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Picking painted ponies

Local artists among 20 finalists in nationwide design contest

BY JULIANNE CRANE
Staff writer

These days, The Trail of Painted Ponies leads to the Inland Northwest.

Artists Debbie Hughbanks of Loon Lake, Wash., and Maria Ryan of Coeur d'Alene are among 20 finalists nationwide in a competition to produce a new design for the popular series of horse collectibles.

From the idea's beginnings as a public art project five years ago in Santa Fe, N.M., painted pony reproductions have become one of the fastest-growing collectibles in America with limited-edition figurines, books, jewelry, ornaments and picture frames.

"Pony expressionism - that's what I call it," says Rod Barker, president of The Trail of Painted Ponies.

In the last couple of years the Trail of Painted Ponies has extended its reach into numerous airport gift shops and art galleries across the country.

To expand the trail even further, last summer the group launched its first competition for new designs from both Native and non-Native painters.

"We feel artists are an under-appreciated resource and see this is another way for them to get their work out and be seen," says Barker.

More than 400 artists responded with designs based on the theme of "Native Art of Horse Painting." In late December, it was announced that Hughbanks and Ryan were among the finalists.

In January, they received a 2-foot-tall horse form and were given two months to complete their painted sculptures.

"Now, in a manner similar to the popular TV show 'American Idol,'" says Barker, "art enthusiasts across the country will be given the opportunity to vote for their favorite pony."

Beginning Saturday, and continuing through April 30, anyone can cast a vote by going online to

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Pony up

• **Vote** for your favorite "Native Art of Horse Painting" pony by going online to www.trailofpaintedponies.com or send in a postcard with your vote to The Native Art of Horse Painting, The Trail of Painted Ponies, 15679 N. 83rd Way, Suite 4, Scottsdale, AZ 85260.



Maria Ryan's "Native Jewel Pony," at top, and Debbie Hughbanks' "Kindred Spirits" are among 20 finalists in The Trail of Painted Ponies' "Art of Native Horse Painting" competition. Vote online at www.trailofpaintedponies.com. The winner will be announced on May 5.

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www.trailofpaintedponies.com.

On May 5, the winner will be presented with "The People's Choice Award," and figurines based on their design will be added to the series. All 20 finalists will be featured in an upcoming book on the collection.

"I am just so thrilled to be a part of this," says Hughbanks. "I can hardly stand it."

Her "Kindred Spirits" pony features a montage of wild animals significant to Native American culture.

"The inspiration for my design was drawn from the spiritual bond that Native people have always felt with animals," she says. "Many Native Americans have traditionally looked to the

animals for wisdom and direction."

Ryan's design, "Native Jewel Pony," reflects the importance of adornment as cultural expression.

"My love of Southwestern silver and turquoise," she says, "led me to research their history and importance as objects of Indian adornment from prehistoric times to the present."

Members of the selection committee were impressed with the professionalism and quality of both their work, Barker says.

"Both Debbie and Maria went the extra step," he says, "not only with their designs, but also with their presentation packages."

"It is encouraging to see artists thinking out of the box. Who says art has to be a square

on the wall?"

The Trail of Painted Ponies began back in 1999, when Barker was living in Santa Fe. He visited Chicago and saw the success of the Cows on Parade public art project, and thought a similar strategy might help reinvigorate the Santa Fe art community.

"The cow might work in Chicago, but the horse is a perfect iconic form for the Southwest," Barker said during a telephone interview from his office in Scottsdale, Ariz.

"Horse painting is a unique, indigenous art form," he says. "Adorning horses has long been one of the ways Native Americans used their aesthetic expression."

In 2001 Barker invited leading Southwest artists to paint life-size, bonded-marble ponies which were displayed

around the Santa Fe area and then auctioned for charity.

"The philanthropic aspect of the project was very important," he says. "We raised more than \$1 million for local nonprofits."

Ultimately, the quality of the artwork and extraordinary public response led to national media attention, including coverage on CNN and a PBS special.

"At that time I was thinking that if the appeal was strong enough," says Barker, "this 'trail' could go elsewhere." Indeed, it has.

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