

Onofrio: Uncommon art, extraordinary artist

By [Ruth Nerhaugen](#) on May 20, 2018 at 6:00 a.m.



1 / 2 The 20th annual A.P. Anderson Award for significant contributions to the arts and culture of Minnesota was presented to Judy Onofrio, a sculptor and arts advocate from Rochester. She's wearing one of her unique bracelets. — Chap Achen / Contributor



Rochester sculptor Judy Onofrio, a self-taught artist whose works can be found in many of the world's most prestigious museum collections, is the recipient of the 2018 A.P. Anderson Award.

The award was presented to Onofrio recently by Anderson Center Executive Director Stephanie Rogers. Named for founder Dr. A.P. Anderson, it recognizes individuals for significant contributions to the cultural and artistic life of Minnesota.

Born in Connecticut, Onofrio studied business law and economics. But after she moved to Minnesota in 1967 with husband Burton, a neurosurgeon, and their young family, she quickly became involved in Rochester's arts and cultural community.

Reflecting on her path as an artist, she is quick to mention her great-aunt Trude. "She influenced me forever more," Onofrio said — especially when it comes to "outsider art."



Trude was a suffragette and an eccentric artist who worked "beyond the confines of the mainstream art world," Onofrio explained. Her great-aunt also sparked her lifetime search for grottos and visionary environments that ultimately became her own world.

In the early 1970 she became acting director of the Rochester Arts Center, and she went on to create a community-wide arts program for children; to help found (and lead) the Minnesota Crafts Council; and to serve on the founding committee of the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

"Judy has been a major leader in strengthening the Minnesota arts community," according to B.J. Shigaki, longtime director of the Rochester Arts Center. "Her generosity of spirit and willingness to share her ideas and experiences have been major assets to the state."

Onofrio's career as an artist emerged on a parallel path. At first she worked in her basement, then in a converted garage. As those spaces became too confining, she moved outdoors and turned her back yard into a large open-air gallery known today as "Judyland."

Her first major exhibition, aptly titled "Judyland," opened in 1993 at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Today her works are displayed everywhere from the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., to The Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Because she has always used an eclectic assortment of materials to create her art, which also includes jewelry, Onofrio became a collector of curios early in her career as an artist.

From garage sales, flea markets and auctions she built a stockpile of buttons, glass jewels, beads, shells, glass fruit, mirrors, ceramic tiles and figurative objects.



Her entire house, Onofrio admitted, has become "a place to collect." And, she added, "I collect without knowing what I will do with the stuff."

Right now, she said, she is building deer walls in hopes of protecting her flowers from 12 deer that live on a nearby hill. From her stash of curios she pulled several iron bedsteads and barrels of Jell-o molds that she strung with wire. "It's like jewelry making," she said, but makes a clanking noise she hopes the deer will not like.

Although she still has a barn full of beads, Onofrio has been using bones to create most of her artwork for the past decade.

According to the Anderson Center's narrative about her, she shifted her focus to "rhythmic forms built out of bone, using the materials to celebrate renewal, healing, and ultimately life itself" after experiencing a serious illness.

A prolific artist, Onofrio works during the day on her sculptures and installations, and relaxes in the evening by making her beaded bracelets.

"It's where I'm happy. It's what I love to do," she said. "It happens when I walk into the studio" and intuition guides her.

Minnesota State Arts Board Director Sue Gens asked about her ability to switch gears creatively.

"I don't ever want to be trapped into doing something just because I have an audience," Onofrio responded, pointing out that her first success was working in clay, then large installations, then jewelry, then mosaics, concrete outdoor pieces and more, before her current interest in bones.

"I work through an idea, then see it's time to move on," she said. The bone work is evolving, too. "I don't know where it's going to go. I'm excited about where it is right now."

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