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History

Napa's black-and-white history archive springs to life at Goodman Library exhibit

Jennifer Huffman

Apr 3, 2019



Artist Carolynne Gamble, left, discusses the placement of her new art installation, "Hand-Tinted Tidings of YesterYear," with Nikelle Riggs of the Napa County Historical Society. The exhibit opens on April 4 at the Goodman Library in downtown Napa. Jennifer Huffman, Register

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A team of horses and two wagons moving a house down a Napa street. A group of men in suits proudly holding clusters of “wine grapes.” A troupe of “amateur theatre actors” posing in costume.

The images, taken of Napans from the late 1800s and early 1900s, are just a few of the collection at the Napa County Historical Society (NCHS).

Today, a Napa artist has created a new way to view those photos and postcards of Napa’s past, with **an exhibit installed this week** at the society’s downtown headquarters.

Inspired by the archives that are part of the NCHS collection, artist Carolynne Gamble chose a set of those images to enlarge and color for her exhibition “Hand-Tinted Tidings of YesterYear.”

Gamble said the idea came after she designed a brochure for the society. While she accessing photos for that brochure, she came across other photos that had been hand tinted.

“That was the seed,” Gamble said.

“I got this picture in my mind. I thought, ‘Wow, wouldn’t it be cool’ if she enlarged some of the old photos from the NCHS collection, printed them on fabric and hand tinted those images.

Gamble, a business marketing consultant, said the idea to create the artworks came to her naturally. She has a masters in fine art from San Francisco State University.

Over the past two months, Gamble spent much of her time working on the nine images, which will be on display at the NCHS from April 4 through this summer. Six larger images measure 35 inches x 53 inches in size; three others are smaller.

Each photo had to be scanned and enlarged and then printed on special fabric.

Then, Gamble's hand tinting began.

The photos feature scenes from Napa County's past from the late 1890s to the 1950s. They include images of the house being moved, the Pope Street Bridge, the Avenue of the Elms in St. Helena, visitors at Soda Springs resort and a picture from Sam Brannan Days in Calistoga.

Gamble financed the project, including the printing of the fabric, which was produced by The Copy Corner of Napa, and ordering the custom foam core mounts.

Gamble said she chose fabric because it has texture and is tactile, not slick like a traditional photo print. She used acrylic paint and then pastel pencils and pastels to "tint" and add soft coloring to each image.

This set of photos was chosen because the NCHS previously produced postcards of those specific untinted images, said Gamble.

It would have been "overwhelming" to have to pick new images from the more than 7,000 in the NCHS collection, said Gamble.

After working on the project, Gamble said she realized several things.

First, the coloring or hand-tinting process "is very meditative," she said.

Second, it brought back memories of her own mother who lived in Idaho. In the 1940s, Gamble's mother sent away for a hand tinting "kit" to learn the art technique.

Gamble said she also learned more about the value of history.

"I determined that history is worth my time and attention," she wrote in an artist statement. "Heritage and legacy form a circle that repeats and returns."

"It connects you" to both your community and its past, said Gamble.

As she helped install her art on Tuesday morning, Gamble said “it feels fantastic and a bit triumphant” to see the work going up on the walls of the historical society.

Executive Director Nancy Levenberg said the Historical Society chose to feature Gamble’s work “because she’s a terrific artist and it perfectly fits our mission to keep history alive.”

Levenberg noted the size of Gamble’s new prints. So much of the Historical Society’s collection is small photos or postcard-sized images, she noted. “When you blow them up, it’s more tangible, accessible.”

Longtime NCHS volunteer Lauren Chevlen also watched the images being hung.

“I’m really taken” with them, she said.

When the photos are enlarged, “the faces come to life,” said Chevlen.



Napa County Historical Society Executive Director Nancy Levenberg and Lee Barlow work to install a new exhibit by artist Carolynne Gamble called "Hand-Tinted Tidings of YesterYear." – *Jennifer Huffman, Register*



One of the images of "Hand-Tinted Tidings of YesterYear," an exhibit now open at the Goodman Library in downtown Napa. – *Jennifer Huffman, Register*



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