

LEAVES OF THE TREE

Beyond providing mankind with wood, paper, cork and other practical materials, trees have long fascinated and inspired writers, poets, scholars, scientists, psychologists, philosophers, theologians, musicians and artists. Creation myths involving archetypal sacred trees appear throughout world religions: the Tree of Knowledge in Genesis; the Quran's Tree of Immortality; the Buddhist Bodhi Tree of Enlightenment; the Taoist Immortal Peach Tree; the Hindu "Kalpavriksha" (a divine wish-fulfilling World Tree); and innumerable trees worshipped as *axis mundi* (the earth and heaven's central axis) by shamanic traditions worldwide. More secular yet equally meaningful trees include: each person's "family tree" (outlining ancestral origins and interconnections between relatives); biology's phylogenetic trees (demonstrating the evolution of species); and various organizational trees—diagramming hierarchies, fruitful goals and complex systems. The computer scientist Ben Shneiderman notes how various kinds of "treemaps" are used "...to visualize computer storage, stock market trading, production and marketing patterns..." Indeed, it's hard to think of another form of life—or another visual metaphor—offering more diverse expressive, expository or practical potential.

As elsewhere in the world, here in Appalachia one finds an astonishing array of tree depictions, each expressing its creator's unique artistic vision. This exhibition focuses on works by two of the New River Valley's leading visual artists: Charlie Brouwer, RU's professor *emeritus* of art, and his daughter Jennifer L. Hand, who completed her MFA at RU and is now an instructor of art at Virginia Tech. Together they proposed this "Leaves of the Tree" theme as a means of celebrating their shared inspiration regarding one of nature's greatest marvels—which they interpret in their distinct yet complementary ways.

Charlie Brouwer has become most widely known for his extensive use of ladders—that he either depicts or physically incorporates in his work—to evoke a sense of aspiration and transcendence. Yet for decades he has also found tree forms likewise effective—and additionally suggestive of organic and spiritual renewal. Here you will see his depictions of bleak vistas filled with tree stumps—left after the clear-cutting of a nearby forest—drawn on paper colored with earth gathered at the site. Yet even these desolate landscapes have miraculously resurgent powers of self-renewal, as shown in subsequent drawings and collages—one of which features dried leaves as trees placed between an inscription that affirms how "...it's about circles, ever turning cycles...rising and falling—leaving and returning to beginnings, *terra beata*" (blessed earth). In a wood sculpture titled "Breathe In, Breathe Out," Brouwer shows the intimate interdependence between people and trees by carving leaves clustered into the form of human lungs. His other tree and leaf-inspired works often serve as vivid remembrances of quietly meaningful moments and places.

Sometimes he collaborates with Jennifer Hand—his sculpture combined with her landscape painting—as in their iconic triptych titled "On a Clear Day"—depicting Burkes Garden, one of southwest Virginia's most unique and cherished micro-environments. Other examples of their work were done independently yet show striking similarities: both have featured emblematic diagrams of a house encircled by leaves to convey their shared sense of belonging in nature.

Jennifer Hand's sensitive and careful observations of nature can most easily be appreciated in her meticulous pencil renderings. For the last two years, she has spent an hour at a time sitting at the base of different trees drawing small sections of the bark—a focused discipline bordering on ritual devotion. She has used the same deliberate care in stitching together actual leaves into natural tapestries—one of which is embroidered with schematic depictions of buildings along blue strips of cloth representing the New River meandering past Radford & points beyond. After permeating another batch of leaves in wax (to maintain their pliability), she sewed them into a dress—which she wears while wandering through the forest (as shown in a video loop). Just as she garbs herself in leaves, she likewise surrounds Brouwer's 23-foot-high sculpture of a tree trunk with four hundred suspended leaves, individually stitched by hand from locally donated fabrics (old pajamas, kitchen towels, beloved but worn-out T-shirts and baby blankets, a *khadi* shirt from India—each an intimate personal artifact resonant with mute sentiments). Hovering around the central tree from which they seem to emanate, this multitude of unique, individual leaves merge to create floating veils of autumnal colors—through which we too, like Hand, can wander in wonderment.

This exhibition has itself inspired other celebrations of trees and leaves on campus and across the community. You are invited to follow a map-guided "Tree Trail"—developed by RU biology instructor John Kell—past various notable trees on campus; explore RU art professor Eloise Philpot's "Leaf Labyrinth;" and see "More Leaves of the Tree"—a juried exhibition featuring works by 75 regional artists—now on display in the museum's nearby Tyler Gallery (at 214 Tyler Avenue). This coming spring a "Sprigs of the Tree" project will display art by students at public schools in the City of Radford and five surrounding counties; and RU's Selu Conservancy will be the site of community plein air landscape workshops, as well as "Hedgerow"—a newly commissioned monumental outdoor sculpture by Charlie Brouwer. Thus we hope this program, recently extended from autumn into spring, will help bring trees and their leaves from the background to the foreground of our consciousness—thereby renewing appreciation of our marvelous natural environment.

—John H. Bowles, Guest Curator