

Contemporary Arrowmont

Unlike the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School, the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts was not Gatlinburg-centric; that is, the school's function was to promote arts and crafts literacy on a national and international scale -- not necessarily to provide economic and social benefits for the people of Gatlinburg (although Gatlinburg certainly benefited, and continues to benefit, from its presence). And yet, the new school was imbued with the same pioneering educational spirit as its predecessor. For just as Pi Beta Phi once sought to bring education, health care, and economic development to the isolated, underprivileged people of Southern Appalachia, Arrowmont sought to spread arts and crafts literacy into communities -- many of them likewise underprivileged -- across America (and around the world).

Because of its mission, early Arrowmont attracted a diverse student body. A visitor to the school in the 1970s and 1980s might well have worked alongside Pakistani exchange student Shaheda Khanam, whose goal it was to find new and creative uses for jute fiber (and thereby provide her nation with a valuable export commodity); Dennis Jackson, a cerebral palsy sufferer who wished to incorporate arts and crafts into the recreational program of the Los Angeles Crippled Children's Society; or Sister Pasquina Tamagni, a nun who taught arts and crafts to mentally retarded children at St. Mary's Training School in Clark, Louisiana. One might also have exchanged ideas with Anne Cheney, an arts and crafts instructor who worked with senior citizens in Houston, Texas; or with Joseph Martin, who presided over recreational programming for troubled teens at the St. Louis (Missouri) County Juvenile Court. Not all of those who studied at Arrowmont were, however, educators. Among the student body were people from all walks of life -- doctors, lawyers, businesspeople, retired persons, and a host of others -- who wished to tap into their creative potential. There were also aspiring arts and crafts professionals

from the University of Tennessee who, thanks to an agreement of understanding between the university and Arrowmont, were able to earn credit towards a BFA or MFA by taking summer courses in Gatlinburg.

In the early years, course offerings at Arrowmont were limited to textile design, craft design, weaving (introductory and advanced), jewelry making, ceramics (including pottery making), school and recreational handicrafts, and enameling. But as the school grew in popularity, and the student population swelled, administrators made every effort to expand the curriculum. During the 1970s and 1980s, Arrowmont introduced a number of new classes such as plastics, macramé, spinning, vegetable dyeing, basketry, woodworking, drawing, painting, photography, paper making, and book arts to its programming schedule. Stitchery, ceramics, stained glass, blacksmithing, quilting, leather and bookbinding were added in the early to mid-1990s, thereby rounding out the curriculum. To ensure that students received the best training possible, administrators hired the very best professional artists available to teach these courses (a policy that continues today). As Arrowmont Board member Martha Connell recently put it, the composition of Arrowmont's teaching staff over the years has been "mindboggling," for it has included "many of the movers and shakers in the various craft media."

Beginning in the early 1980s, Arrowmont administrators implemented a series of programs aimed at increasing enrollment and providing assistance to up-and-coming professional artists. In 1981, for example, the school began offering courses designed specifically for senior citizens (as a part of its affiliation with the Elderhostel program) as well as Saturday morning children's classes. A decade later, the school began its highly selective "Artists in Residence Program" -- a program which granted, and continues to grant, nine to eleven months of studio

space to five worthy artists, with the stipulation being that they assist the Arrowmont staff with projects, courses, and administrative tasks.

In addition to providing vast educational opportunities for amateur and professional artists, contemporary Arrowmont has provided a place for professional artists to meet and exchange ideas. Since 1979, the school has hosted a variety of conferences, including the American Craft Council -- Southeast Conference, the Form and Imagery Conference, the Tennessee Art Education Association Conference, the Paper: USA and Finland Contrasts Conference, and the Tennessee Watercolor Society workshop. The school has also hosted conferences devoted to specific craft mediums, such as leather, fiber, enameling, and polymer clay. The most notable of these conferences, given its impact on the larger arts and crafts community, was the school's 1985 woodturning conference. So successful was this conference that participants later met to form the American Association of Woodturners. To express their gratitude, AAW members created a totem pole for the school, which still occupies a prominent spot on the campus, just to the east of the Emma Harper Turner Building.

Thanks to its outstanding gallery program, Arrowmont has also been able to host numerous exhibitions. Some of these exhibitions, such as the Southeastern Contemporary and Traditional Basketry Forms Exhibition (1979), the Forms of Leather Exhibition (1982), the Kaleidoscope: Directions in Surface Design Exhibition (1983), and All Things Considered Exhibition (1999), just to name a few, were staged alongside conferences held at the school. Others, such as the annual Artists in Residence Exhibition and Arrowmont Faculty and Staff Exhibitions, were designed to give Arrowmont employees and promising young artists an opportunity to showcase their work. Additionally, Arrowmont has utilized its gallery space to exhibit work produced by local artists and those from the greater Southeast region. Since 1980,

the school has consistently displayed the work of artists from Sevier County, Tennessee, and hosted numerous “Spotlight” on Southeastern Crafts exhibitions, the Tennessee Artist/Designers Invitational Exhibition, Annual Exhibitions of the Tennessee Watercolor Society, and the Smoky Mountain Woodturners Exhibition.

None of this would have been possible, of course, without firm leadership. Fortunately, in this regard, Arrowmont has enjoyed remarkable stability over the years.

Arrowmont’s first director, University of Tennessee Professor of Craft Design Marian Heard (1968-1977), was the natural choice for the job. Having directed the highly successful Pi Beta Phi Summer Workshop in Crafts and Community Recreation since 1947, Heard was more than familiar with the fraternity’s expectations for Arrowmont (particularly the fraternity’s desire to make the school accessible to both amateur and professional artists). She was also well-acquainted with the people of Gatlinburg, and therefore mindful of their concerns about the sweeping changes taking place on the former Settlement School campus. As Heard herself once put it, there was a great deal of “apprehension” among the townspeople about the new school, primarily because they feared that a sudden influx of outsiders -- college students in particular -- might serve as a conduit of unwelcome social change. Knowing this, Heard made a priority of recruiting “students and faculty that would fit into a traditional setting.”

Heard’s immediate successor, Ray Pierotti, enjoyed only limited success during his brief tenure (1977-1979). Given free rein to direct the school as he saw fit, Pierotti decided to recast Arrowmont in the mold of the Cranbrook Academy of Art, an institution that was (and still is) dedicated primarily to the training of professional artists. Rather than deviate from its preferred goal of training professional and amateur artists side-by-side, the Arrowmont Board of Governors made the difficult decision to dismiss Pierotti and adopt new leadership. After a brief

search, the Board of Governors appointed Arrowmont's then Assistant Director Sandra Blain to the position of full-time Director in 1979.

On considering Blain's long tenure (1979-2001), one might easily assert that it was she, more so than anyone else, who guided Arrowmont into the modern era. After all, most of the important developments that make the school what it is today -- the diverse curriculum; the outstanding gallery program; the exhibitions and conferences; the first-rate faculty; the programs designed to assist promising professional artists -- originated during her twenty-two years of service, and may be attributed in one way or another to her leadership. For that matter, Blain oversaw a massive renovation/construction project which saw virtually every existing structure on the Arrowmont campus receive a facelift -- including the Red Barn, the Stuart Cottage, the Staff House kitchen, the administrative offices, and the book and supply store -- and a series of new structures -- such as the Staff House dining room (1989), the Hughes Hall Dormitory (1995), the painting studio (1995), the wood studio facility and gallery (1996), and the new Pollard Cottage (1999) -- added to the campus. With these renovations completed, and the new structures in place, administrators were no longer forced to shuffle students, faculty, and classes between outdated buildings dating back to the Settlement School era. This served to enhance the school's reputation, enabling it to better compete with other arts and crafts schools for faculty and students.

Since 2001, the year that Blain stepped down, Arrowmont has been under the direction of David Willard. In the six short years since he arrived in Gatlinburg, Willard has been highly successful in reinvigorating the relationship between Arrowmont, Pi Beta Phi, and the Gatlinburg community (all of which had waned to a certain extent following the closure of the Settlement School in 1965). Not only has he taken an active role in community affairs, participating in local

organizations such as the Gatlinburg Gateway Association (an organization dedicated to bringing about civic improvements in Gatlinburg, such as the recent decision to bury the town's power lines); he has worked closely with Pi Beta Phi officials and the University of Tennessee Libraries to complete and promote the "Pi Beta Phi to Arrowmont" project. Thanks in large part to his efforts, researchers, artists, Gatlinburg residents, Pi Phis, and others interested in the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School/Arrowmont story now have access to thousands of letters, photos, diary pages, and other items gleaned from the Arrowmont archives. They may also view scrapbooks compiled by Settlement School teachers and nurses, a 360-degree interactive gallery of contemporary art objects housed at Arrowmont, and read a collection of historical essays which tell the story of the Settlement School's evolution from a Progressive Era education service project into one of the nation's premier centers for the promotion of arts and crafts literacy.

Finally, under Willard, Arrowmont continues to be a leader in the arts and crafts community. For not only does it educate artists of all skill levels; it continues to serve as pioneer in the field of arts and crafts literacy. As Board member Lloyd Herman put it in early 2007, Arrowmont has staked out a place for itself by continually introducing "new forms (baskets and turned bowls, for example), new materials (polymer clay, precious metal clay), and new methods (digital everything)." This, he insisted, represents Arrowmont's "unique contribution" to the modern art world, setting it apart from similar institutions.