



Learning a new art



Fourteen-year-old Anna Rice, of Naples, learns to play bluegrass on the fiddle in her father's pottery studio with the help of Naples musicians Joe McNichols, left, and Bob Campbell at the seventh annual Five Painters and a Potter event at the Clay Place on Sunday. The Naples event gathers six longtime artists — Jerry Vallez, Phil Fisher, Jim Rice, Paul Arsenault, Natalie Guess and Jeff Fessenden — for an afternoon of sharing their work, local music and socializing. *David Albers/Staff*

Rich in charm

Five Painters and a Potter art show does things a bit differently, and many like it that way

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Nestled at the edge of East Naples lies an art lover's haven.

Pass through the arbor of the Clay Place and the air is a bit different, a bit lighter as long-time Naples residents mingle over local artwork.

On Sunday, the attitude was one of a backyard gathering more than an art show at the annual Five Painters and a Potter event, with understated live music and a small throng of people braving dipping temperatures and cloudy skies.

"We're having a great time," said painter

Phil Fisher. "It's a great crowd. It's bad weather, but people have warm hearts."

Fisher is part of a close-knit group of artists in Naples who have been around for a few decades, well before Naples became a golfing destination and epicenter of the real estate explosion.

"I get grouped as one of the old-timers here now," he said. "That's starting to feel more comfortable to me."

Comfort seems to be a main point at the Five Painters event, where each of the artists cites the community atmosphere as the most important feature. Potter Jim Rice hosts the event at his workshop and gallery, which enclose a secluded courtyard shaded

by a stand of bamboo and palm trees.

"If things don't sell, it's OK," said painter Natalie Guess, Fisher's wife. "We're more here to see people and show them what we're doing."

Still, in spite of a down economy and fewer visitors to Southwest Florida this season, paintings were selling on Sunday. Perhaps that's because many of the attendees at Five Painters and a Potter are true locals, as they profess, and keep coming back to the event year after year.

"Jim Rice has been a friend since we came to town," said Naples resident Mark Miller, 60.

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"It's a time to catch up with old friends."

His wife, Darlene Miller, was sitting nearby to have her portrait drawn by caricature artist Jeff Fessenden, known around town as Fezz.

"It's small and personal and funky," Darlene Miller, 66, chimed in.

Once Fessenden wrapped up drawing the Millers, he turned his attention to a portfolio of murals and trompe l'oeil work he has done in the area. At times, Fessenden has dedicated himself full time to both the caricature work — he was in high demand in the '90s at parties and galas — and to painting murals for businesses and homeowners, which takes up more of his time now.

He joined Five Painters and a Potter last year.

"I kind of like being thought of as part of the 'art mafia' in Naples," he joked. "It just seemed to be such a fun day. It attracts locals — it's got such a genuine,

home-spun quality to it."

So home-spun, in fact, that his wife, Jenny Fessenden, and their 5-year-old daughter, Laura, come along to help. Jenny Fessenden makes prints for her husband and carefully bags them, helping customers while Jeff Fessenden is busy drawing caricatures. Laura provides the moral support only a 5-year-old can.

A few paces away, inside Jim Rice's clean, well-ordered studio, Charleston, S.C., resident Mike Clouse strolled at a leisurely pace. He summed up Sunday's event in much the same way.

"The art shows (in Charleston are) a lot more sophisticated — it's not set amongst the trees," said Clouse, 61. "It's a great setting."

Clouse, who was visiting friends for a few days, may not have realized he was soaking up a unique vestige of old Florida.

Natalie Guess described it as "the way art shows used to be in Naples," a little less polished, not quite as organized, but rich in charm.

"There's more to it than buying things," Guess said. "It's images of things here in the area — because we've been here so long."