

Roslyn Schultz – Grassroots Art Center

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Self-taught art. Visionary art. Primitive art. Outsider art. Naïve art. Recycled art. Trash art. Contemporary folk art. Raw art. Intuitive art. Marginal art. There are many names world-wide for the type of creative endeavour which I am describing today, but perhaps the best umbrella term might be “grassroots art.” Grassroots art, a term coined by Kansan Greg Blasdal, refers to spontaneous, unique, and sometimes outlandish yard environments. Our state's center for grassroots art is found in rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Roslyn Schultz is the director of the Grassroots Arts Center in Lucas, Kansas. She went to K-State and met and married a farmer near Lucas. As a wheat farmer's wife, she was creating wheat weavings. She found others in Lucas who wanted to promote art in area schools.

Then a unique opportunity came along. A collection of limestone sculptures from Inez Marshall became available. In 1991, local entities at Lucas formed the nonprofit Lucas Arts and Humanities Commission to purchase the Marshall collection.

Inez Marshall had been injured in a serious trucking accident in 1933 and started carving limestone sculptures. She did so for the next 50 years. She displayed her distinctive carved structures at the nearby rural town of Portis, population 120 people. Now, that's rural.

After Inez Marshall passed, her sculptures went up for auction. Eventually they ended up in Lucas where three downtown limestone buildings were acquired where her collection and other unique types of outsider, recycled art could also be displayed. That was the beginning of the Grassroots Art Center.

Volunteers worked thousands of hours renovating the buildings downtown. In 1995, the Grassroots Arts Center opened in Lucas.

Lucas already had a bit of a reputation for off-beat art, because it was the home of the Garden of Eden – a collection of unusual concrete figures created by eccentric businessman S.P. Dinsmoor, as we have previously profiled. However, the Grassroots Art Center has its own collection of remarkable artifacts from contemporary local artists.

It began exhibiting four local artists with yard environments plus the Inez Marshall collection. Today the Grassroots Arts Center features more than 20 artists in permanent and rotating exhibits. What is the common theme of these works of art? One description would be quirky. It is truly grassroots, self-taught art, usually created from recycled materials by someone of retirement age.

For example, Herman Divers started making things out of the pull-tabs which we used to get off the top of aluminum cans. He created a full-size motorcycle using 179,200 pull-tabs. A Model T car is made of hundreds of thousands more. When pull-tabs were no longer available, he made things with buttons strung on fishing line.

Jim Dickerman created whimsical figures of people and animals using scrap metal and spare parts from cars, trucks, tractors and farm implements. Janet Fish makes one-of-a-kind dolls from recycled clothing, foam insulation, and more. Farmer Adolph Hanneman carved hundreds of depictions of people's faces in wood during the last 20 years of his life. M. T. Liggett created more than 500 scrap metal totem poles. At age

84, Warren Ling of Cawker City started carving figures and totems of people from dead trees. Betty Milliken painted hundreds of miniature portraits on chewing gum, dried grapefruit peel and Styrofoam meat trays. Ed Root embellished his farmstead with concrete sculptures embedded with broken glass, stones and metal. All of these artists and other regional environments have been featured at the Grassroots Art Center.

“We’ve never found any two yard environments the same,” Rosslyn Schultz said. “It’s always so interesting. These are genuine Kansans doing their thing,” she said. “They are creating artwork, not for a commercial market, but to satisfy a creative urge.”

For more information, go to www.grassrootsart.net.

Whatever this is called, it is definitely grassroots. We commend Rosslyn Schultz and all those involved with the Grassroots Art Center for making a difference by honoring these artists and sharing their distinctive works of artistry. They are ordinary people creating extraordinary art.

And there’s more. Lucas is also home to what has been described as the world’s most artsy public toilet. We’ll learn about that next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.