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*The Makers*

Celebrating 100 Years Of Art

Susan Swartz—From Baldwin, to Budapest, to Beijing

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EDINBORO UNIVERSITY



# From Baldwin to Budapest to Beijing

By Angela Burrows

## ART HAS TAKEN ALUMNA AROUND THE GLOBE

A great teacher can change everything. One such teacher at Baldwin High School did exactly that for Susan Swartz by recognizing and encouraging her artistic talent early on. Upon graduation, he strongly encouraged her parents to send her to study art at his alma mater, what was then Edinboro State College. Following that advice helped to put Swartz on a trajectory that has taken her from Baldwin to Budapest to Beijing, where she has showcased her art to a worldwide audience.

A first-generation college student, Swartz grew up in Pittsburgh's South Hills, the oldest of three daughters of Margaret (Peg), a homemaker, and Lee Shallcross, a line foreman for Bell Telephone. After high school, she headed north to Edinboro, where she immersed herself in the experience. She studied art, served as a class officer, joined a sorority, sang with the choir, and performed in campus musical theater productions.

"I had a phenomenal experience at Edinboro. I remember the winters, lugging art supplies back and forth. I was involved in everything. My parents were very proud."

She returned home after college and was teaching art at Baldwin when she met Jim Swartz, a Coraopolis native and Harvard graduate, on a blind date. The couple married soon afterward and moved to Princeton, N.J., where she taught until her children were born. As she raised her son and twin daughters, she spent evenings in her home, teaching art to former students and helping them prepare their portfolios as they applied to colleges. All along, her painting remained a constant.

"I did the festivals and mall shows with Jim right there beside me."

From those retail outlets and community gatherings, her life has changed dramatically. Since 2008, Swartz has had solo exhibitions around the globe. And there are more international exhibitions to come.

Her stature has also grown domestically. In late August, the art student who once toted her supplies across the Edinboro campus, was featured in a concert by Sting in support of Zion National Park in Utah, where a patron gifted one of her paintings to the park for its centennial anniversary.

## A CHANGE IN APPROACH

Swartz said her visibility has increased as her art has evolved, becoming more authentic.

It was a life-threatening illness that changed her approach to her work, which shifted from photorealism to abstract impressionism, highly textured and bursting with color. Diagnosed 15 years ago with Lyme disease and then mercury poisoning, Swartz was living with extreme pain, potential blindness and the possibility of death.

"I got sick and I had to fight to live. It is one of those battles that grounds you in a different way. I've always loved nature, but when there's a chance you may never see another sunset, each one becomes a blessing."

The illness, she said, was a gift, adding depth to her work and creating a sense of urgency. Inspiration, which once came from her brain, now comes from her soul.

"My illness caused me to feel and interpret things differently. The spiritual foundation of my work had always been there, but being sick caused my faith to deepen. I wanted my life to be worth something. Surviving transformed my art."

Robin Marrouche, a friend and director of Utah-based Susan Swartz Studios, has been on the sidelines for a number of years, watching as Susan's prominence as an artist has grown.

"The paparazzi now follow Susan through Europe and I love watching that, but she has never been in it for the accolades. She's worked in solitude, expressing her joy and her love. She's being true to herself. It's amazing to watch her energy. When you are doing what you're put on this earth to do, the universe responds in kind."

## FROM THE MOUNTAINS TO THE SEASIDE

Swartz spends much of the winter in Park City, Utah, summers on Martha's Vineyard, and also spends time at the home she and her husband share in San Francisco, where his work is based. When in Park City, she paints from a studio in her home, which sits on a peak that affords vistas that are nothing short of spectacular. Each region of the country, Swartz said, offers a different type of light, which keeps things fresh.

Avid skiers and hikers with adult children in Oregon and Boston and nine grandchildren, Swartz and her husband had vacationed in Utah and had a condo there, but wanted to build a home in a place where their family was motivated to visit. The sense of community in Park City was appealing.



“We were looking for a place for our family to visit and happened to read a story about a little boy with cancer who lived in Park City. The entire community had rallied to support him. We liked that.” They also like the easy access to great skiing and the abundance of beautiful hiking trails. Given her lifelong love of nature, it is somewhat ironic that Swartz’s health crisis was caused by environmental diseases. Her mercury poisoning came from eating fish that had high mercury levels and it’s likely she contracted Lyme disease while hiking trails in the Utah mountains.

Having Lyme disease led Swartz and her husband to serve as executive producers of “Under Our Skin: The Untold Story of Lyme Disease.” The 2008 film was winner of the best documentary award at the 2009 Sonoma International Film Festival and was a finalist for the Tribeca Film Festival’s Audience Choice Award.



The film is one of many produced by Swartz and her husband, who share a passion for documentary film production. Together, they founded Impact Partners, which has gone on to produce more than a 100 significant documentaries, many of which have either been nominated or won an Academy Award. Notable examples include “Won’t You Be My Neighbor,” “Born into Brothels,” “The Cove” and “Icarus.”

Although the environment has become quite toxic, when it comes to her art, Swartz has chosen to focus on its beauty. That being said, all artists are advocates in some way. “If you’re passionate about your work, you have to be an advocate. It’s not something unique to me.”

While she has chosen not to make political statements, Swartz’s art has helped to build bridges, Marrouche said. For example, Utah Gov. Gary Herbert chose the opening of her exhibition in China as an opportunity to announce the first annual Utah/China Friendship Day.



“It’s been interesting to watch the way some countries are using Susan’s art to build bridges,” Marrouche continued. “They understand the power of art to transform and unite and recognize that by honoring and paying tribute to the environment through her work, Susan has found a way to help us find common ground.”

## FROM EDINBORO TO HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL

Her effort to help find common ground is also reflected in her work with Harvard Divinity School, where she has spent 16 years as a member of the Dean’s Council. Her introduction to the school came through a retired Harvard faculty member whom she met at an art show on Martha’s Vineyard. He invited her to serve as an artist in residence at the divinity school, which led to the Dean’s Council appointment.

## SINCE 2008, SWARTZ HAS HAD SOLO EXHIBITIONS AROUND THE GLOBE.

**China Central Academy of Fine Arts**, Beijing, China (2018)

**Manetti Shrem Museum at UC Davis**, Davis, California (2018)

**Ludwig Museum of State Russian Museum**, St. Petersburg, Russia (2017)

**Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art**, Budapest, Hungary (2016)

**Ludwig Museum**, Koblenz, Germany (2015)

**Kollegienkirche**, Salzburg, Austria (2014)

**National Museum of Women in the Arts**, Washington, D.C. (2011)

**Springville Museum of Art**, Springville, Utah (2010)

**Utah Museum of Fine Art**, Salt Lake City (2008)

And there are more international exhibitions to come.

# “For someone seeking strong women role models, I’ve found one.”

—Robin Marrouche

“I’m very right-brain and an out-of-the-box thinker, which they apparently found appealing,” Swartz said. “The school serves 33 different religious traditions, which work together to look at what they have in common rather than their differences. It’s an exciting place to be.”

Marrouche said she wasn’t around to see Harvard’s presidential portraits coming down to make way for Swartz’s paintings during her stint as an artist in residence, but she had long been a fan, even before they began working together.

“I had been following her art,” said Marrouche, former executive director of the Park City-based Kimball Art Center. “When she did the exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, I asked her what it felt like to be recognized in that way. I was struck by what a humble and decent human being she was. I asked her to participate in an arts salon so that we could water ski behind her success”



At about the same time, Swartz’s cousin, who had been helping to manage her exhibitions, died after a brief battle with non-smokers lung cancer. Swartz invited Marrouche, who had left the Kimball, to step in to manage her international shows.

“For someone seeking strong women role models, I’ve found one. It’s been an amazing friendship,” Marrouche said.

## ADVICE TO EDINBORO’S STUDENT ARTISTS

Just as she’s provided guidance and served as an inspiration to Marrouche, Swartz has some advice for Edinboro’s student artists, those who have shared the experience of the winter walks along Mallory Lake, portfolios blowing in the wind.

“Be true to yourself. If you’re right-brained and in the arts – any kind of art – it’s a special gift. Earlier in my career, I got into the trap of painting for judges. Ironically, my commercial success came when I was true to myself.”



Patience, she said, is also a virtue. “Sometimes, we want things right away. If we get them, we don’t appreciate them.”

Swartz said that as she ages, her opportunities continue to increase. “It’s a gift that touches my heart because those opportunities are born of life experience. When you’re just starting out, you learn the rules. Later, you learn through life. Everyone has struggles. It’s what you do with them. They can bring you down or you can grow from them.

“Being very sick allowed me to see how many people had it so much worse. It made me realize that every day is a gift.”

Although life has taken her far from western Pennsylvania and down paths she never imagined, her ties to the region remain strong.

“There’s something about growing up in western Pennsylvania, where it was about hard work. That work ethic and humility are what I grew up with. Those roots stay with you.”

**To learn about Swartz’s art, visit [www.susanswartz.com](http://www.susanswartz.com).**

