



David Fahleson/Daily Nebraskan

The Coffee House, 1324 P St., features works by local artists on a rotating basis.

# Coffee, tea or art shop Curator changes atmosphere

By Lisa Donovan  
Senior Editor

It was like doing business at the dinner table. An aromatic blend of coffee and tea filtered into the air as Rob Benton and an artist and her young son perused and discussed her portfolio at the front table by the front window in The Coffee House, 1324 P St.

Benton, Coffee House curator, said he likes to get acquainted with both the artist and artwork before making a decision to display the work at the coffee shop.

"I enjoy the artist, just as much as showing his work," he said.

Benton began his job as curator when the coffee shop first opened, about three years ago. A University of Nebraska-Lincoln student at the time, he worked as a night and morning manager at the coffee shop, as well as selecting artwork for display.

For the first six months of his curatorship, Benton worked without pay. After that, he charged a 25 percent commission on the sold works.

"It's (still) a hobby because I'm putting more money into it than making (money)," he said.

The cost of driving to meet with artists and paying for ruined pieces often leaves his commission pockets close to empty.

But Benton says it's worth it.

He enjoys meeting the people and seeing the creative process in motion.

And Benton gets to meet a lot of artists -- with a rotating display

schedule of five weeks, his appointment book is pretty full.

Usually there isn't a problem attracting artists to display and sell their works at the coffee shop. Benton said he tries to circulate his business card around town and at the Coffee House, and usually artists will call him. Then he and they just meet and talk.

"I try to really do it on a friendly basis."

Along with the friendliness, Benton said he insists on professionalism.

"When you're working with artists, some are professional, and some will come in with another piece when you're just finishing hanging the show."

And while Benton said he's fairly flexible, organization and the presentation of ready-to-show pieces are important, because it shows pride in the work.

According to Benton, an important part of being a professional artist is having pride in your work.

A lot of artists think that they need professional training, but that's not true, Benton said.

When Benton began working at The Coffee House, he was pursuing a bachelor of fine arts degree at UNL, and a lot of his main sources for the art displays were students.

Since he graduated in May 1989, Benton said he has lost a lot of his contacts. However, he said he's very interested in hiring students.

Benton noted that students working on their master of fine arts

degrees are at a good point to exhibit and even sell their art.

"When they're working on their master's degree, they're really concentrating, yet they have to risk being different."

Also, these students have weeded out many pieces for their thesis. Some of these pieces are very presentable works of art, he said.

Along with a variety of artists (he boasts that the age range has varied from four to 64 years old), Benton said he has displayed almost every type of art form -- and is always willing to expand.

Benton said he has displayed sculpture, mixed media, ceramics, woodcuts, lithography, etching and many others.

The space in the Coffee House is conducive to displaying many art works, he said.

"This is . . . close to a gallery space," he said "It's real important to have art in something other than a gallery. Everyday people (who) wouldn't have time to go to a gallery get to see art."

The rotating display allows the coffee shop's atmosphere to change, Benton said.

Since he has no desire to make subtle transitions from show to show, Benton said, many times he changes the show "drastically."

That way people will take notice -- whether they want to or not, he said.

"People (who) come here to buy a cup of coffee then . . . find themselves looking at a piece of artwork."

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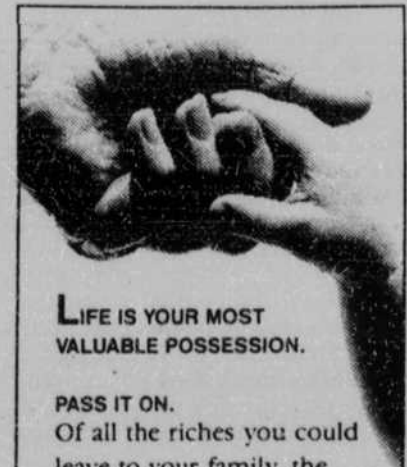
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