

PORTLAND, OREGON: A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

BY JUDY WAGONFELD



Susan Zoccola
Bower, 2015
steel, paint,
powdercoat, lights
30 x 20 x 20'
Commissioned by
Tri-Met, for the
Park Ave/Oak Grove
station of the
Orange Line

First things first: A visit to Portland entails a pronunciation lesson. It is *not* the *WILL-a-mette* or *will-A-mette* River. Locals instruct: *It's "Will-AM-it" as in "It's Will-AM-it, damn it!"* This point can even be found printed on T-shirts. The Willamette River, rippling to its Columbia River confluence, bisects Portland. However, it unifies rather than divides, linking 15 neighborhoods by 12 bridges. Its newest 2015 connection, Tilikum Crossing, the "Bridge of the People," serves feet, bikes, and light rail—no cars.

The sundry bridge styles mirror Portland's eclectic culture, so hilariously spoofed on the TV series "Portlandia": "The city where young people go to retire." The official City of Roses nickname refers to the spectacular International Rose Test Garden in Washington Park, established in 1917. Other nicknames abound: P-Town, Bridgetown, Biketown, Rip Town, or PDX (the airport). But it's Stumptown, adopted by an iconic Portland coffee roaster, that's popular now. The name references the angry protests of the 1850s, when a road project decimated tree stands, littering the landscape with stumps. Indicative of Portland's civic engagement ethic, it befits the city's unofficial motto, "Keep Portland Weird." In 2007 *The Oregonian* newspaper actually trademarked the slogan, distributing bumper stickers. Attesting to the weirdness, in Portland (and throughout Oregon), you cannot pump your own gas, but you can participate in naked bicycle events.

Mike Suri
 Driveway Gate, 2010
 weathering steel
 Photo: Mike Suri



Portland public art dates to 1888, when pharmacist Stephen G. Skidmore's will allocated funds for a bronze sculpture of a woman balancing a granite fountain overhead; it is known as the Skidmore Fountain. Restored in 2005, it remains an Old Town gathering point. Today, Portland teems with art, owning approximately 2,000 works funded by percent-for-art initiatives and donations. A \$35 annual Arts Tax on anyone over 18 yields an additional \$10 million a year, funding school programs for 36,000 students.

In 1997, the transportation system, Tri-Met, adopted a Percent for Arts policy that stipulates that all projects include an Art Master Plan based on a cross-disciplinary, sense-of-place motif. Its finest example, the new seven-and-a-half-mile light rail Orange Line, integrates the art of the Tilikum Crossing with artwork in its 21 stations. Crafted by 26 makers and 57 writers, the project incorporates metal, glass mosaics, poetry, stone, wood, and technology, immersing riders in a rich historic and cultural journey. The bridge's cable supports merge in triangular towers, echoing Mount Hood's snowy peak. Anchoring each riverbank, the chiseled basalt of Greg A. Robinson's *We Have Always Been Here* honors Chinook imagery. LED lighting hues mutate based on the river's speed, height, and temperature. At the line's Oak Grove terminus, people stand beneath *Bower*, a lacy canopy of powdercoated steel oak leaves by Susan Zoccola.

While enhancing the quality of life, public art can also galvanize change, as when one downtown Portland sculpture upended the 1984 mayoral race. Candidate Bud Clark, a colorful tavern owner, holding his raincoat open, flashed *Kvinneakt*, (Norman Taylor, 1975) a bronze female nude sculpture. A photo of the incident by Mike Ryerson was made into a poster, *Expose Yourself to Art* (1978), which in today's language, went viral. Against the odds,

Clark won. Recently I spotted the poster in a Budapest cafe.

During that era, Michael Graves designed a multihued, post-modern government center. Above its entry, the copper repoussé *Portlandia* (Raymond Kaskey, 1985) portrays the 1878 Queen of Commerce city seal. Nearby Pioneer Courthouse Square, dubbed the city's "Living Room," is the site of the popular *Allow Me* (1984, J. Seward Johnson), a bronze gentleman under an umbrella, and Georgia Gerber's bronze wildlife *Animals in Pools*.

The plenitude of public art emanates from the Regional Arts & Cultural Council (RACC), which awards commissions, runs workshops, and develops programs such as The Right Brain Initiative, which facilitates creativity in schools. "Portland is very interdisciplinary in art," says Oregon College of Arts and Crafts (OCAC) metals department head Christine Clark. As evidence, she cites the annual 10-day Time Based Art Festival (TBA), held each September, which mirrors innovation across realms—from metals to Nike to cafes. Whether it's coffee, microbrew beer, Willamette Valley wine, art galleries, crafts, clothing, music, fresh produce, culinary arts, or food cart pods, there's a feast for the visual and aromatic senses.

"You cannot talk about Portland without talking about food," says Clark. The Portland Saturday Market (also open Sunday) is a thriving microcosm of art, craft, and culinary creativity. Across the city, crowds cram monthly art walks and then dine out in three neighborhoods: First Thursday is held in The Pearl (Portland's

Sara Thompson
 Rocket Ship #3,
 2016
 sterling silver
 teapot, 3-D
 printed plastic
 Photo:
 Stephen Funk





Shelly Durica-Laiche working on an Art Deco Holiday Tree commission from ARTEMIS for the Providence Festival of the Trees, 2016.

Photo: DBMcD, Portland.

art epicenter); Last Thursday in Alberta; and First Friday in Central Eastside.

"I think [the art scene is] incredibly encouraging here, not cutthroat. People support one another, especially at OCAC," says silversmith Sara Thompson, maker of sleek contemporary jewelry and hammered bowls, spoons, and plates. Like many OCAC students and graduates, Thompson reveres Christine Clark. "I wouldn't be the metalsmith I am today if I didn't have her," she says. It's a common refrain.

"OCAC is like a fraternity or sorority. It's tight-knit and intense," says jeweler Kate Speranza. With other graduates, she rents space from Joe Diemer Artisanry, sharing techniques and equipment. Diemer, a maker of Renaissance-inspired copper, brass, and silver birdcages, pays the rent by fabricating locksets and decorative ironwork. Diemer's wife Jamieson crafts enameled and molten silver rings and pendants. Gina Rios produces minimalist, bold sculptural jewelry. Since Diemer's studio rent doubled last year, the group worries about losing studio space to cannabis shops and gentrification.

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OCAC, founded as the Arts and Craft Society in 1907, employs a studio- and mentor-based environment, teaching impeccable metals skills. An impressive 82 percent of alumni work in art fields. Since 1994 OCAC has offered bachelor's degrees, and later added master's degrees, which can be combined with the Pacific Northwest College of the Arts' (PNCA) Applied Craft and Industrial Design specialties.

Although Portland lacks a dedicated studio jewelry gallery or a museum jewelry collection, myriad sales venues exist.

Markets and seasonal fairs, open studios, pop-ups, and craft stores such as MADE (goods handmade in Oregon) feature one-of-a-kind and production pieces, ranging from accessible contemporary design to funkiness for the less faint of heart.

In the upscale, custom realm, Alchemy owners David Iler and Laura Mapes design, repair, and restore jewelry in their architectural steel-clad showroom. Using recycled and ethically sourced gold, platinum, gemstones, and heirloom pieces, they fashion contemporary couture works. As employers, they mentor artisans in precision metalwork and gemology.

In late May, Portland will host the Society of North American Goldsmiths' (SNAG) conference based on the theme, "Makers Across Disciplines Engage" (MADE). Conference participants will gather at Art Design Portland (ADX), a 24,000-square-foot hub, where makers explore, build, and grow through six-month Maker Paths. The evening will feature tours, food trucks, and a joint Portland-Seattle metals exhibit. Elsewhere, SNAG will host a Trunk Show, "Exhibition in Motion," and exhibits at OCAC's Hoffman Gallery and The Marriott Hotel. Thursday's Pearl District "Gallery Crawl" will showcase metals, such as SNAG member Greg Wilbur's exquisite raised vessels at Waterstone Gallery.

Wilbur, a former chair of the Portland's Creative Metal Arts Guild (CMAG) and its annual exhibit, laments the clientele change. "We used to get people of means, but not now," he says. Current president Mandy Allen agrees: "Locals prefer jewelry on the borderline of manufactured and handmade." Both bemoan the 2016 bankruptcy that ended the Museum of Contemporary Craft (MoCC), a fixture in various iterations since 1937, as a harbinger of art's vulnerability due to aging collectors and a youth "less is more" culture.

Shelly Durica-Laiche, typical of Portland's new maker breed, shares a studio at Watershed PDX, crafting metal gates, trellises, and abstract and figurative sculptures. Run by Deadletter



Greg Wilbur hammering copper in his studio.



Lee Kelly
Memory 99, 2012
 Cor-ten steel
 Located in plaza of
 Pacific Northwest College
 of Art, Portland
 Photo: Judy Wagonfeld

(yes, that is the name he uses), the old warehouse hosts about 30 artisans. “We know and help each other,” Durica-Laiche says. These younger makers eschew traditional galleries, favoring client contact at fairs, on-line platforms, co-ops, and word of mouth. “I do about 16 shows a year,” says Durica-Laiche, “and show at Artistic Portland, a member-tended shop.” As part of Pacific Northwest Sculptors, she says, “We meet in studios and discuss our work—materials, tools—and find out how other people create.”

Alternatively, metalsmith Mike Suri navigates on his own. Obsessed with metals during high school, he scoured library books, experimenting in a backyard shed. Then he saw an Albert Paley exhibit. “It was like the Holy Grail,” Suri says. Foregoing academics, he honed his skills at a metal shop and in a bronze casting apprenticeship. Now a self-supporting fabricator of ironwork trellises, railings, ornamental metals, and public art, he trains assistants. Hoping to inspire vocational students, Suri teaches metals at Mt. Hood Community College.

Art, like the bridges and mist, pervades Portland’s social fabric. It infiltrates the psyche—whether it’s Lee Kelly’s 4,000-pound Cor-Ten steel sculpture *Memory 99*, William Wegman’s cast bronze *Dog Bowl* (2002), The Portland Art Museum, or the summer’s 24 pianos scattered across town, bearing “Please Play Me” signs. People do, spawning impromptu gatherings. And, there’s Powell’s, the beloved independent bookstore where locals can hear authors and get lost in literature amid the sprawling warren of rooms. Although the “Keep Portland Weird” counterculture persists, the city flows like the river, always moving forward with its environmental protections, transportation and bicycling network, and public art programs. Before stepping into its waters, heed two last pieces of advice: In The Pearl, the street is pronounced “Kooch,” not ‘Couch’ Street. And, please, say “*aura-GUN*,” NOT “*Oregone*.”

Judy Wagonfeld is a freelance writer living in Seattle.

Martha Steife in her booth at the 2017 Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft show.