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# Art Calendar®

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"... Tastes GREAT!!!"

## Small Town, Big on Art

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# Small Town, Big on Art

## Paducah's Artist Relocation Program

by Stacy Smith Rogers

Halfway between St. Louis and Nashville lies a city in Kentucky named Paducah. Though it is slow in pace, it is fast-becoming a community known for its arts. Through the visionary efforts of several individuals, an artist relocation program was born in 2000 and its birth has showered the city with prospective participants from around the country.

Paducah's Artist Relocation Program is simple and to the point. The program provides significant economic and business incentives for artists who are looking for a convenient location and cultural atmosphere without the costs of living in a big city. Located along interstate 24 (I-24) and along the confluence of the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers, Paducah is only a few hours' drive from St. Louis, Nashville, Memphis, and Louisville. A local airport offers flight service on two commuter carriers with daily flights to nearby major hubs, Memphis and St. Louis.

The program is targeted to the city's Lowertown and Downtown areas, with many sections named to the National Historic Register.

Paducah is probably best known for the world's largest quilt museum, which draws visitors from around the world, especially in April when it hosts the American Quilter's Society Annual Quilt Show and Contest. The event draws 35,000 visitors and gives the local economy an \$11 million annual boost.

In 2002, the city plans to unveil a \$32 million performing arts center, which will host major touring performances, including Broadway shows.

In addition to the Four Rivers Center for Performing Arts, renovation and preservation efforts are constant in the downtown area. The up-and-coming Maiden Alley Cinema will feature new releases and international films in a new theatre located in one of the city's historic alleys.

A state-of-the-art museum in the downtown's oldest building will focus on the heritage of the rivers and is scheduled to open this fall. Blending the charm of historic architecture and conveniences of modern technology seems to be a recurring theme in Paducah.

"This program is a perfect fit for the community and its goals for the future," said Artist Relocation Program coordinator Mark Barone. Barone,



an artist himself, is spearheading the program. "It's an exciting time for Paducah. I moved here in 1989 because it seemed like a good location and it was affordable. I never thought I would be soliciting other artists to do the same, but here I am." Barone exhibits most of his work in Washington, D.C. and Chicago. "I actually keep a pretty low profile in Paducah and concentrate on marketing my art in the bigger cities. Your work can still be successful in New York and L.A., while you're enjoying a comfortable lifestyle here, away from the stress and

costs of the big city."

While a primary goal of the program is to revitalize Paducah's downtown, the town's concurrent goal is to create an artist colony and to market the area as a collage of studios, galleries, shops and artistic business.

To that end, the town is giving back in the form of economic and other incentives.

### Incentives

Aside from the cultural incentives, the city is offering an appealing business and financial incentives package to artists, including financial incentives through locally-owned Paducah Bank. Lower-than-market interest rates are offered, with loan-to-value ratios up to 100%, discounts on all closing costs, and a variety of banking services at no charge.

Other business incentives include health insurance packages through the Kentucky Arts Council, free websites, joint marketing and promotional opportunities on a national scale, technical assistance with business plans, preservation tax incentives, and other significant tax incentives through the Paducah Enterprise Zone.

### Taking the Leap

Illinois artists Charlotte and Ike Erwin recently took advantage of those incentives and purchased an 1897 home in the Lowertown area. "It's definitely a fixer-upper," said Charlotte.

The Erwins plan to renovate the home and move in this spring.

Through their business, Working Artists Studio, the Erwins create commissioned murals, portraits, framing, art repair and restoration. "We had already decided Paducah was a good market for us, so we'd leased space there for a couple of years. It wasn't until we looked at the incentives offered through the relocation program that we decided that it should be home for us as well," Ike said.

Working with Barone is Dan Carver, director of the Yeiser Art Center, the region's premiere art center. Housed in the 1905 Market House and located in the heart of downtown, the Center features nationally known exhibits, including "Fantastic Fibers" in the spring. "We're hoping to work with participants in the Artist Relocation Program and provide opportunities to market their talents," said Carver.



One of the galleries of the Museum of the American Quilters Society

### Town life

On Saturday nights in the spring, summer and fall, Paducah's downtown is filled with music in the streets, classic show cars, dancing, and thousands of people enjoying one-of-a-kind restaurants and antique-hunting. The After Dinner Downtown Paducah program is in its fifth year and provides a unique social atmosphere, reminiscent of America as it used to be. The program has received two state awards and was included in President George Bush's Points of Light recognition program.

The city's floodwall is a work of art in itself, featuring 22 murals painted by renowned artist Robert Dafford. Each mural is reflective of the city's history and is paid through individual sponsorship of at least \$10,000 each. "I've spent so much time in Paducah painting, that I often call it my second home," said Dafford, who resides in Lafayette, Louisiana. "It's a unique and welcoming community. Their genuine hospitality really inspires me to be creative and want to work there."



Each October, the city celebrates the murals through a living history drama, in which mural characters are portrayed by actors. The drama is held during the Arts in Action Festival, which also features a Community Art Walk, demonstrating artists, a Taste of Paducah, and various downtown arts-related activities.

Paducah is a popular stop for riverboats, averaging 35 stops a year by the Mississippi Queen, Delta Queen, American Queen, River Barge Explorer, Niagara Prince and Creative World Travel. More than 11,000 riverboat passengers visit the Port of Paducah and its downtown each year.

"There are so many opportunities for artists to market to tourists in Paducah. We hope to eventually include artists' studio tours as part of the riverboat stops in the future," said Barone. "We're also working with the Quilt Museum, Visitors Bureau and After Dinner Program on cooperative marketing opportunities."

If you're not ready to pack your portfolios yet, at least keep Paducah in your rolodex of places to visit. What Paducah might lack in big city conveniences, it makes up for in a broad appreciation of heritage and culture, and its willingness to welcome artists with open arms.

*For more information, contact Mark Barone, Artist Relocation Program, City Hall, P.O. Box 2267, Paducah, KY 42002-2267, 270-444-8690, mbarone@ci.paducah.ky.us, or Dan Carver at the Yeiser Art Center, 270-442-2453.*

A festival, the River, and Paducah's flood wall murals by Robert Dafford. Photo by Jim Keeney.