The Year Of The Woman: Mint Museum

A Federal Neoclassical Gem That Was Torn Down In 1932 And Was Restored Into An Art Museum By The Women’s Club In 1936

When members of the Charlotte Women’s Club learned in 1932 that the government planned to tear down the local branch of the U.S. Mint, a one hundred year old Federal neoclassical gem that was among the oldest buildings in the city, they were determined to stop it. They had long hoped to convert the building into an art gallery, something that Charlotte - and North Carolina - didn’t have at the time. Led by local mover and shaker Mary Myers Dwelle, the ladies wrote numerous letters to the appropriate authorities but the demolition of the building went ahead as planned.

The women of Charlotte, however, didn’t give up. They bought the rubble.

“They were a very determined group,” Ellen Show, archivist at the Mint Museum today, tells The Buzz. “They raised the $950 they needed to secure the building’s remains, most of it at a single luncheon. That was a considerable sum back during the Great Depression.” The ladies got a local developer to donate three acres of land in the Eastover neighborhood, and moved the rubble there.

With the help of a New Deal grant from the Emergency Relief Administration, the Mint building was restored to its former appearance, right down to the golden eagle over the front entrance. The Mint Museum of Art opened to the public in October, 1936. President Franklin Roosevelt, in town to address a rally, was the first to sign the museum’s guest book.

“To the people of Charlotte back then, the Mint represented a unique period of local history,” Ellen says. “Charlotte had its own gold rush beginning in 1799 when a local boy discovered a 17-pound gold nugget. It was the country’s first gold rush and the biggest until gold was discovered in California in 1849.”

By the early years of the 19th century, North Carolina was the top gold producing state in the nation, with some 50 mines in operation. At first the gold was transported in strong boxes to the official U.S. Mint in Philadelphia but as the amount of gold increased that method became too expensive and dangerous. “There were so many
hold-ups that Congress authorized the establishment of a branch of the U.S. Mint in Charlotte in 1835,” Ellen Show says. It was another first for Charlotte, the first branch mint in the country.

The new U.S. Mint building opened in December, 1937, on W. Trade Street near the center of the young city. From that date until the outbreak of the Civil War, the Charlotte Mint turned some $5 million worth of local gold into coins, in denominations that included the $5 half golden eagle. Each coin bore a “C” to indicate its origin in Charlotte. Today these coins are quite rare, not to say valuable. Show says that the Mint possesses one of the few complete sets, on display in the museum's Heritage Gallery on the ground floor of the historic building.

Timelines, artifacts and photos in the Heritage Gallery trace the history of the Mint from its coin striking days, through its use as a military hospital during the Civil War and afterwards as a U.S. Assay office, to its resurrection as North Carolina’s first museum of art. Show says that, appropriately, the first piece in the permanent collection was the portrait of the woman after whom the city was named. “Allan Ramsay’s 1762 full length portrait of Queen Charlotte,” Show says, “it’s hanging upstairs right now.”

The Heritage Gallery details the many expansions the Mint’s growing collections have required. Walking along the museum’s timeline, Show reflects on the journey that has taken the Mint from a single historic structure to a multi-building organization with many community outreaches. “We’ve had to expand so many times,” she says. In 1968, M. Mellanay Delholm’s 2,000 piece ceramics collection put the Mint on the art world map, and sparked the museum’s first expansion. The 1985 Dalton Wing tripled the size of the Mint and pivoted its entrance to Randolph Road, leaving the original facade with its golden eagle intact facing Eastover.

In 2010, the Mint opened a new 145,000 sq. ft. facility in Charlotte’s Center City to house special exhibits and the Mint’s burgeoning – and world famous – collections of craft and design works. The two branches, called the Mint Uptown and the Mint Randolph, today operate in tandem, with a single entry fee and free shuttle bus running between them.

Through it all, Show says, women played prominent roles in the Mint’s expansion. “I’ve been researching the history of the Mint for the 80th anniversary this year,” she says, “and I’ve been amazed at what an important part the women of Charlotte played.” In particular, the Women’s Auxiliary (now the Mint Auxiliary), organized by Dwelle, led the efforts to bring significant works and collections to the museum. The ladies assembled notable holdings of fashion and North Carolina pottery, plus one of the
world's largest collections of works by Harlem Renaissance master Romare Bearden, a native of Charlotte. The Auxiliary also established an acquisition fund that continues to make important purchases and commissions to prominent artists.

The museum’s 80th anniversary, celebrating the Year of the Woman, began in October, 2016, and will feature many events showcasing women’s contributions to the museum since its founding as well as exhibits featuring art created by women. Two exhibits opened on the anniversary weekend, Oct. 21: “Women of Abstract Expressionism,” a highly praised exhibit organized by the Denver Art Museum, and “Fired Up: Women In Glass” featuring works from the Toledo Museum of Art’s Glass Pavilion as well as the Mint’s own permanent collection.

“The Mint has always been a special place for women,” says Hillary Cooper, the museum’s Director of Advancement. “Besides the opportunity to make a difference in the community, it’s a great place to form friendships that last a lifetime.”

Renee Wright

A graduate of Franconia College in Social Psychology, Renee has worked as Travel Editor for Charlotte Magazine and has written three travel guidebooks for Countryman Press among other writing assignments. She enjoys food and camping.

Make Sure To Stay At:

Carolina Country Campground, a family-oriented campground located in Salisbury, North Carolina. Amenities include mini golf, lake for fishing and paddle boating as well as a hiking trail, an Jr Olympic size pool and horseshoe pits.