and Now*, runs September 14 through October 6 at Morpeth Contemporary in Hopewell.) "When you start out, you need some sort of path, but that path is pretty opaque. What artists need more than anything is to get their work in front of people. This show has high-quality participants and people who pay attention to it."

Janine Dunn Wade, the 2024 Honored Artist, has been submitting work to the show since 1995. "I was lucky enough to get in on my first shot," Wade says. "You read about how Garber and Lathrop founded the Mill. I want to be part of this history, which is why the honor is so wonderful."

Wade, whose studio is in Doylestown, served for two decades on the Art Show Committee that produces the show. She chose an oil painting, *Peonies, Pansies, and Badger*, to represent her at this year's show. "As always, I am giving what I consider to be my best painting to the Mill," she says.

Of the Juried Art Show, Wade says, "The people are the magnetic force that makes it happen. It's a lot of work and time. You really have to love it to do it. It brings me back to Annie Lathrop. She was a dynamic force. She is the reason why the Mill produced plays in addition to being a place where artists gathered. The new breath of life at the Mill is continuing Annie's same lifeforce."

Each year, the Phillips' Mill Art Show Committee invites artists to submit an image of the mill for consideration as the show's Signature Image, to be used on marketing material. The artist receives a \$400 stipend and the piece is included in the show and is available for purchase. This year the Signature Image Committee narrowed down the thirty-four paintings submitted to six finalists, which were then viewed in person by the committee members, who cast a confidential ranked vote to determine the 2024 image. The winner: *March Afternoon*, a twenty-by-sixteen-inch pastel on paper by Donna Ruane Rogers, of Frenchtown, who was inspired by the light and shadows on the mill the day she decided to enter the contest. Rogers' rendering is so crisp, you can sense the chill across the lawn, feel the sun on the back of your neck, and hear the rustle of the scant leaves remaining on the trees.

"I got the email from the Mill about the competition about three o'clock in the afternoon," Rogers says. "I wanted to get there

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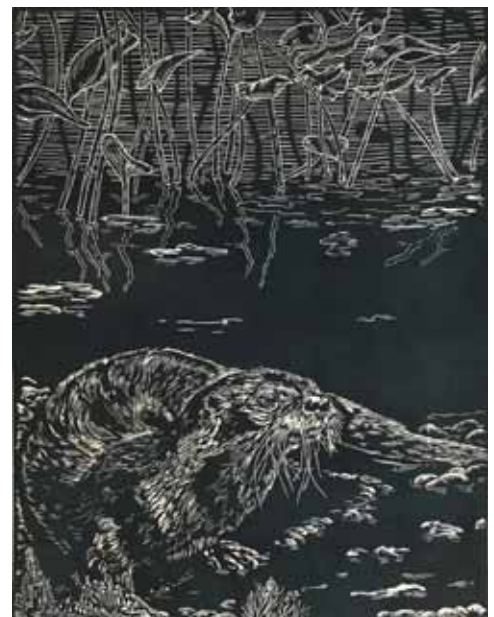
and take some pictures while there was still some sunlight. One of my goals as an artist is to faithfully depict my subjects and their interaction with natural light. I remember waiting in line to bring my work inside. My heart was racing a little bit. You are looking at everyone else's work. When I found out my painting was chosen as the Signature Image, it blew me away. It is such an honor. The Phillips' Mill Juried Art Show is the pinnacle for artists in the area."

From its earliest years through today, the Juried Art Show continues to influence artists and viewers alike. The late Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and Doylestown native James A. Michener once recalled that it was at Phillips' Mill that art "first became real to me, where I came to understand that paintings were not just



Three award-winning works from the 2023 Juried Art Show (from top): Rosie's Nine, by Robert Beck, received an award in memory of Edwin Leffingwell, given by Jon and Linda Paton; Perch, by Shawn Campbell, which received the Patrons' Award for Sculpture; Otter, by Ron Balerno, which received the Patrons' Award for Drawing, Pastel, or Printmaking.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF
PHILLIPS' MILL
COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION





PHOTOS (THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE) COURTESY OF PHILLIPS' MILL COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

A gallery from the 2023 Juried Art Show. Last year artists from across the River Towns and beyond submitted 326 framed pieces, 268 portfolio pieces, and forty-two sculptures.



Among this year's theatrical offerings at Phillips' Mill was this production of The Mill's Guide to the Best Vacation Ever!

decorative objects hung on walls but the work of flesh-and-blood people who transmitted what they saw into their own visions."

The Juried Art Show has spawned a variety of other programs and signature events. Earlier this year the association mounted its first Members Art Show and Sale, which spotlighted the creativity of its members and honored the creative spirit founded by the original members of the Phillips' Mill Community Association.

Other events are more established. For the past eleven years, the Youth Art Exhibition has offered young artists from more than twenty area high schools an opportunity to display their work at Phillips' Mill and receive awards. The exhibition features work submitted by the students' art teachers. "It's an

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Annabelle Schu, a student at Council Rock High School South, with her first-place-winning painting, Blowing Bubbles, at the 2024 Youth Art Exhibition.

extraordinary show, incredibly sophisticated,” says Terri Epstein, a member of the association’s board of directors (and a contributor to *River Towns*). “The young exhibitors are amazing artists already in their own right. The art is less filtered. Most is really personal.”

Continuing Annie Lathrop’s legacy, each year the Phillips’ Mill Players present theatrical productions on the mill’s stage, including a cabaret-style musical comedy each May and the Premiere Showcase production of a never-before-staged play in July. The Phillips’ Mill Players also sponsor two Emerging Playwright Competitions—one for adults, one for students—and showcase live readings of the winning plays by community actors. “Getting kids started early and encouraging them in art and theater at an adult venue is really important for our future community,” Womack says.

The Mill also holds two photography exhibitions: an internationally recognized juried show, launched in 1992, and the “Not Your Run of the Mill” exhibit for members of the association’s Photo Committee. In between the exhibitions and shows, Womack hosts the association’s popular monthly online *ArtTalk* series, for which she interviews artists, curators, writers, and directors. “We consider all artists in the region to be ‘Phillips’ Mill artists,’ whether they’re in the show or not,” Womack says, “because that’s the community that started here.”

Phillips’ Mill is part of a larger hamlet of buildings. Just across River Road, the village of Phillips’ Mill, modeled on an English village, includes clustered houses designed by



The Concordia Chamber Players, a Bucks County–based ensemble led by cellist Michelle Djokic (second from right), rehearsing inside Phillips’ Mill.

Morgan Colt, an architect, painter, and metalworker who bought the land from Lathrop; the miller’s house, which was the Lathrop family’s home; the former Inn at Phillips Mill (closed since 2020); West End Farm; Lenteboden (the house where Dr. Marshall lived); Hotel du Village; and St. Philip’s Episcopal Church. The village was named a National Register Historic District in 1983.

Today the Phillips’ Mill Community Association is setting its sights on preserving its land for generations to come. “Phillips’ Mill has partnered with community organizations, such as the Primrose Creek Watershed Association, to study this section of the Primrose Creek behind us going up to the quarry, the water quality and the environment to repair our riparian zone and make it more eco-friendly,” Womack says.

By doing so, she adds, the association is serving as a continuum of the curators of the building and the land it sits upon. The Mill’s strength, Beck says, is this perpetuation of the community of artists forged within these walls by William Lathrop and his fellow Pennsylvania Impressionists. “It has always been important,” Beck says, “because it’s a place where artists can get their work seen, meet people, and pursue something larger.” 🌊

Patti Zielinski is the chief arts writer for River Towns.