

Giving old books new life: Bisbee preps for annual Altered Books Show and Auction

Emily Ellis

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Artist Heather Green holds up a sculpture made from a book at the Copper Queen Library altered book workshop last Friday.

BISBEE — In the age of tablets and smartphones, hard copies of books have become a thing of the past for many — something to stuff in a closet or toss in the dumpster.

But in Bisbee, artists are giving such forgotten books the star treatment.

Bisbee's annual Altered Books Show and Silent Auction, a Friends of the Copper Queen Library fundraiser, returns to town this month for its eighth year. The event showcases works of art made from books that are auctioned off to raise funds for the library. Anyone can submit an art piece for the auction, which have ranged from lamps sculpted to resemble famous literary characters to dresses made of book pages in the past, said library program coordinator Alison Williams.

"To me, even before I worked at the library, it is the best art show in Bisbee," she said. "A variety of artists build these amazing things."

The library offered a free altered books workshop last Friday, the first of two that will be held prior to the auction, in order to give folks an opportunity to create artwork for the show.

Local artist Heather Green instructed last week's class, which focused on creating an altered book assemblage, a three-dimensional collage created from books and other objects.

Green said she loved showing people how to create something new out of the broken and discarded.

"There's something wonderful with having a history," she said. "It's the same thing with these books, there's notes in the margins or they're falling apart because they've been used so much, so what's beautiful is giving these old books new life."

Artists of all ages and levels of experience attended the workshop, picking through the massive spread of broken jewelry, boxes, beads, and other objects that Green had laid out along the table. Many attendees, including Douglas resident Mary Fogleman, brought books from their homes to repurpose.

"So far, I've just been collecting things that kind of represent my life," said Fogleman, a former librarian, as she arranged zippers and buttons inside an empty box. "I think I'm going to line it with a book page, because books are a very big part of my life."

Workshop attendees were welcome to take their artwork home or submit it to the auction, said Green. The goal was for them to create a piece of art with a mood or story, as well as have fun.

"Sometimes with assemblage you want to take everything, because it's with found objects," she said. "You need to try to pare that down and create a theme."

Seeing the creative ways that people turn literature into art is one of the best parts of the show, said Williams.

"There are so many interpretations of what that means, to alter a book," she said. "The range of art is phenomenal. We have people from Tucson or Phoenix that come to participate in the show, or just to see the art show."

The auction usually raises around \$3,000 to \$5,000, which goes toward the library's different programs and activities, said Williams. Prices on individual art pieces start as low as \$10, and artists who submit to the auction have the option of keeping a percentage of the sale.

“It’s a wonderful art event, and social event,” she said. “Even if you’re not planning on purchasing, it’s really exciting.”

For those interested in submitting an altered book to the auction, artist applications can be picked up at the Central School Project or the Copper Queen Library.



Gretchen Hill and Alison Williams makes a three-dimensional collage at the Copper Queen Library altered books workshop last Friday.

If You Go

What: Altered Books Show and Silent Auction

Where: Central School Project, 43 Howell Ave., Bisbee

When: Aug. 25, 5 to 8 p.m.

More info: Contact the Central School Project at (520) 432-4866

Cost: Free

What: Altered Book Assemblage Workshop with Heather Green

Where: Copper Queen Library, 6 Main St., Bisbee

When: Aug. 17, noon to 2 p.m.

More info: Contact the Copper Queen Library at (520) 432-4232

Cost: Free