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Newport Beach to honor artist Rex Brandt, a key figure in the city



Artist George James, 82, poses for a portrait at his home studio in Costa Mesa. (KEVIN CHANG, Daily Pilot)

BY MICHAEL MILLER

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When Gordon McClelland got his introduction to Rex Brandt, the Newport Beach painter's work came with a ringing endorsement.

“My mother was a watercolor artist, and when I was about 14 years old, she took me to see some paintings by Rex Brandt at a gallery in Anaheim, where he was having a show,” McClelland said. “She basically showed me these paintings and said, ‘This is what really amazing, great watercolors look like.’”

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This weekend, some other Orange County mother may say the same thing to her child — at a show curated by McClelland, no less.

The artist and historian, who knew Brandt for years, has put together a retrospective to celebrate what would have been his old friend's 100th birthday. The show, which features 14 watercolors along with projected images of Brandt's work and photographs of him painting on location, is only part of the festivities planned for this weekend as the Newport Beach City Arts Commission honors a man whose art — and life — intertwined with the city's history.

Brandt designed the city's official seal, which is still in use, in 1957. He and his wife, Joan Irving, also an artist, were early supporters of the Orange County Museum of Art. Newport officials recently designated the location of his residence and studio, Blue Sky, as a Historic Point of Interest.

Saturday, the city will unveil a plaque commemorating that location by the Goldenrod Footbridge. The same day, the exhibit McClelland curated will open at the Newport Beach Central Library, which will host a reception and discussion in the afternoon.

Among those expected to attend are the artist's daughters, Joan Scarboro and Shelley Walker, and E. Gene Crain, a longtime collector of Brandt's work. One other guest, George James, has particularly strong memories of Blue Sky's heyday — he was one of Brandt's students there in the early 1950s.

James, a Costa Mesa resident, was an Orange Coast College student when Brandt viewed his work at a local exhibit and gave him a scholarship to study at Blue Sky. In the ensuing years, James said, he became a prized student of Brandt's, even occasionally leading the daily critique and helping to teach his younger classmates.

“He was a great man,” said James, who later taught art at Cal State Fullerton. “He wrote all my recommendations for getting into teaching.”

Brandt, who died in 2000, was renowned for his scenes of Newport and its surrounding areas — the spots where James remembers going to paint between class sessions at Blue Sky. It was that subject matter that drew McClelland to him in the early 1980s, when the author approached Brandt for research on a book about the history of California painting.

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“He was one of the really important painters in what was called the California style watercolor movement that evolved in the ‘30s to ‘50s period,” McClelland said. “Not only was he important as an artist, but he was important as a teacher. So he was quite important. He would be considered one of the very top people in that genre of painting.”

The plaque that commemorates Brandt and Irving contains an image and description of the city seal along with a brief account of Blue Sky’s history. The two artists, the text notes, “instructed countless students in the art of watercolor painting.”

For the younger generations, that studio may simply be a name from the past. McClelland, though, can attach an image to it.

“If you look at the plaque and then directly to the right, that used to be Rex’s driveway right there,” he said.

If You Go

What: Rex Brandt centennial celebration

Where: Plaque dedication by Goldenrod Footbridge near Goldenrod and 1st avenues; art exhibit at the Newport Beach Central Library, 1000 Avocado Ave.

When: Dedication ceremony at 11 a.m. Saturday; centennial celebration program at 2 p.m. Saturday at the library; exhibit on display at the library from Nov. 1 through Dec. 15

Cost: Free

Information: (949) 717-3801 or <https://www.newportbeachca.gov/culturalarts>