

Minnesota Wildlife Art Museum

By Doug Hennes

The first wildlife art museum in Minnesota would open within several years if plans underway at a Catholic university come to fruition.

Why would the University of St. Thomas, a comprehensive liberal arts university with campuses in St. Paul and Minneapolis, be interested in running a wildlife art museum 70 miles away in Owatonna, a city of 25,000 in southern Minnesota's farming heartland?

The answers are simple and make sense when one considers St. Thomas' ties to Owatonna and the rich heritage of wildlife artists who found in that community a natural habitat, so to speak, to carry out their craft.

Many observers trace the birthplace of Minnesota wildlife art to Owatonna, for decades the home of Jostens, the nation's leading producer in school yearbooks, diplomas and class rings. Jostens commercial artists such as David Maass, who went on to win two Federal Duck Stamp contests, Jim Killen and Stu Ferreira found satisfaction in drawing and painting the game birds they pursued in the hunting season. Barney Anderson and Charles Pearson, two Owatonna High School art teachers, mentored budding wildlife artists such as the sister duo of Rosemary Millette and Theresa Marschel.

In the 1960s, Wild Wings, a fledgling company founded by William Webster of Frontenac, Minn., correctly gauged the public's growing appetite for wildlife imagery and started to sell limited edition prints of images by Maas and other artists. Wild Wings made wildlife art accessible to the masses, fueling the public's enthusiasm for bringing wildlife and sporting art into their businesses and homes.

Webster, a 1950 alumnus of St. Thomas, approached his alma mater in 2007 about creating a showplace for the work of Minnesota's wildlife artists. Webster knew the university owned and operated an Owatonna conference center named after the late Daniel C. Gainey, the longtime Jostens chief executive officer who had left his Owatonna horse ranch to St. Thomas as a bequest. St. Thomas has run the conference center since 1982.

"There might not be a more fitting place for a state wildlife art museum," Webster said, "than the Gainey Center and its 180 acres along the Straight River. They provide a natural habitat for deer, ducks, geese, pheasants, turkeys and a wide variety of song birds."

And as for Owatonna, Webster said, "If one were to trace back to the who, what, where and when that brought about the explosion of wildlife and sporting art, most would agree it all began in a somewhat obscure and rather unlikely location. Clearly no other community in the United States did more to foster the growth and acceptance of this genre of art than Owatonna through the great works of its 'painters of the prairie.'"

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The Gainey house. future home of the Minnesota Wildlife Art Museum

The museum at the Gainey Center would recognize the significant contributions that wildlife artists from Minnesota have made to this popular art form, which celebrates Minnesotans' love for the outdoors and their respect for nature and the environment.

Preliminary plans call for permanent and rotating displays of original works and limited edition prints. Other endeavors could include a history of wildlife art and an annual tribute to an artist with a retrospective of his or her work, a lecture and a workshop for young artists, including college and high school students from the region. A possible partnership could be developed with Cabela's, the giant outfitter that has a store on Interstate 35 just minutes from the Gainey Center.

No timetable has been developed to opening a museum, and St. Thomas is engaged in raising funds at this time. The university also hopes the project will be eligible for state funding generated by a new sales tax (three eighths of one cent per dollar) for the environment and the arts.

St. Thomas' proposal gained recognition – and encouragement from wildlife artists – last July when the university hosted a special 75th anniversary celebration of the Federal Duck Stamp program.

Seven Minnesota wildlife artists who have won the Federal Duck Stamp competition, including the eight-time-winning trio of Hautman brothers, participated in the Gainey Center event. Activities included an exhibit of the artists' original works, the Postal Service's first home-state cancellation of the 2008 stamp designed by Joe Hautman, and many hunting and outdoors-related workshops.

“It is time to honor the Minnesota artists and the Owatonna community for doing so much to advance wildlife and sporting art across the United States,” Webster said at the time as a member of the event planning committee. “Minnesota artists have won the Federal Duck Stamp Contest more than any other state – 23 times – and now the public can meet them and thank them.”

The first home-state ceremony to celebrate a new duck stamp typically is held in the artist's hometown (in Hautman's case, Plymouth, a suburb of Minneapolis), but he volunteered to move the event to Owatonna to draw interest to the St. Thomas museum project.

Hautman is a three-time Federal Duck Stamp artist (1992, 2002, 2008), as is his brother, Jim (1990, 1995 and 1999). A third brother, Bob Hautman, won in 1997 and 2001. Also attending the Owatonna event were Maass (1974 and 1982), Richard Plasschaert (1980), Phil Scholer (1983) and Scot (*ff: there is one T in Scot*) Storm (2004).

Since 1934, Federal Duck Stamp sales have generated \$760 million to purchase or lease 5.2 million acres of waterfowl habitat, which are under protection in the National Wildlife Refuge System. Nine million stamps have been sold in Minnesota alone, helping to acquire 13 national wildlife refuges and eight wetland management districts totaling nearly 500,000 acres. Wetland management districts in the state include nearly 900 waterfowl production areas.

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To learn more about a possible wildlife art museum in Minnesota, contact Marlene Levine, director of the Gainey C. Gainey Conference Center, at (507) 446-4464 or mmlevine@stthomas.edu.



Ross's Goose by Karen Latham

