

THE MUSE GALLERY TURNS 40

In 1977 statistics showed that, while 60% of students in American art schools were women, only 2% of these trained artists ever showed in galleries.

It was that year that Muse Gallery opened its doors as Philadelphia's only professional Women's art gallery. Muse was also the first women's co-operative gallery in the city. The political climate during that time was described by feminist Lucy Lippard as one in which "Women artists began to like each other. They began to see and discuss each other's work, to drink, dance and share histories, to do things that male artists had always done but which had been made totally unfamiliar to women by their conventionally precarious position in the art world."

Muse was initially part of the Philadelphia Chapter of the Women's Caucus for the Art (WCA). It was organized under the direction of Judith Stein and Patricia Meilman, with a core group of nine professional artists. It later grew to 21 members. Two years after the Muse opened the Civic Center Museum in Philadelphia hosted those 21 artists in an exhibition. Writing about the exhibition, Victoria Donahoe noted in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "Few women artists in Philadelphia can be said to suffer the burden of fame." During its first decade of existence, Muse gallery exhibitions were written about frequently in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and other publications.

Muse Gallery has always provided support to its members. It was, and still is, a place where women could explore their art without the pressure to sell. In the early days of the gallery all mediums were acceptable, which at the time included making blankets, quilts and pottery, in addition to the more typical mediums of painting drawing and sculpture. Since its beginning, each Muse member has had the freedom to create what she wants with the support of other members. When the gallery started, there were potluck dinners to discuss art and learn new techniques, and even occasionally weekends spent together. At that time the gallery also presented music and dance events, poetry readings, films, and organized walking tours of artist studios.

Initially Muse Gallery was located near Rittenhouse Square at 1915 Walnut Street. A few years later the gallery moved to 60 N. 2nd St in Old City, since most galleries were re-locating to that area. And at some point, the gallery moved a few doors down to 52 N. 2nd St. where it has been ever since.

Muse Gallery had a very strong feminist point of view when it started but became less political over the years. It also began accepting men as members and has had many male artists over the years.

Many of Muse's founding principles are still at work today in the gallery. It is still a place that provides extensive support to its member artists with monthly critique sessions, information and technique sharing, assistance with shows, and website and social media postings to list all shows and events of the artist. It is also a place where people form lasting friendship and make important connections to other artists. Muse provides artists, especially women artists, a great space to show their work at a time when there are few galleries in Philadelphia. While women artists are today finding somewhat greater acceptance, they still significantly lag behind their male artist peers. A recent *NY Times* article points out that major NYC galleries range from 14-32% women versus 68-76% men artists represented. Things are looking better for women artists but it's still not where it should be. A gallery like Muse has offered women the opportunity to shine and still does after 40 years.