

# They Understood the Vision Al and Mary Shands

By Philis Alvic

## Sometimes, a major focus of one's life

grows from childhood experiences and interests, and sometimes, a significant event sets the course. When Gov. John Y. Brown and his wife, Phyllis George, persuaded Mary Norton Shands to take on coordinating the board for a new crafts organization, it set Mary and her husband on a path that would have great meaning in their lives while performing a tremendous service to crafts in Kentucky. Mary and Al Shands went beyond setting the direction for the Kentucky Art and Craft Foundation; they became major collectors.

Bloomington's that eventually led to the development within state government of the Kentucky Craft Marketing." Although a division within government could do much to help craftspeople with business skills and promote the economic potential of crafts, George also saw the opportunity for even wider community involvement. "We needed to draw Kentuckians into supporting the crafts of their state. That's when I called on Al and Mary Shands to help me with organizing the Kentucky Art and Craft Foundation [KACF]. They understood the vision and, along with their involvement in the art community and organizational skills, helped me make it happen."



The 1981 board of the Art and Craft Foundation. Front row: Roanne Victor, Sandy Meredith, Jenny Mahoney, Nash Cox; second row: Ellen Pedley, Mary Shands, Sis Cooper, unidentified, Vivianne Lake and Donna Hall; back row: PeeWee Watson and Lois Mateus.

Former Kentucky first lady Phyllis George explained: "When I became first lady of Kentucky, I wanted to show the rest of the country the wonderful crafts that I had discovered in Kentucky. First, there was the promotion at



The members of the board ate dinner at Patti's 1800s Restaurant in Grand Rivers, Kentucky, on one of their many road trips. Karen Boyd, fiber arts professor from Murray State University, is at the head of the table; at the other end is Emily Wolfson, former president of the Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen.

In 1981, Mary Shands concentrated on assembling the board for the KACF. The organization of 24 dedicated women met in the Shandses' business office in downtown Louisville. Many of them knew little about Kentucky's craft heritage and even less about the state's contemporary craft

artists, so they set out to educate themselves. In a series of road trips, they covered the Commonwealth from the back roads of the eastern mountains to the river country of far western Kentucky. Most of those early board members became craft collectors and appreciated having the first pick as their knowledge of the field grew.

Lois Mateus observed, “Mary and Al Shands had the vision to create the Kentucky Art and Craft Foundation [KACF] as a tool for creative freedom for the state’s talented artisans.” Mateus, who is now senior vice president with Brown-Forman, was then Kentucky’s commissioner of art and tourism. KACF provided craftspeople new opportunities. Mateus summed it up this way: “With Phyllis George and a board of committed volunteers, this was a time of reaching out and embracing these people, recognizing and rewarding them but most of all encouraging them by opening new doors for marketing opportunities outside Kentucky.”



*Nancy Archer, product development coordinator for KCPM, was KACF’s first director*

Photos courtesy of Phyllis Alvic and KCPM



By 1983, the KACF board had a firm enough idea of its mission that it hired Nancy Atcher Moore as its first paid director. Moore, now product development coordinator for the Kentucky Craft Marketing Program (KCMP), says she responded to an ad in the Louisville Courier-Journal. She had just graduated from Indiana University with a degree in business administration; she remembers not knowing what these people were about but knowing that she wanted to be a part of it. Moore says the timing was good—it was the expansion of crafts into viable businesses. The early foundation offered workshops for craft artists in business skills and published a newsletter, *Made in Kentucky*.

In 1984, KACF opened a gallery at 609 West Main Street in Louisville. The premier exhibition in the new gallery was the private collection of craft and folk art of Al and Mary Shands. The list of artists represented in that exhibit reads like a who’s who of Kentucky crafts: Marvin Finn, Alma Lesch, Arturo Sandoval, Sarah Frederick, Tom Marsh, Mike Imes, Ron Isaacs, Jan Arnow, Jacque Parsley, Emily Wolfson, Wayne Ferguson, Lynn Sweet, and Anne Lindstrom, among others.

KACF managed to involve the elite of Louisville in its efforts to promote Kentucky crafts. A fifth-generation Louisvillian and daughter of an important media family, Mary Shands drew in people and corporate support. Early contributors included Ashland Oil Inc., the Bourbon Stock Yard Co., South Central Bell, the Kroger Co., PATCO, NRC, the Norton Foundation, and the Bingham Enterprises. Although the foundation gallery resided in a building partly owned by the Shandses, they paid rent. Always generous contributors, Al and Mary quietly rescued the organization on more than one occasion.



*Mary Shands spoke in the Frankfort Capitol rotunda at the presentation of the “Oh, Kentucky” tourism promotion campaign. She also went to New York City in 1980 with Phyllis George for the Oh! Kentucky crafts promotion at Blomington. George is to the left in the background.*

Al Shands confessed that back in 1981, he “knew nothing about crafts,” although he loved art from his teenage years. He recalled frequently wandering around the modern-

art collection in the museum home of Duncan Phillips in Washington, D.C., and confronting the paintings as old friends. Mary also had an early orientation to art from her mother, who was a journalist, a painter, and a patron of the arts. The Shandses launched their collection with a piece by Wayne Ferguson. After Al put the piece in their car, he returned and bought two more.



*Al and Mary began their collection with an early piece by ceramist Wayne Ferguson, seen on the table.*

Mary and Al had different collecting styles. Mary proceeded with assurance and made decisions quickly. Al thought more, weighing his purchases—considering cost, significance of the artist, and his personal response to the work. The Shandses started with Kentucky crafts, concentrated on ceramics expanding to a national focus, and then chose to acquire sculpture. The latest piece is an earthwork by Vietnam Memorial artist Maya Lin that is being constructed on the Shandses' farm, east of Louisville.

Eventually, the Shandses' collection outgrew the historic farmhouse that had been their home. They commissioned an eminent architect to design a house to showcase their art collection. This famous person designed an elaborate structure that exceeded the intended budget by about four times, throwing the project into doubt. A first cousin of Mary's, David Morton, knew of the Shandses' desire to build a house for themselves and their collection, and requested to submit a design. He created a structure that is five connecting buildings with a curtain of windows overlooking the rolling hills of their farm.

Al Shands realizes that the couple's new home has become a museum. The house reflects the interests and personalities of the owners and provides enough flexibility to adapt in the future. Mary's room displays her teapots around the room. Al had his home office turned into a three-dimensional tromp l'oeil painting by Sol LeWitt. Al says that the house absorbs art; he is still adding to the collection that will someday be bequeathed to Louisville's Speed Art Museum.



*Mary's room displays her collection of teapots.*

Al is an ordained Episcopal priest, a producer of approximately 35 documentary films, and an active supporter of the arts. He has served on the boards of many organizations, including those of the Speed Art Museum, Shakertown at Pleasant Hill, the American Craft Council, and New York's Whitney Museum and Museum of Modern Art. Mary, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease six years ago, concentrated her efforts on arts and health institutions.



*(L to R) Mary, N Sands, KFAC founder; Owsley Brown II, Brown-Forman Corporation; Rita Steinberg, KACF Executive Director; and Phyllis George, KACF founder, came together for the Kentucky Art and Craft Foundation's (now KMAC) 20th anniversary celebration in 2001.*

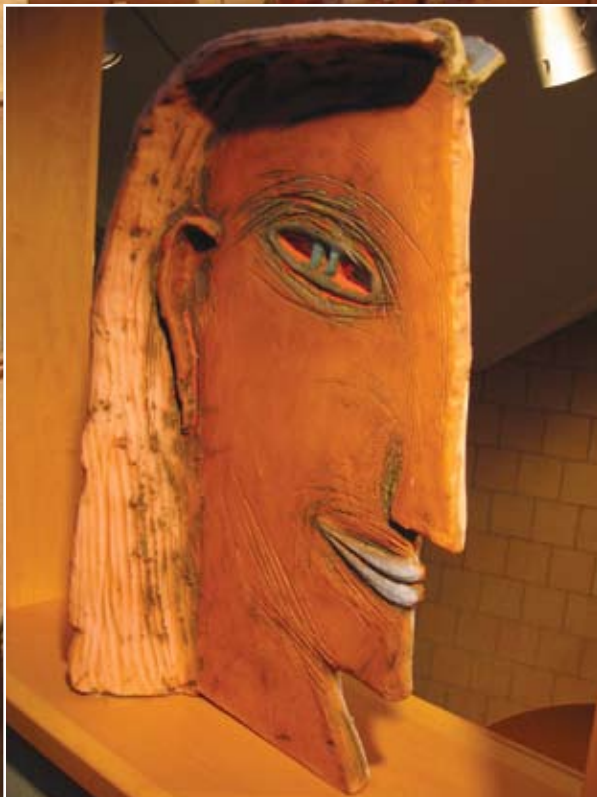
For those of us in crafts, Mary's greatest contribution will always be the vision she brought to KACF. She set a course for the organization with a clearly defined goal, allowed for growth, and was flexible enough to meet the challenges of promoting Kentucky crafts and offering services to the crafts community over the years. As it continues to evolve, the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft now owns the building

on Main Street that houses four floors, several galleries, the Gallery Shop, educational and workshop spaces, and administrative offices. The main exhibition space is named the Mary and Al Shands Gallery.

**For more reading see these and many other articles about Kentucky's artists and craftspeople in Arts Across Kentucky: "The Kentucky Art and Craft Foundation Celebrates Twenty Years," Fall 2001; "Kentucky Crafted: The Market: 20 Years of the Best in Kentucky Crafts," Spring 2002; "Wayne Ferguson: An Unsung Hero," Fall 2006.**



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*Large profile head sitting on a narrow railing, Judy Moonelis, Untitled*



*Large vessel with rounded bottom sitting on counter top in long hall - Art Nelson, The Fifth Season*



*Knotted hanging rope sculpture, Petah Coyne, Communion*



*Dale Chihuly, Untitled*



*Pedestal with head,  
Robert Arneson, Ecstasy  
of a Mud Stomper*



*Red wall hanging, African American quilt*



*Sol Lewitt, Geometric blue, Red and gold painted wall*



*Painting on brick wall,  
Jonathan Borofsky, Untitled*

