

## **An Art Museum for Sun City -- *Signs of the Past* by Ed Allen**

Rex Staley, president of the Sun City Bank, is credited with the idea of an art museum for Sun City. He was one of the founders of the Phoenix Art Museum, and along with a group of art-loving residents persuaded it to establish a satellite museum in Sun City that would display art borrowed from its parent organization in Phoenix.

The Sun City Branch's first exhibit space consisted of the walls in Staley's City Bank at 105<sup>th</sup> and Grand in 1976. Later that year, the branch museum moved to a vacant wing in the Merrill Lynch building at 98<sup>th</sup> & Bell Road – the first of several moves during the next eight years. For its first major show in November 1976, museum volunteers borrowed original art owned by Sun City residents.

The Sun City branch broke from the Phoenix group in 1980 and began raising funds for a permanent facility. Five years later the museum had 2000 members and DEVCO offered them a lot at 111<sup>th</sup> and Thunderbird, where the Hearthstone Care Center is located. Plans were being drawn up when news came that ASU was planning a satellite campus for senior education at 115<sup>th</sup> and Bell, and would welcome the museum as a neighbor. DEVCO swapped land for a larger lot on 115<sup>th</sup> north of Bell. ASU would have occupied the land between Bell Road and the museum.

The Sun City Art Museum opened in March 1985, and although the ASU campus never materialized, the museum grew in membership from the Sun Cities, plus the entire surrounding area. It was no longer a branch museum, but a full-fledged art museum of its own!

The museum grew in popularity as it offered the surrounding community programs for children and special events for adults. Major additions occurred in 1987 and 1996 with all the museum construction funded by private gifts.

Entering the museum, you stepped into a large foyer leading into a central gallery. To the rear of it was a small tearoom. To the right were another gallery plus a second larger hall for performances, classes, or displays. To the left as you entered were a gift shop, library, small gallery, offices, along with work and storage space.

The museum's collection grew to some 2,000 pieces, including a premiere collection of ethnic dress, represented by 158 costumes from 60 countries.

Out of respect for the many Sun Citians that had supported the museum with their donations and by volunteering, there was great reluctance to change its name. But as the surrounding area grew and to make clear the museum was for all, the name was changed to West Valley Art Museum in 1998.

Expenses began to outpace income in 2001. The following economic downturn, along with a decline in memberships, the deaths of several major donors, and the failure of the costly conversion of the tearoom to a profitable, full-service restaurant caused the museum to fall behind in its loan payments. As a result, the bank called in the \$500,000 debt. The building would have to be sold.

As important as retiring the debt was preservation of the 4,000-piece art collection, valued at \$3,000,000. The art needed to be carefully climate controlled, and there was a strong desire to keep the collection together. Surprise offered the space vacated by Heard Museum West, but the space was too small and the museum lacked the operating funds that would be needed.

Peoria had begun revamping its aging downtown. A performing arts theater had been built, and the City Council had approved gallery space in the renovated City Hall. That would provide space for nearly the entire museum collection, meeting the goal of keeping it as intact as possible.

The new West Valley Art Museum officially opened in Peoria in 2011. After the move was completed, the former museum building was acquired by the Salvation Army. One reminder of the past is the name of the street built to give easier access to the museum: "Avenue of the Arts."

