

Art Land: A Scenic, Pastoral Landscape and Thriving Creative Spirit Inspire Artists and Art Lovers in these East Iowa Towns

by **Linda Egenes**

It's a warm spring day and I'm in the mood for adventure. The sun slants golden across newly planted rows of corn, creating a scene as idyllic as a Grant Wood painting. No wonder so many artists have been inspired by this landscape. It's a perfect day to discover the museums, galleries and art colonies of eastern Iowa.

Grant Wood Country

I start my trip in Cedar Rapids, a city with an arts tradition. Grant Wood lived and painted the "American Gothic" there, perhaps America's most recognized painting. The largest collection of his works is housed in the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art.

"Grant Wood was an active member of the art association that founded this museum," says Sean Ulmer, curator. "Legend has it that he served as a night guard and would dash across the park to attend high school each morning."

Inside the museum's Roman collection, I step back into time. Marble busts of emperors and everyday citizens dating back to the 3rd century B.C. beckon alongside coins, musical instruments, and kitchen utensils.

"Kids are amazed at how old these artifacts are," says Sean. "It gives you a sense of what it was like to live 2000 years ago."

Sean describes each work like he's talking about his own child. "Art is more than pretty colors hanging on the wall," he says. "There's a great story behind every one of these pieces."

After a stop at The Blue Strawberry downtown for an asparagus-and-havarti cheese panini, I head off the beaten path to a Czech neighborhood called Little Bohemia for a more avant-garde art experience.

CSPS, which roughly translates as Czech and Slovak Prudential Society, takes up the second floor of a 100-year-old Czech meeting hall. It has a welcoming feeling, with a 175-person performing arts theatre, a three-inch thick wood dance floor and a cat named Hazel. An edgy multi-media exhibit called "Women in Hip-Hop," featuring artists from the U.S., South America and Africa, fills two spacious galleries.

"We're an interdisciplinary art center, with cutting edge music, theater, performance art, film and visual arts," says Mel Andringa, artist and co-director. "We came to Cedar Rapids 17 years ago, looked at what was being done and tried to fill the gaps. We highlight national and international artists, minorities, and special groups that might not have a venue of their own."

Iowa City-Scapes

I've always loved the easy blend of collegiate and cultural that is Iowa City, so I feel at home in the eclectic Chait Galleries, owned by the photographer Benjamin Chait.

"We represent more than 100 living artists, including a blend of painters, sculptors, jewelers, ceramicists, photographers and calligraphers," says Chait.

I'm captivated by the graceful pen-and-ink lines of Ramon Lim, a retired professor of neurology who writes poetry in looping Chinese calligraphy. Sometimes just one character creates an entire piece.

A must-see is the Hudson River Gallery, located on the second floor of a Victorian mansion, with jazz flowing through two exhibition rooms.

"I represent Midwestern and Iowa artists exclusively," says owner Nick Hotek, who mounts up to eight shows a year. He also maintains a permanent space for artists such as Cedar Rapids illustrator and painter Gary Kelley and pastel artist Ellen Wagener, who portrays the agrarian landscapes of Iowa.

Later that day, I'm gazing at one of the most famous American paintings ever created. "Mural," Jackson Pollack's largest painting, dances and swirls with paint, bringing to mind scenes from the movie *Pollack*, which portrayed the artist painting this very piece.

The painting is housed in the University of Iowa Museum Of Art, overlooking the scenic Iowa River. Works by Matisse, Miro, Kandinsky, Chagall, Braque and Picasso, a collection of 5000 master prints, and an African gallery offer something for every taste.

In February and March the museum will transform into a spectacle of light with a special exhibit of VOOM PORTRAITS by the internationally acclaimed stage director and artist Robert Wilson. Wilson has captured video portraits of celebrities such as Winona Ryder, Johnny Depp and Brad Pitt, who appear on life-size HD screens in repeated video loops. The portraits are part of a joint exhibit with CSPS.

Little Town with Big Art

It's hard to avoid coming face-to-face with art in the small town of Fairfield—it's integrated into the fabric of life. Besides its 10 dedicated galleries, clustered conveniently around a town square straight out of *The Music Man*, 34 other venues also display art.

At Revelations Café and Used Bookstore I feast on wood-fired pesto pizza made from local ingredients while soaking up the ambiance cast by brick walls, books and art exhibits.

Later I'm rubbing elbows and munching olives at the Emerald Gallery's 6th Annual International Small Works Show. With 340 small paintings by 140 artists from 14 countries, it's the Midwest's largest annual exhibit of original works featuring international artists.

Owner Stacey Hurlin shows only original art, as opposed to prints or copies. "There's life in original pieces that enriches the viewer," she says. Seeing a correlation between community arts and quality of life, Hurlin founded Fairfield's 1st Fridays Art Walk four years ago.

Awarded the 2005 Iowa Tourism Event of the Year, the art walk is held on the first Friday of every month and is the best way to tap into Fairfield's art scene. Crowds of 3,000 join in an extravaganza of gallery openings, great food, live music, dance performances, and activities for kids.

"The whole thing is done by sheer love and community spirit," says director Cathy Wadsworth.

Not to be missed is ICON, a non-profit center for the arts established by Bill and Janet Teeple. Today the primary colors and geometric shapes of the nationally known Fairfield ceramicist and sculptor Jim Shrosbree, are mounted in minimalist fashion, one sculpture to a wall.

"We're like a nonprofit contemporary art museum, devoted to a pure art experience with no commercial side," says Teeple, who has been a driving force behind the Fairfield art scene for the past decade. "It's unique for a town this size."

Add to this mix a brand new 32,000 square-foot Fairfield Arts & Convention Center, complete with a 526-person performance theatre—and a Fairfield Art Association studio in which artists can work, exhibit and offer workshops—and it's easy to see why Fairfield has been named one of Iowa's Great Places. And why it's becoming known as a lively colony for the arts.

Linda Egenes is a Fairfield freelance writer who likes to paint in spare moments.

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