

# THE NEIGHBORHOOD

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## Local woman teaches art to the 'unartistic'

Acclaimed artist inspires creativity at senior center

By Emily Soares  
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The walls and shelves of the art room at Richmond Senior Center, at 6221 Geary Boulevard, are packed with the offerings of the artists who work there: ceramic hangings, sculptures, and paintings. At clay-whitened tables, students sit, absorbed in their work, as they shape bowls, apply glaze, or sketch.

According to the seniors who attend her classes, art instructor Helen Ludwig is the first person in their long lives to call them artistic.

Ludwig, 87, has been volunteering as an art instructor for seniors, children, and those with disabilities for 25 years. Eight of those years have been spent at the Richmond Senior Center.

"She does the most delicate work," says Ludwig as she watched Katherine Sakai, one of her students, paint details on a ceramic planter. Sakai, who cites her age as "past 77" has been under Ludwig's tutelage at the center for three years.

"I felt, up to now, that I didn't have any kind of [artistic] ability," says Sakai, though she is not surprised that her creative talent did eventually bloom, considering she has two commercial artists and a dressmaker in her family. "You have to give yourself a chance to find out," she says.

Ludwig says she tries to focus on individuals who've been labeled unartistic as children. "Everybody has undeveloped skill," she says.

### A life of art

An accomplished artist in a variety of media, including painting, ceramics, collage, illustration, and jewelry making, Ludwig has 41 of her sketch books in the Archives of American Art collection of the Smithsonian Institute, has had her work exhibited all over the world, and has illustrated nine books on plants and animals.

She still paints and sculpts prolifically, swims to keep fit, and teaches three days a week. "The more you move, the longer you live," she says.

Ludwig grew up on a Connecticut farm with 10 siblings and a Swiss mother, who was very supportive of her children's creative leanings. "Everyone [in my family] does something creative," says Ludwig. "We raised everything we ate and made everything [we needed]. My brothers built houses and barns, and my sisters do a lot of creative things like quilting and tatting," she says.

Ludwig began painting in watercolor in her earliest years and switched to oils at the mature age of 11. "I've done artwork all my life," she explains.

During the Great Depression in New York, Ludwig worked on the Works Project Administration mural project. "In the Depression ... [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] gave people jobs being creative," she says, "and it saved the country." Ludwig also did a stint creating the backdrops for shop windows along Fifth Avenue while pursuing her art career.

In 1957, Ludwig moved to San Francisco from New York with her husband, who had been a philosophy professor at Hunter College and editor of several journals of philosophy until he was blacklisted by Senator Joseph McCarthy's House on Un-Ameri-

See LUDWIG, page 26B

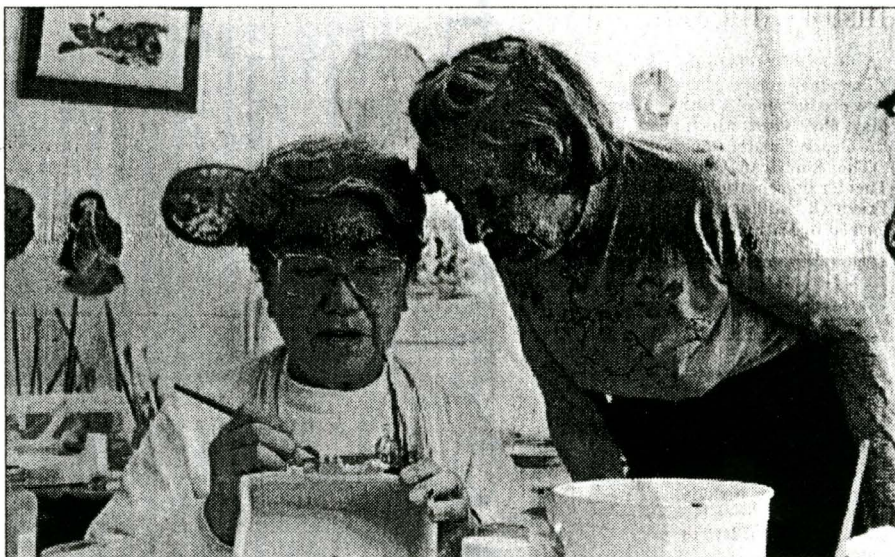


PHOTO: RORY McNAMARA

**GUIDING THE ARTIST'S HAND:** Senior art student Katherine Sakai (left) gets tips on her craft from art instructor Helen Ludwig at the Richmond Senior Center.

PERSONALITIES

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# LUDWIG: Artist passes talents to seniors

*continued from page 25*

can Activities Committee for refusing to give up the names of suspected communists.

## A love for the city

Ludwig says that when she came to San Francisco, she immediately fell in love with the city, and she has spent the last 40 years sketching, sculpting, and painting its streets and landmarks, among other favorite subjects. She has published a book of Golden Gate Park sketches and paintings and has another collection of San Francisco works for which she is looking for a publisher.

Photographs of her work show scenes of San Francisco, the capital cities of Europe, and lush Hawaiian expanses — the legacy of a life rich in travel and art. Ludwig says her personal collection contains a number of her sketchbooks and countless paintings. Her garden fences hold her ceramics, not

one of which fell down in the earthquake, she notes, and two of her cityscapes hang in the Mayor's Office.

Ludwig's work, though praised by local galleries, is not exhibited as frequently as it once was. "In the '60s, *they* asked *me*," says Ludwig of city galleries wanting to exhibit her work. "I don't like that business of promoting myself," she says.

"I don't know what's the matter with the art world now," says Ludwig. "Now they like the blank nothings."

"What I'd like to do is get more students," says Ludwig. "We have the space for them," she says, noting that at a price of \$1 a session, the center's art program — which is taught Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. — is a great bargain.

And for Ludwig, instructing the young is as important as teaching art to the elderly.

"I grew up very antiwar," she says, noting how tired she is of

what she sees as a willingness among governments and citizens to use violence. "The more creativity that's established, the less likelihood that we will have violence and wars," she says. "I think its very important to bring out the creativity of little children. We want the next generation to be civilized," says Ludwig.

As a view of the Richmond District shines outside the studio's

windows, 66-year-old Alicia Ramos is hard at work on a ceramic wall hanging. Having attended Richmond Senior Center art classes for one year, Ramos now has a collection of her own work. "I didn't know anything about clay before Helen," she explains. "She's a very good teacher."

For more information on the Richmond Senior Center art classes taught by Ludwig, call 752-6444.