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Exhibit headed to Smithsonian

By KELLY GERLACH

Wow.

Wow, wow, wow.

That's how Maquoketa artist Rose Frantzen describes every step of the journey that has taken her simple "Portrait of Maquoketa" project from a Main Street storefront to the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.

The announcement came this week after months of wishful thinking by Frantzen and careful deliberation by officials at the Smithsonian Institution and National Portrait Gallery.

Frantzen's "Portrait of Maquoketa" project includes the 180 head-and-shoulder portraits of people living within a two-mile radius of the city that she painted in 2005 and 2006.

All 180 portraits will be displayed as part of the museum's "Portraiture Now: Communities" series, confirmed Bethany Bentley, public relations person with the National Portrait Gallery.

The exhibit begins Nov. 6, 2009 and ends July

About one million visitors per year visit the National Portrait Gallery. This time they'll be viewing a Maquoketa native's work.

"This is a big deal," Frantzen explained. "As an artist, to have your work, when you're alive, in any museum is a big deal. But something like this? Wow! I honestly just hoped it would be shown regionally and it would maybe be a traveling thing in our area.

"I never imagined it getting into the Smithsonian!"

Frantzen is surprised by the mere fact that the Smithsonian Institute even heard about her project. She played no part in the process, saying forces outside her control put this exhibition

She said a friend she painted with in Chicago 15 years ago wrote to the Smithsonian, informing officials there about the rather unique "Portrait of Maquoketa" project.

"He had seen my project on my Web site and wrote to the (National Portrait Gallery) on his own. It was a total shock to me that he would even think about it. I hadn't seen him for a very

"I didn't ever think about it. I didn't think about (the Smithsonian) for months."



Rose Frantzen, right, stands with Brandon Brame Fortune, associate curator from the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Fortune examined Frantzen's 180-piece "Portrait of Maquoketa" and recommended that it be exhibited at the Smithsonian Institution.



MSP photo by Kelly Gerlach

Shown is a sampling of the 180 portraits that will hang in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. later this fall. "Portrait of Maquoketa" will be exhibited in the nation's capital Nov. 6 through July 5, 2010.

Not until March of 2008, that is. That's when Frantzen received a letter from the National Portrait Gallery asking for more information about "Portrait of Maquoketa."

"We didn't hear back from them for weeks and weeks and weeks. They said we'd hear something in a few weeks. But after that, I figured it was all just over and I forgot about it."

Frantzen began focusing more on the Maquoketa Art Experience, a project to make the downtown and Maquoketa a more vibrant retreat for artists. Her husband Charles Morris and long-time Maquoketa resident Bob Osterhaus met while Frantzen was painting Osterhaus' portrait, and thus the Maquoketa Area Experience was formed.

"We were just getting this project off the ground. We'd been pleased just to get that letter from the Smithsonian, that they'd heard of the project and this little town. But when a community comes together the way they did for this project, it's bound to go so much further and affect so many," the artist said.

Rep. Bruce Braley's office became involved after Maquoketa Art Experience leaders mentioned the gallery letter. Shortly thereafter, gallery officials said they were interested in 'Portrait of Maquoketa" but certain conditions had to be met. Deliberation on those conditions was holding up the process.

"Brandon Fortune, the gallery curator, told us they move at a glacial pace," Frantzen joked.

According to Frantzen, the three conditions included funding, skill and relevance.

"The project needed to be funded by a source. The Smithsonian's not going to have the money to fund such projects," she said. As fate would have it, one of Frantzen's

patrons called her in January of 2008 and told her that she'd be willing to fund a project to get "Portrait of Maquoketa" in to a museum. This was before the Smithsonian Institute ever contacted the artist.

The patron agreed to pay expenses incurred for the 180 Maquoketa portraits to hang in the National Portrait Gallery, as well as for the necessary sound equipment. (In 2007, Frantzen and Morris recorded the voices of 51 people whose posed for portraits. Through a grant from the State of Iowa, the artist's composer brother John Frantzen edited the interviews and added music to complete the project.)

■ EXHIBIT,

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"Portrait of Maquoketa" history The "Portrait of Maquoketa" project began in July of 2005. It was then that, through a grant from the lowa Arts Council, Frantzen began painting portraits of 180 Maquoketa area residents.

"My hope was to approach an unfiltered representation of this small town at this time in history," Frantzen said at that time. "People can view art but what better way for them to appreciate art than to be the art, to experience it themselves?"

She arranged a temporary studio in a Main Street storefront and invited everyone aged a few days to 100 to sit and have a portrait painted. Curious passersby often crowded in front of and inside the studio to watch Frantzen transform a blank 12 x 12 inch canvas into a their neighbor, family member, friend or simply a familiar

Those posing for the Maquoketa artist each received a giclée print of the completed portrait at that time.

A portion of the portraits has been displayed in previous art shows in Dubuque and Chicago. The 180 portraits were first exhibited together at the Ohnward Fine Arts Center in December of 2007.

Since Frantzen painted the portraits, the youngest of her muses will be three years old. Four of the participants - Bernadette Billups, Annilee Bell, Earl Lietz and Mildred Vehrs – have died.

All 180 portraits will next be included in the "Portraiture Now: Communities" exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. from Nov. 6, 2009 to July 5, 2010. More details will be released as they become available.