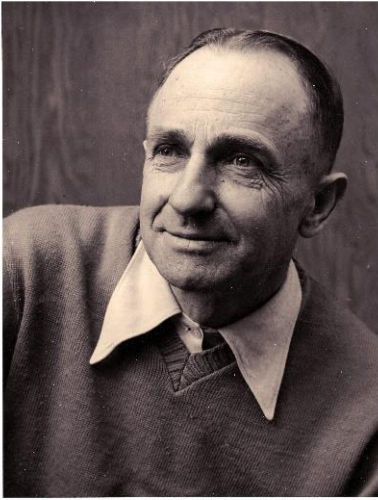


## THE HISTORY OF THE MARIN SOCIETY OF ARTISTS, the first and longest operating arts non-profit in Marin County



Left: Paul Romer, former president and a founding member of MSA, was instrumental in keeping the art association going during hard times.

### **EARLY YEARS: 1927 to 1933**

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Marin County emerged as a popular place for landscape painters. Many artists came from San Francisco on weekends, some camping overnight, others staying in one of the “Arks” on the slough in Corte Madera and Larkspur. At the time there were no art galleries in Marin – aside from an occasional exhibition in the Hotel Rafael.

**1927 to 1929** - In 1927, a group of artists that routinely exhibited work in the annual Marin County Fair in Novato, adopted the name “**Marin Art Association.**” The Association

opened a gallery above a garage at Fourth and D Street in San Rafael and the tiny space became the artists’ headquarters and the site of public art exhibitions for the next three years. The initial group of 50 artists included painters, weavers, jewelers and other crafts and grew quickly. The Association also staged exhibitions at the Outdoor Art Club in Mill Valley, the Anvil Gallery in San Rafael and the Junior College in Kentfield.

**1930 to 1933** - In 1930, the Association president, Mary Cole, rented several rooms at 2 Bank Street in San Anselmo where art exhibitions and art classes for adults and children were given. A subsequent move to an “old mansion” in Gerstle Park, San Rafael was less successful due to it’s location and the notable economic challenges of the times.

### **THE DEPRESSION YEARS: 1934 to 1942**

The arts suffered during the Great Depression as both artists and the general public were experiencing financial hardship.

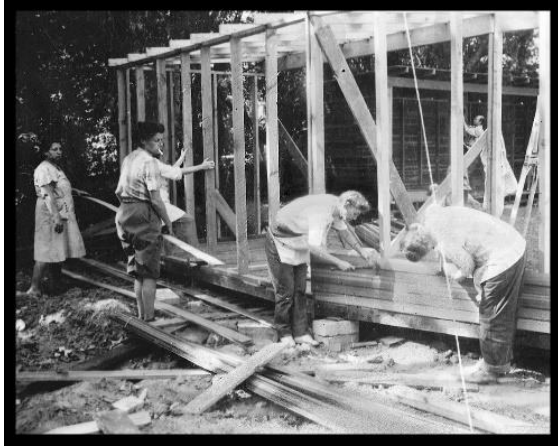
**1934 to 1941** - At a meeting of the Association called to “wind up affairs,” Mary Cole performed another rescue by advancing a reported \$20 of her own funds to keep the Marin Art Association going.

In 1935, Association president, Paul Romer, changed the name to the “**Marin Society of Artists**” and led efforts to keep the organization alive. The first exhibition under the new name was a widely publicized major event that attracted participation by well-known artists and the public. The event was publicized throughout the Bay area and a huge success. Press coverage and arts activities of MSA improved in the coming years, and attracted prominent artist members such as Seldon -, Ralph Stackpole and others. -----

By 1940, Marin Society of Artists had a gallery at the Sea Spray Inn in Sausalito, where it staged a series of shows and also held annual exhibitions at Sir Francis Drake High School.

**1942** - World War II intervened and MSA temporarily suspended operations.

## SECURING A FUTURE & BUILDING A GALLERY: 1943-1949



In the early 1940s, Caroline Livermore and Gladys Smith teamed up with 8 autonomous groups, including Marin Society of Artists, to acquire 11 acres of the former Kittle Estate in Ross. They obtained a loan for the purchase price of \$25,000, which the groups paid off over time from their respective operating revenues.

In 1945, the groups incorporated the Marin Arts and Garden Center (**MAGC**) to hold title to the property, with its primary mission to foster appreciation and education in the arts, horticulture and environmental conservation. The original intent was to create a colony of artists and craftspeople who made and sold their wares on the premises, an idea modeled after the Allied Arts Guild in Menlo Park. While Marin Society of Artists would produce the visual arts programming and Ross Valley Players would provide theatre, other groups such as the Marin Garden Club and Marin Conservation League (formerly Citizens Survey Committee) would manage the horticulture and conservation programs on the MAGC grounds. MAGC was also a “living memorial” to those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

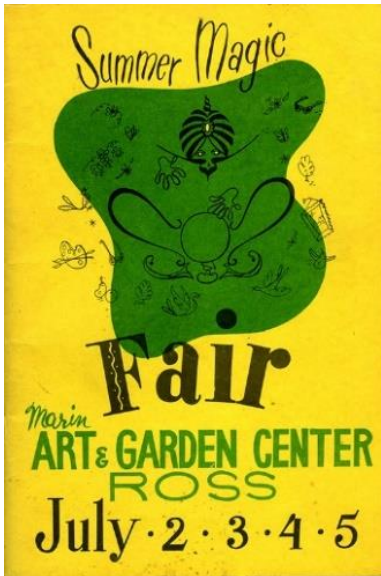
As one of the founding members of **MAGC**, Marin Society of Artists was assigned a designated area of the property to develop for the visual arts. Thirty to forty MSA members came every weekend for a year to clear and level the land with shovels and their hands – brush and poison oak made it a tough job.



MSA built a concrete foundation in 1945, using up its entire treasury of \$5000. The following year an open air art show was installed on the foundation. A loan obtained to construct a gallery building was only enough to build the shell – walls and a roof. Francis Young of Ross contributed enough to pay off the loan, and more.

To raise money to complete the building, an outdoor log pavilion was set up, and two paintings a day were raffled off. MSA member volunteers provided what labor they could, some contractors worked for free – and, with the guidance and efforts of Paul and Katy Steinmetz among others, the new Marin Society of Artists art center and gallery opened on November 6, 1948. This was the first new building on the **MAGC** grounds, and it was named the “*Frances Young Gallery*”. Marin Society of Artists filed articles of incorporation in 1949 and is a 501 (c) (3) California non-profit.

## THE FAIR YEARS: 1946-1970



Beginning in 1946, an annual “Marin Art and Garden Fair,” was held on the MAGC grounds. In 1950, the fair was designated the official Marin County Fair, supported largely through State horse racing funds.

By 1954, 25,000 visitors packed the fair. MSA was initially responsible for the “Art” component of the fair, offering art and craft demonstrations, and managing art on display and for sale in temporary fair pavilions. As years passed, the fair themes became more elaborate, and the fair ever more popular. Eventually the County of Marin assumed management of all aspects of the fair including the arts. The last county fair was held on the **MAGC** grounds in 1970 and then moved to the Civic Center to accommodate the sizeable crowds.

## RENTAL GALLERY: 1955-2015

Around 1955, MSA initiated the first of its kind art rental program in the Frances Young Gallery. An untested idea, by 1959 the program began to show a profit, and continued to grow. By 1965, a new wing was added to the building containing a wall of sliding panels to display the rental artwork. Art rental became so popular that MSA hired staff to manage the program which continued through 2015.

## MSA PROGRAMS AT MAGC: Through 2015

During its years in the Frances Young Gallery, MSA managed 10 or more month-long exhibitions annually, art classes for adults and children, lecture series and art demonstrations, special events featuring weaving and other crafts, and many other activities including partnering with Marin County to offer workshops for the blind and vision impaired. Broadening horizons, MSA sponsored an art tour of Europe, visiting the major museums from Paris to Rome. Rental gallery events, the annual auction, and other activities filled out the calendar.

## RISING RENT & DISPLACEMENT: 2011-2015

With loss of County Fair revenues in 1970, by the early twenty first century, MAGC’s financial condition deteriorated. The founding non-profit program providers that had enjoyed affordable space at MAGC, were asked to increase monthly rent payments to commercial rates. In MSA’s case, the requested increase was five-fold existing rent. In addition, **MAGC** shifted its business model away from historic uses and gave preference to its own revenue activities, such as renting the campus for outdoor weddings and third-party events that filled the parking lots and conflicted with its non-profit partners’ operations. By 2014, it became clear that Marin Society of Artists could not survive at MAGC. MSA leadership began the search for a new location, with the knowledge that dissolution would be the only alternative to relocation.



## BACK TO SAN RAFAEL: 2016 & Onward

2018 marks a 91st anniversary, and the 1st year of MSA's future. A five-fold rents increase coupled with physical limitations that prevented needed program growth, forced MSA from its 70+ year home at MAGC. In 2016 MSA found a new location in the nascent "Downtown San Rafael Cultural District" and commenced a 10 year lease. In January 2017 the MSA Art Centre obtained full occupancy of the building at 1515 Third Street that has been transformed into an Art Centre containing basic tenant improvements consisting of galleries, flexible class, meeting & performance space and artist studios. Fittingly, the Art Centre is just a couple of blocks from the Fourth & D Street location of MSA's first home.

In the former Ross location, there were no artist studios or dedicated space for an art classroom, meeting and performance space etc. At the new location, the Art Centre is a two-story former retail space housing 3 galleries (Main Gallery, Flex Gallery and Ground Floor Gallery), each with a different purpose and focus, and 17 artist studios. The Flex Gallery and Main Gallery double as classroom and useable space for arts, enrichment, and other community activities.

Centrally located in the heart of Marin County and the new CA State designated *Downtown San Rafael Cultural District*, the 1515 Third Street Art Centre holds the potential for new arts and community activities that the former location did not. MSA's business plan includes significantly more and new community-based outreach and space use, with a goal of becoming the "go to" place or "**Crossroads**" for community-based arts and enrichment in the North Bay and greater Bay area.

The envisioned **Crossroads Program** will build on and expands MSA's historic outreach activities and includes significantly more robust and diverse partners, uses and activities. In addition to typical gallery wall use for ongoing art exhibits, the Art Centre floor space is ideal for a broad array of other compatible uses. The **Crossroads Program** goal is full utilization of floor space for arts, cultural and community benefit & enrichment as well as for social and business uses.

## SECURING THE ART CENTRE FOR THE FUTURE

### Conversion from Leasehold-to-Ownership

Since Marin Society of Artist and the 1515 Third Street Art Centre are participants in the CA State designated *Downtown San Rafael Cultural District*, **permanently securing the Art Centre as a cultural asset is essential**. With 8 years remaining on its lease, the Art Centre's future is at risk. MSA is launching a capital campaign to fund acquisition of the Art Centre, make flooring improvements, launch the Crossroads Program and provide endowment to support programs and general operations.

**Sources:**

- Interview with Paul Romer on 1/8/75. Tape of interview is available at the Anne T. Kent California Room in the Marin County Free Library.
- Various Palettes (MSA Newsletters) now in the possession of Ross Historical Society.
- Marin County Fair history timeline (available on the Fair website).
- Summaries of minutes from various MSA committees from 1955-65. MSA archives.
- Various newspaper clippings, dating from 1928 onward. Of special interest: Oakland Tribune 11/24/35 article "Marin Artists Society Holds Its First Annual", Independent-Journal 9/13/58 article "Art's Ups and Downs", Independent-Journal 9/15/62 article "Our Marin Artists: Garage to Gallery". MSA Archives.
- Various website resources.