



Eric Hylden, staff photographer

Matthew Wallace (left) curator of the North Dakota Museum of Art's annual Benefit Dinner and Silent Auction, and veteran artist Dan Jones of Fargo share a laugh at Saturday's event.

# FROM HAND SELECTION

# TO SALE

A behind-the-scenes look at the buyers, sellers and human easels of NDMOA's Silent Art Auction



Eric Hylden, staff photographer

Mike Helt views UND artist in residence Shawn O'Connor's ceramic pieces at Saturday's annual Benefit Dinner and Silent Auction at the North Dakota Museum of Art.

story by **Jasmine Maki**  
 Accent Staff Writer

Throughout its lifetime, a piece of artwork can be bought, traded, gifted and donated. Along the way, it's passed through the hands of many people, who each have different reasons, interpretations and intentions for the piece. In the instance of the 54

lected a small drawing of hay bales along a shelterbelt drawn with conte crayon on a piece of handmade paper. "I had a couple of things he could have taken, but he liked that one," Jones said. It may not have been the exact piece Jones had in mind, but Wallace eventually got what he wanted. "It was tough negotiating

pieces of artwork auctioned off Feb. 1 at the North Dakota Museum of Art's annual Benefit Dinner and Silent Auction, the pieces were passed from the artists to curator Matthew Wallace, to the buyers. And, for a few hours in between, volunteers of the museum held onto the art as they tried to get the highest bid for the sake of both the artists and the museum, which split the profits 50/50. Although the passing of artwork may seem natural, it can be a difficult process for everyone involved. It involves risk, acceptance, caution and the willingness to let go.

### Selection process

The selection of auction pieces started in late November and continued through the end of January, just days before bidding began. In most cases, Wallace visited the artists' studios and hand selected the artwork. "You have to hand-select them to get pieces the audience will like," he said, adding that with each piece he asked himself who will buy the piece and how will it fit into his or her current collection. Some artists had a small collection for him to choose from, while others let him choose any piece from the studio. For veteran artists, like Dan Jones, of Fargo, the process is fairly routine. Jones said he planned to have a drawing in the auction this year because his charcoal exhibition was a hit at the museum last year. Wallace se-

with this guy, but he's been doing this for years, so he kind of knows the drill," Wallace said. He added that whether it's a new artist or someone who's been a part of the auctions from the very beginning, the selection process can be a game of cards. "An artist might think a certain piece will do better than another," he said. "But, they look at it from the side of the creator, and I look at it from the side of the buyer." Wallace said he also runs into the problem of having limited art to choose from because the artist might have several exhibitions running at the same time as the auction. This was the case for ceramic sculptor Shawn O'Connor, artist in residence at UND. "I had just shipped off a bunch of work for exhibitions, so what I had on hand was fairly limited," O'Connor said, adding that he deferred to Wallace for the auction selection because he'd never been to the event before and didn't really know what to expect. Wallace combined several of O'Connor's pieces for a set of five, choosing four cups and a water pitcher.

### The passing of pieces

Once the selection was made, the piece passed from artist to curator. For some artists, it can be difficult to let

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# IN TUNE WITH THEIR PASSION

Love of music leads women to play more unconventional instruments

by Tracy Frank

Forum News Service

**F**ARGO — Katie Shaw's grandfather, who was of Scottish heritage, wanted bagpipes played at his funeral. When her family couldn't find anyone who could play, Shaw promised at his graveside that she would take up the instrument.

She's been playing bagpipes now for 14 years and is part of a local bagpipe group called Heather and Thistle Pipes and Drums, which plays at parades, the Celtic Festival and some local churches. While the group includes women, many bagpiping groups do not. In fact, Shaw says she and the other women in Heather and Thistle have to wear men's uniforms when they perform.

Still, the 49-year-old Fargo woman loves the sound of the bagpipes and she has a passion for playing the unconventional instrument.

"It's a contemplative instrument," she said. "It puts me in a certain kind of mood. It really makes me feel close to God."

Many women who play more eccentric instruments share Shaw's enthusiasm for playing, though their reasons for picking up instruments most people wouldn't consider trying to learn are all a bit different.

Sara Sha started learning to play bagpipes seven years ago. Sha, 49, Fargo, is also part of Heather and Thistle.

She jokes that she took up the instrument because it was the loudest, most obnoxious instrument she could find.

"I'm the youngest in a mu-

sical family and nobody had picked up bagpipes," Sha said.

Even though she played violin, piano, trumpet and banjo, learning the bagpipes was no easy task.

"It's a complicated instrument," she said. "It takes patience."

Bagpipers need to practice on a chanter, which looks similar to a recorder, for about a year before picking up their pipes, both Shaw and Sha said.

The chanter is also how they learn a tune or practice indoors.

"It's not the best indoor instrument," Shaw said of the bagpipes. "I love to go outside and play."

The bagpipes can also be an emotional instrument, Sha said.

Both women said they love watching crowd reactions to their playing. Sometimes they will even see the music bring people to tears, they said.

## Versatile instruments

Sarah Nelson, 28, Fargo, has been playing accordion for the past five years.

When she was 12, her family visited Norway and she watched a relative, who was a renowned accordion player, perform.

"I always thought that was cool and sort of a special thing," Nelson said.

Nelson sings and plays piano, clarinet and cello, but says she's always wanted to play accordion. Then her father, who is a Realtor, sold the house of an accordion dealer and Nelson got her instrument.



David Samson, Forum News Service

Katie Shaw, left, and Sara Sha both play the bagpipes.

Nelson, who works at the Fargo library, incorporates her instrument into story-time and events like pirate week. Nelson says the kids are always excited to see it. "When I can tell the audience is in the moment with me, or I'm really in sync with someone I'm playing with then it's a great feeling," Nelson said. "I usually play in a setting where I want people to sing along and move a little, so when they do and especially when you see the look of awe on a kid's face, it's a lot of fun."

She has also played during the "Oom Pah Pah" song for a Rural Cass Community Theatre production of the musical, "Oliver!"

Accordions, Nelson says, are very versatile instruments.

"Polkas can be a beautiful thing, but accordion music goes beyond that," she said. "Accordions can be tender or haunting and fit in all sorts of genres. They aren't always earsplittingly boisterous, although my neighbors might disagree."

## Cheerful instrument

For Christmas a year ago, Lindsey Bachmann, 30, of Moorhead, asked for a ukulele on a whim. She didn't know how to play and didn't expect to get one, but says she loves how they

sound.

"I love that bright, cheerful quality," she said. "They highlight the optimism in every lyric. It has a happy voice."

After her aunt gave her a ukulele, she set to work teaching herself how to play. Bachmann says she'd dabbled in acoustic guitar since she was 17 or 18, so the concept was similar, but the ukulele has a different chord structure and fewer strings.

"It helps to know guitar," she said. "It also hinders to know guitar."

Bachmann creates her own songs, but says covering other musicians' music is a good way to learn.

"With the ukulele, it's fun to bring your own personal spin to a song," she said.

She also sings and is working on an album with a friend, Patrick Fundingsland. They call themselves The Very Very Famous Love Machine.

She describes her sound as folk and The Very Very Famous Love Machine as sultry acoustic folk.

Bachmann says her goal is to perform live, but it's something she's been working on building up the courage to do.

"It's a big part of who I am and people don't see it so I've been really trying to just come out of my shell," she said.

## AUCTION/

Continued from C1

go of the art, especially if it's not the piece they were expecting. Wallace said some artists develop an emotional attachment to their pieces, and others struggle to let go of the plans they had in mind for the piece to be shown in a different exhibition.

But, for Jones and O'Connor, the passing of pieces was more natural.

"My philosophy on my artwork is that they're all like my children," Jones said. "I want them to go out in the world and be successful, which means sold."

Jones said he did take a bit of a risk entering his piece into the auction, in which every piece starts at \$100. His pieces typically sell for \$500 or more, so he said the price is something he always wonders about.

"It can be somewhat of a gamble for an artist who has higher priced artwork," Wallace added.

Jones said he wouldn't agree to a \$100 minimum at any other auction, but this auction is different. "The North Dakota Museum of Art has done so much over the years to promote the regional artists, and Laurel (Reuter) just really takes care of us," he added.

He also has a following of people in the area who collect his work, so he said he doesn't worry about his pieces "selling on the cheap."

O'Connor, who moved to Grand Forks in August, might not have a regional following like Jones, but the passing of pieces is inevitable for him.

"My primary focus is to make utilitarian ceramics, things for everyday use," he said. "I really feel like my work isn't complete until it's being used. My intention is always for them to live out their life in someone's cupboard being used every day."

## Human easels

He and Jones may not have an attachment to their artwork, but Wallace said he became a bit attached to the art himself.

"It's so fun being able to go and pick out the pieces," he said. "You can't help but



Jerry Davis (left), of Grand Forks, visits with artist Shawn O'Connor about his five-piece ceramic set.



Marie Strinden, executive director of North Valley Arts Council, speaks to artist Shawn O'Connor.

have an attachment."

Wallace said he had a couple of pieces in mind that he would have liked to buy, but his duties to the museum come before bidding. He left the auction empty-handed, but Wallace said the best part is being able to walk into someone's home or a business a year or two later and see the artwork placed.

"It kind of completes the circle," he said.

But, before that cycle can be complete, Wallace and many museum employees and volunteers must work hard throughout the night to

make the event a success.

High school students, college students and other community members volunteer their time to be human easels, walking the artwork around the museum for people at each table to see the art and place their bids.

Second-time volunteer Siri Bergsgaard, a junior at Central High School, said there's a lot of pressure to get a high bid and not drop the artwork.

"You kind of have to target certain people," she said. "You can definitely tell who the big buyers are."



Eric Hylden, staff photographer

Marcell Willis, a volunteer from Grand Forks Air Force Base, agreed that there's a lot of pressure on the human easels.

"(We're) handling the artwork," he said. "And it's kind of the artist's baby."

The volunteers work for the museum and the artists to get the highest bid throughout the night, but when the time runs out, their duty is to the bidder. As soon as the clock hits zero, they have to draw a red line under the last bid to close the auction and secure the piece for the winning bidder.

## An unforeseen connection

For Jones' painting, the winning bidder was Laurens Robinson, of Fargo.

When Robinson and his wife, Stefanie Hanisch, were invited to the auction, they saw the collection online and were immediately drawn to Jones' painting.

"That one caught both my eye and my wife's," Robinson said. "Oddly enough, Robinson and Hanisch have a connection to the artist. Their children attend the Dakota

Montessori, where Jones' wife, Julia Jones, is the director.

"I've met Dan, and Julia has mentioned that he is an artist... but I hadn't seen any of his work," Robinson said.

They didn't realize it was Jones' art until they got to the auction Saturday night.

"When we've bought art, there's always been a personal connection somehow with the artist, so that definitely influenced our decision," he said.

But, that wasn't all; Robinson had a personal connection to the subject, as well.

"I sell equipment that is used around the world to grind up these round hay bales," he said. "So, it really does remind us of North Dakota, the work I do and the personal connection to the Montessori."

Robinson and Hanisch are currently looking for the perfect place to hang the drawing. He said they will probably replace the frame with something darker and hang it somewhere in their home or his office.

## A different purpose

Suzette Bieri, of Grand Forks, is looking for the perfect spot to display her new artwork as well. Bieri had the winning bid for O'Connor's ceramic pottery.

She said she collects funky, unusual pottery, and she thought O'Connor's was a really nice set. But Bieri doesn't plan to use the pieces like O'Connor intended while creating them.

"When I buy ceramic pieces or pottery, they really, for the most part, are for display," she said. "They're functional art, but I tend to use them just to hand them around because they're so beautiful to look at."

It's not the use O'Connor intended, but it's no longer in his control. As artwork passes from hand to hand, the intentions, interpretations and connections often change. But, the story it holds only grows with each passing.

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