



Art can serve as a gateway to reinvention

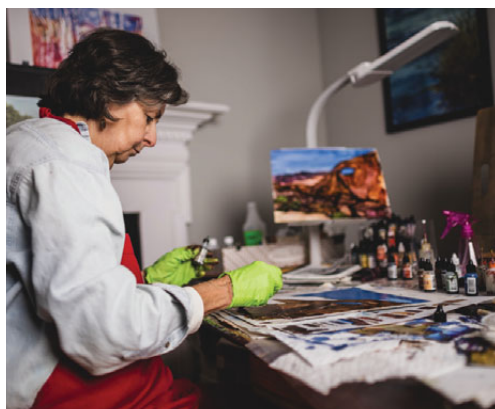
Whether through designing furniture, painting vivid landscapes, or fostering artistic connections in their communities, each of these New Englanders has discovered what truly inspires them.

BY JACQUELINE CAIN

Metaphorically, Richard Burns, 70, likens going back to art school as a senior to finding the “fountain of youth.” He enrolled in the Furniture Design Certificate program at Massachusetts College of Art and Design in 2017, after retiring from a career in software engineering. On his way to 38 credits, which he achieved in 2021, Burns took various electives that put him in conversation with young people. “They brought with them a lot of different ideas,” he says. Collaborating with them taught him more about creativity than he’d ever imagined.

The Hingham, Mass., father first developed an interest in furniture making through woodworking projects around the house, like finishing the basement, building a swing set for his son, Rob, and designing storage solutions. It wasn’t until he brought his son to tour MassArt as an undergrad, however, that Burns considered taking his practical hobby to the next level. “It was the first time I ever set foot in an art college,” he says. (Before Burns enrolled, Rob graduated from the MassArt education program. Ironically he now works in software sales.)

About the certificate program



Clockwise from top left: Carol Courtney selects pigments in her home studio in Connecticut; A close-up of Courtney’s paint swatches where she experiments with hues and textures; Courtney works on a painting in her home studio; With a steady hand, Courtney applies layers of color to her piece.



“Now that I’ve been able to show my art, why not help others reach that feeling?”
– *Carol Courtney*

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 – *Richard Burns*



Clockwise from top: Richard Burns cuts a piece of wood in his home woodshop in Massachusetts; A detailed sketch and early-stage component of Burns' woodworking process; Close-up of Burns' table saw in action; Burns sits beside his handcrafted furniture.

he pursued, Burns says “I really enjoyed the aspects of the design side and different influences I studied,” particularly the Arts and Crafts movement. Now back in his home woodshop, he is incorporating his newfound artistic sensibility into new “commissions from my wife,” including a Mission-style bookcase and a dresser inspired by a linen press he studied in the Museum of Fine Arts collection.

Art for everyone

Burns is not alone in finding inspiration in the world of art. For painter Carol Courtney, 72, the

idea of using creativity to give back is a powerful motivator. “You do art because you’re expressing yourself, and you want to have others get some kind of feeling,” Courtney says. The Connecticut-based artist uses fast-drying, highly pigmented alcohol ink and nontraditional tools like sponges and credit cards to create evocative, stained glass-like landscapes.

Paintings inspired by national parks are some of her most popular pieces, often because patrons tell her they have happy memories associated with those places. “It makes me feel good that I can create that and pass it on to someone else to share.”

Since completing a bachelor’s degree of fine art at University of Hartford in 2020, and retiring a year later from her career as a faculty evaluator for a different university department, Courtney has presented her art in dozens of shows.

In 2023, she began volunteering with CCARC, a Connecticut non-profit that provides services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Since then, she’s been involved in a handful of art shows for CCARC participants, including an exhibition at the New Britain Museum of American Art.

“Now that I’ve been able to show my art,” Courtney says, “why not help others reach that feeling?”

Feeling empowered to create

Meg Ricks’ artistic journey led her down a similar path of self-discovery — one rooted in personal healing and reflection. When she took up painting full time around 2011, her son was serving as a marine captain in Afghanistan during a tense period of military opera-

tions targeting Osama bin Laden. The news of the day became an unwelcome distraction, so Ricks, a lifelong doodler and hobbyist painter, decided to pick up a watercolor class. “I realized that I wasn’t worried about my son when I was taking a class,” she says. Now at 73, she continues to find painting “very meditative.”

Ricks credits MassArt New England, a summer program aimed at adults from the public art college, for fueling her artistic passion. These week-long intensive workshops, which Ricks has attended for much of the past two decades, allow artists to devote as many waking hours to their practice as they desire. “I think for women, it’s something we almost never have,” she says. Discouraged by her own parents from pursuing art as an undergrad, Ricks had long felt that making time for drawing wasn’t practical.

Now, after retiring from her career in child psychology, Ricks has the luxury of time — and she wants to use it to make art that has meaning. Ricks enjoys plein air painting and creating abstract interpretations of landscapes in her own home studios. Ricks grew up in Essex and Newton, Mass., but is currently bicoastal between Montague and Santa Barbara, Calif. She is a board member of Southern California Artists Painting for the Environment, which promotes camaraderie among local creators while also raising funds for environmental organizations. She has also sold paintings to support humanitarian aid in Ukraine.

Creativity can transform

All of these stories reflect a broader truth: engaging in the arts enrich-



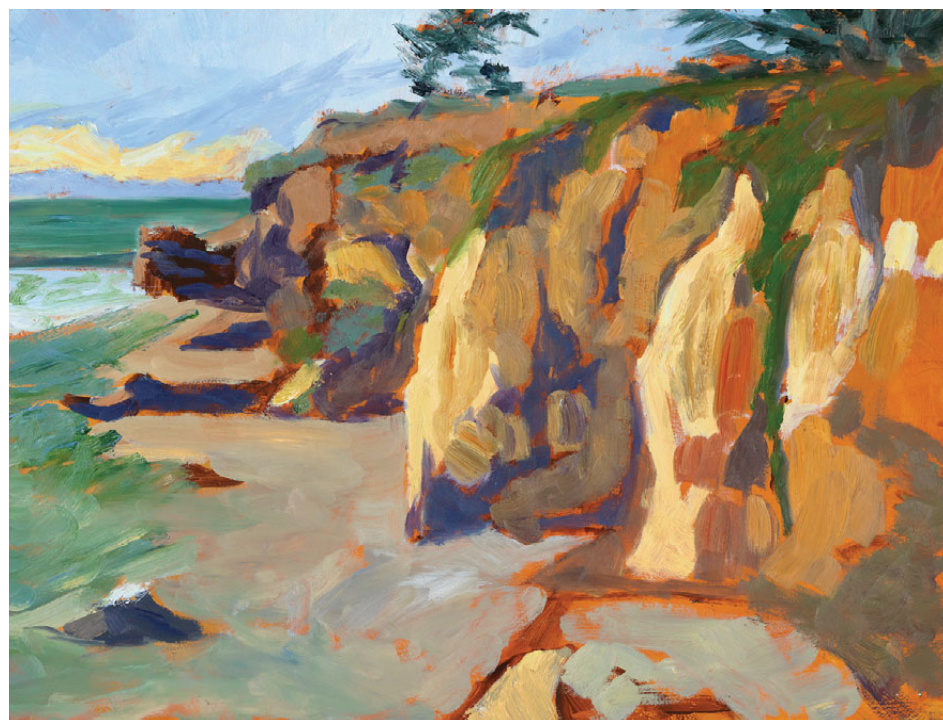
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es life at any stage, offering joy, fulfillment, and a sense of connection. Research from the National Institute on Aging supports what Burns, Courtney, and Ricks have each experienced firsthand — creative pursuits can reduce stress, foster independence, and provide a deep sense of accomplishment.

Organizations like the Somerville Council on Aging help make

these benefits accessible, offering low- or no-cost arts programming, therapy services, live music, and more. “Art sparks a real joy that can bring a sense of relief,” says executive director Ashley Spilotis.

Whether picking up a brush, a chisel, or a lifelong dream, these artists prove that creativity has no age limit, and that it’s never too late to create. ■



From top to bottom: Meg Ricks admires her art in her home studio, image by J.L. Cederblom; ‘Cliffs at Sunrise’ painting by Meg Ricks, image by Letitia Haynes; Meg Ricks in her home studio, image by J.L. Cederblom; ‘Bach in the Studio’ painting by Meg Ricks, image by Letitia Haynes.



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