

Longtime local art teacher's works now on display at library



Ashley and Kevin Bird confer with Library Director Margaret Morrissey to explain their design plan.



Mark Ashton photos

Kevin and Ashley Bird of Birdhill Design explore the Jacob Edwards Library stairwell they have to work with for a permanent exhibit of local artist Claire Birtz's artworks.

BY MARK ASHTON
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SOUTHBIDGE — Some of the newest artwork in town is also some of the oldest. That is, it was created by an artist well-known for her influence on generations of Southbridge schoolchildren, and it's now on permanent display for everyone — including future generations of local schoolchildren — to enjoy at Jacob Edwards Library.

The artwork is that of former Southbridge Schools Art Teacher Claire Birtz, who mentored young artists in town and, among other things, created the artwork that is now the official seal of the Town of Southbridge.

But attending or watching Town Council meetings is no longer the easiest way to enjoy Birtz's artistry. As of June 13, nearly two dozen pieces of her art — pencil drawings, sketches, colorful paintings, and even one product design — are now installed in the stairwell leading to the Foster Street (emergency-only) exit of the library.

Library Director Margaret Morrissey selected that area as suitable for the artworks because of the abundance of wall space and the design options it provided.

The project came about as the conclusion of "a long process," according to Morrissey. Members of the Clair Birtz Trust were interested in seeing her works preserved as a local collection and approached the library as far back as 2008.

Four Birtz pieces were already on display in the library opposite the Literacy Volunteers Office, but Morrissey was willing to accept 21 more from the estate, with the understanding that they'd have to be simply preserved and stored until the timing — and the funding — were right to do more.

Recently, that timing was right, and the works — all framed by New England Framing in Sturbridge — were gathered for the creation of a permanent library exhibit. "It was right that we were finally giving Miss Birtz (as she was known to generations of Southbridge Schoolchildren) her due," said Morrissey.

Kevin and Ashley Bird of Birdhill Design were charged with envisioning the exhibit's design. The installation project took two days of designing, laying out, and then securing the artworks so that all 21 drawings and paintings had a visual flow — and a welcoming feel — for those viewing the pieces in the stairwell.

The Birds used the floor of the downstairs Pioppi Room to "dry run" their design plans and then used ladders and scaffolding to install the art pieces around railings, mid-wall moldings, emergency exit alarms and floor plans, and a thermostat.

The Birds had to deal with a variety of wall surfaces (brick, hard plaster, cement, and one section of sheetrock) and limited lighting options in the stairwell and conferred with Morrissey on their designs prior to putting the pieces in place. Because the artworks wind down the stair-



Included in the exhibit is this 1963 drawing of a young potter.

well from the main floor to ground level — and around a corner at the bottom, the end result is a display that flows as it invites viewers to enjoy the vibrant colors of Birtz's seasonal paintings from the top landing and the detailed work of her drawings and sketches up close.



The artist from a 1966 "Musket" (Southbridge High School yearbook).



A dry run gives a sense of flow and thematic focus.



Birtz's New England scenics explore seasonal color shifts.

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The final installation takes advantage of multi-level viewing opportunities.



Ashley and Kevin Bird in the stairwell exhibit they designed at Jacob Edwards Library.



This 1961 seaside drawing has a Mystic connection