



OREGON ARTSWATCH

ARTS & CULTURE NEWS

(<https://www.orartswatch.org>)

CULTURE DANCE FILM LANGUAGE MUSIC NEWS OREGON / NW THEATER VISUAL ART STAGE & STUDIO



Search...

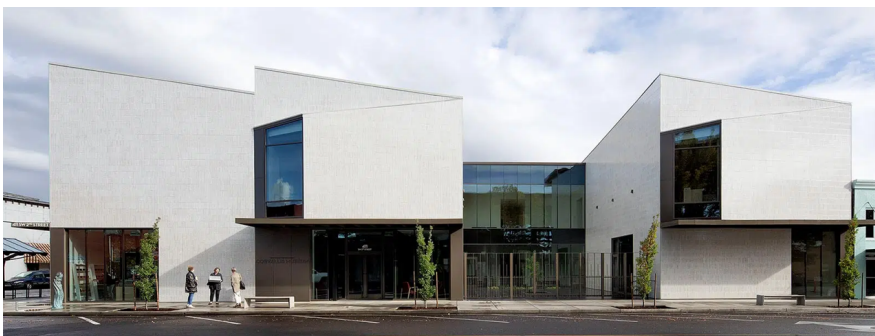
(<https://cmnw.org/>)

From slave to homesteader in Oregon

An illuminating exhibit on the life of Black pioneer Letitia Carson helps the Corvallis Museum broaden its perspective on the history of Oregon and Benton County.

JULY 8, 2023 |

ALEXANDER BANKS ([HTTPS://WWW.ORARTSWATCH.ORG/AUTHOR/ALEXANDER-BANKS/](https://www.orartswatch.org/author/ALEXANDER-BANKS/)), CULTURAL HUBS ([HTTPS://WWW.ORARTSWATCH.ORG/CATEGORY/CULTURAL-HUBS/](https://www.orartswatch.org/category/CULTURAL-HUBS/)), CULTURE ([HTTPS://WWW.ORARTSWATCH.ORG/CATEGORY/CULTURE/](https://www.orartswatch.org/category/CULTURE/)), OREGON / NW ([HTTPS://WWW.ORARTSWATCH.ORG/CATEGORY/OREGON-NW/](https://www.orartswatch.org/category/OREGON-NW/))

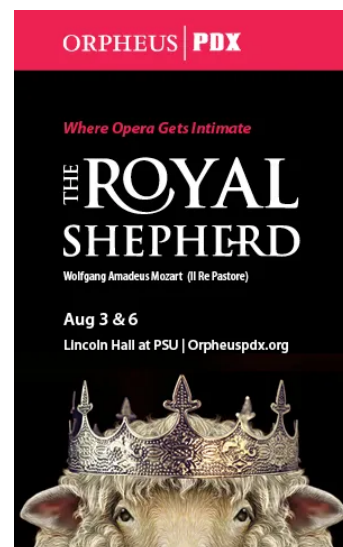


A contemporary space to consider the past: The Corvallis Museum, one of two museum homes for the Benton County Historical Society.

The new, environmentally friendly Corvallis Museum – opened by the Benton County Historical Society (<https://bentoncountymuseums.org/>) in 2021 – shares with its older sister the Philomath Museum a collection of more than 140 thousand objects, regional and international, as well as permanent and rotating exhibitions. And the modern, 10,000-square-foot building in



(<https://cmnw.org/>)

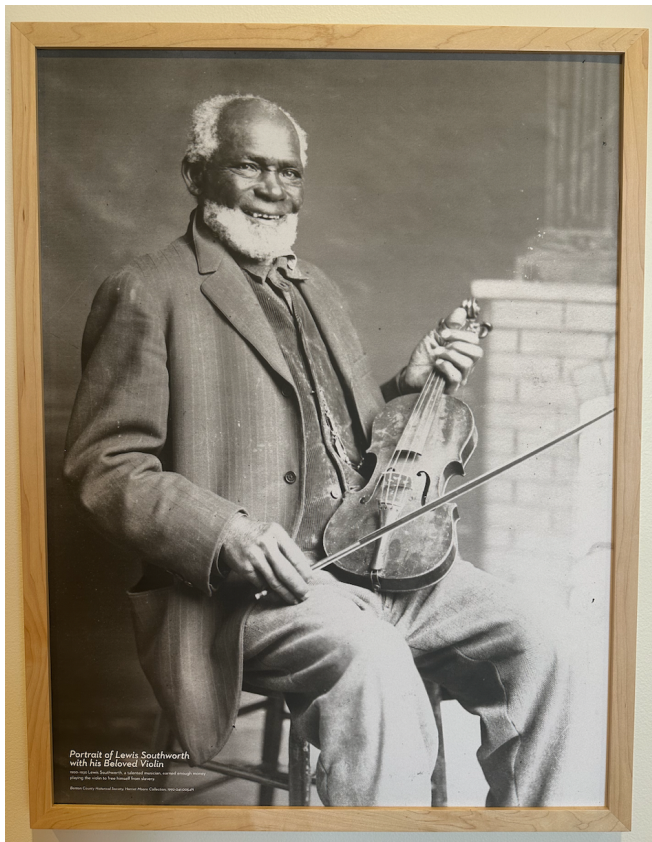


rotating exhibitions. And the modern, 19,000 square foot building in downtown Corvallis isn't the only thing that's new: With a new mission statement, the historical society that operates both museums has a stronger focus on telling more diverse stories through community partnerships and different curatorial practices.

Through July 16 the Corvallis Museum (<https://bentoncountymuseums.org/visit/#corvallis>) is hosting *Letitia Carson: An Enduring Spirit of Hope and Freedom* (<https://bentoncountymuseums.org/exhibits/letita-carson-an-enduring-spirit-of-hope-and-freedom/>), a temporary exhibition that features the story of Letitia Carson, a Black matriarch and former slave, who traveled the Oregon Trail from Missouri to forge a life with her partner, David Carson, in Soap Creek Valley, Oregon – just north of Corvallis. She became one of the few Black people – and likely the first Black woman – to be a homesteader in Oregon at that time.

OREGON CULTURAL HUBS: An Occasional Series

The spotlight on Carson's story isn't alone. Other exhibits at the Corvallis Museum include the story of Lewis Southworth, a former slave who bought his freedom after his master took him to the California Gold Rush in 1853. There, he played violin for dance schools, earning \$1,000, which would be almost \$40,000 today. After becoming free, he moved back to Oregon where he became a beloved community member, known for his violin playing. Southworth Creek, in Lincoln County, was named in his honor.



Portrait of Oregon Black Pioneer Lewis Southworth in the Corvallis Museum. Photo: Alexander Banks

And on the museum's second floor hangs a portrait of Mary Jane Holmes Shipley Drake, a former slave who was involved in the *Holmes v. Ford* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holmes_v._Ford#:~:text=Ford%20was%20an%20American%20U.S.%20) in Oregon, which confirmed that slavery was illegal in the Oregon Territory. Her parents



(<https://orpheuspx.org/events/the-royal-shepherd-il-re-pastore/>)



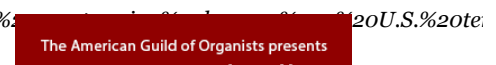
(<https://salemartfair.org/information/>)



(<https://literary-arts.org/event/an-evening-with-ann-patchett/>)

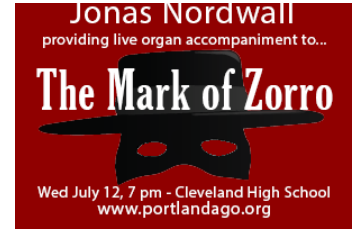


(<https://willamette.edu/arts/hfma/exhibitions/23/jim-hibbard.html>)



fought for her freedom and won their court case in 1853.

Carson’s story was revived and brought to the public’s eyes due to the curiosity and research of Oregon State University graduate Bob Zybach, with help from historian Jan Meranda. Zybach was a budding historical ecologist, and understanding people’s relationship and impact with the landscape is something that he wanted to do.



(<https://www.portlandago.org/events-1/the-mark-of-zorro>)



(<https://www.portland.gov/ombudsman/make-complaint-about-city-bureau-or-office>)

Photographic portrait of Mary Jane Holmes Shipley Drake, date unknown. Wikimedia Commons

The Letitia Carson exhibit, created by the group Oregon Black Pioneers (<https://oregonblackpioneers.org/>), was largely based on Zybach’s research. Artifacts in the exhibit include the 1850 Oregon census – the first written record of Carson’s existence – a pottery fragment from the Carson homestead, and court records from Carson’s legal battle with her neighbor Greenberry Smith.

Sponsor

(<https://culturaltrust.org/get-involved/donate/>)

Jessica Hougen, executive director of the Benton County Historical Society, was familiar with Oregon Black Pioneers before taking her role with the historical society in August 2021. For her and the museum, it was a good fit. She realized there is a growing understanding in the industry that historical museums have done a great job of preserving the history of white pioneers – but not much else – and need to do better. She learned more about the legacy project and the exhibit’s development through her connection to Larry Landis, one of the historical society’s board of directors, and being invited to meetings with project partners.

“We are trying to work on building some community partnerships that will help more of the community feel more comfortable with us, and understand that we really do want to be here for everyone,” Hougen said.

Through Landis, Hougen was able to develop a partnership with the Letitia Carson Legacy Project (<https://letitiacarson.oregonstate.edu/>). The legacy project is a partnership among



(<https://oregonbachfestival.org/>)



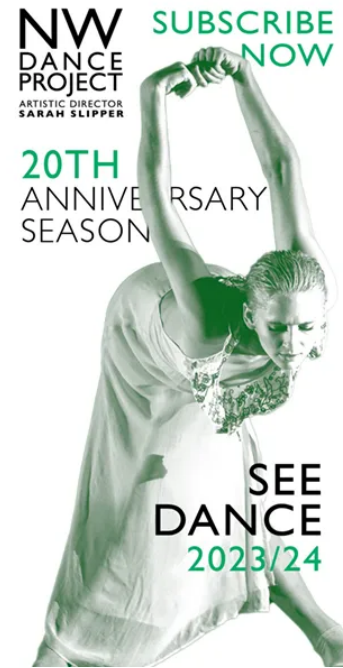
(<https://portlandpiano.org/season>)

several organizations: Black Oregon Land Trust, Oregon Black Pioneers, Linn-Benton Counties NAACP Branch, Mudbone Grown and Oregon State University, that are united in honoring Letitia Carson’s story.

“Larry told me about this exhibit when they were talking about developing it, and I said, ‘yeah,’” Hougen said. “We absolutely want to have it.”

FROM EVERYDAY OBJECTS, A HISTORY RISES

History is told in many ways at the Corvallis Museum, and often concentrates on the little things that residents of Benton County have used, collected, and revered over the decades. A tour of the galleries reveals some of these everyday items and tells a collective story. Photographs by Alexander Banks.



(<https://nwdanceproject.org/performances/sub>)



(<https://www.pdx.edu/arts/>)

THE CURIOUS WORLD OF SEAWEED
NOW - OCTOBER 1, 2023

Seaweeds are the supreme eco-engineers, oxygenating the waters & creating habitats for countless organisms. This exhibition examines how these surprisingly sophisticated marine plants keep our planet opulently rich in life.

PACIFIC MARITIME HERITAGE CENTER
Call 541-265-7509 or [CLICK HERE](#)

Pacific Maritime Heritage Center
333 SE Bay Blvd., Newport, OR

Thank you to our sponsors and Partners:

(<https://oregoncoasthistory.org/2023/05/17/th>)

curious-world-of-seaweed/)



(<https://www.maryhillmuseum.org/>)



(<https://oregonbachfestival.org/>)



(<https://culturaltrust.org/get-involved/donate/>)





(<https://www.orartswatch.org/advertise/>)

Sponsor



(<https://culturaltrust.org/get-involved/donate/>)

THE BENTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY bought the property that later turned into the Corvallis Museum in 1999. It was originally meant to be a storage warehouse. However, with the acquisition of a 60 thousand artifact collection from the defunct Horner Museum at Oregon State University – and an idea to make better use of the property – the building was transformed into the Corvallis Museum in 2021. It opened 41 years after the Philomath Museum (<https://bentoncountymuseums.org/visit/#philomath>) was

~~The Philomath Museum (<https://bentoncountymuseum.org/visit/philomath/>) was developed, and is a less than 15-minute drive away.~~

The museum, designed to high energy-efficiency LEED (<https://www.usgbc.org/leed>) standards by Allied Works Architecture in Portland, is a two-story building situated in downtown Corvallis. Carson's exhibit sits in the museum's lobby, accessible through the doors of either the gift shop or front entrance. In the hallways nearby, trinkets are encased on the walls: oil and kerosene lamps from the 1800s, cameras from the 1900s, a Star Wars lunchbox from 1977 and more. The artifacts in the room take views all throughout Benton County, showing the history of Corvallis, Philomath, and the various Indigenous tribes that lived in the area.

The opening of the museum in Corvallis marked the latest chapter in the growth of the Benton County Historical Society and its collections. The Philomath Museum, which had been the society's core exhibition space, didn't officially become a museum until 1980, although the historical society has been around since 1951.

Philomath Museum, built as a college and the original home of the Benton County Historical Society's collections. The society still operates it as a museum, in conjunction with the newer Corvallis Museum 15 miles away.

The original section of the Philomath building was constructed in 1867 with the intention of being used as a college. It was added onto and used as one, Philomath College (<https://www.lostcolleges.com/philomath-college/>), until the school shut down in 1929.

After that it was used for a while as a church and then abandoned. Philomath residents saved the building before it fell apart, with the intention of having it turned into a museum and occupied by the county historical society.

Originally, the Philomath Museum building had everything: collections, storage, offices, etc, until the historical society was able to diversify by adding the Corvallis Museum. Now,

the building still operates as a museum with different events and exhibitions than the one in Corvallis. *Water Works* (<https://bentoncountymuseums.org/exhibits/water-works/>), a show that looks at the sources of water and how it's used and preserved, is on view now.

“Philomath has been a wonderful home for us over the years,” Hougen said. “But being in Corvallis just opens up a lot more opportunity for us in terms of how many people we can serve.”

BEFORE THE LETITIA CARSON EXHIBIT made it to the Corvallis Museum, it was at the Lonnie B. Harris Black Cultural Center (<https://dce.oregonstate.edu/bcc>) at nearby Oregon State University. Not only was it a quick transfer from the BCC to the museum, but Hougen believed the museum could serve a vastly different audience than the cultural center on campus. It would also, she believed, entice students who already know about the exhibit – or Carson's story – to check out the museum and revisit it.

Letitia Carson, as a slave or former slave, traveled with David Carson across the Oregon Trail from Missouri, arriving in Oregon in 1845. Government-sponsored land claims in Oregon spurred white settlement, displacing the Indigenous population, and giving the Carsons 640 acres in Oregon's Soap Creek Valley to build a log home, a garden and herd cattle. This land was later reduced to 320 acres, because the union between the Carsons' marriage wasn't viewed as lawful because Letitia was a Black woman.

A drawing in Oregon Black Pioneers' Letitia Carson Collection of Greenberry Smith, the administrator of David Carson's estate, whom Letitia Carson sued twice. It is from 1885 circa. At one time he was considered the "richest man in Benton County, Oregon."

In 1852, David died suddenly and without a will. Since Oregon's Black exclusionary laws attempted to prevent Black people from settling in Oregon for more than six months, David's estate was given to Greenberry Smith, the neighbor of the Carsons.

Carson sued Smith twice, and in 1856 she was awarded a settlement for back wages she was owed for her time with David, as well as legal fees. Sixteen months later, Carson was

awarded more money, which included a settlement for the unlawful sale of her cattle. Carson then moved to Douglas County, in southern Oregon, with her two young children, where she worked for another family and as a community midwife.

In 1862 President Abraham Lincoln passed the Homestead Act (<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/homestead-act>), allowing an applicant to acquire ownership of government land or the public domain, regardless of race. And in 1869, Carson's homestead claim was approved by President Ulysses S. Grant, giving her 154 acres of land and making her the only Black woman in Oregon to receive a homestead.

Carson died in 1888 and was buried in the Douglas County town of Myrtle Creek, at The Stephens Cemetery. She left behind two children, Martha Jane and Jack. Oregon writer Jane Kirkpatrick released *A Light in the Wilderness* (<https://www.amazon.com/Light-Wilderness-Novel-Jane-Kirkpatrick/dp/0800722310>) in 2014, a novel based on Carson's life.

Historical researcher Bob Zybach at Letitia Carson's gravesite at Myrtle Creek in Douglas County, Oregon.

Zybach, the OSU grad who revived interest in Letitia Carson, believes he was the first person to ask for the documents on David Carson – which turned out to be 180 documents – from the Benton County archives, now moved to the Oregon State Archives (<https://sos.oregon.gov/archives/Pages/records.aspx>). Historian Jan Meranda helped

transcribe most of the documents and gave Zybach constant words of encouragement. After 35 years Zybach's still uncovering more documents, and plans on writing a book about Carson's life.

In 1987, Zybach was doing research as a student on Jedediah Smith, an American hunter credited with being the first European-American to trek through what is now Utah and

Nevada, and found his trail crossed through the estate of Letitia Carson's husband, David. More investigation led him to a book by Donna Wojcik Montgomery, *The Brazen Overlanders of 1845* (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/43413643-the-brazen-overlanders-of-1845>), which documented Oregon Trail migrations in 1845. The book mentioned David, accompanied by Carson, as they both traveled from Missouri to Oregon, making roots in what was then Soap Creek Valley – just north of Corvallis.

“In my generation, all the history was about old white guys,” Zybach said. “So every time a woman, or a Black person, or an Indian came into the picture, I was like, ‘wow.’ This person is something odd here.”

To Zybach, a non-white person being documented back then must have meant that person had some significance to that point in history, “because these old white guys are only concerned with other old white guys.” Furthermore, it made him question how those people got there, and why their stories are hardly mentioned.

EACH OF THE ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED in the Letitia Carson story brings its own strengths to the project.

Oregon Black Pioneers, which put together the Carson exhibit, was founded in 1993 by Seattle educator Carole Davis and Oregon State Senator Jackie Winters, in Salem. The organization had an initial mission focused on providing Black history education in Salem. OBP eventually grew in scope and their educational endeavors eventually encompassed the state as a whole.

The organization has published three books, offers lesson plans, does presentations around the state, creates traveling exhibits and more. With 30 years of research, OBP also has access to digitized archival materials, which according to Executive Director Zachary Stocks, many other repositories — including large museums — don't have access to.

“We do a lot of collaboration with other history organizations,” Stocks said.

The vision of the Letitia Carson Legacy Project that was fashioned by the collaborating organizations, Stocks said, was one of preservation and activating the property that Carson lived on in Soap Creek Valley. In the future, the legacy project hopes to use the land to provide opportunities or Black entrepreneurial farming, land stewardship, and history education.

Oregon Black Pioneers works year-round, delivering more than 60 presentations each year, rotating traveling exhibits to multiple locations, and participating in community panels and advisory committees.

The Corvallis Museum maintains accessibility. Admission is free for students, members, and youth under 18 years old, and just \$5 for non-members. The museum still sees more of an older crowd, Hougen said, but it's figuring out what it can do to gain the interest of college-aged people and young professionals in the community. She noted that speaking engagements from a local author, Cambodian-American Putsata Reang; a music series; and other programs and events have had big turnouts and diverse crowds.

Every year in July, the Corvallis Museum has a family day event, geared toward families and younger kids. Each event is centered around a different theme, and the museum invites local agencies that relate to said theme – this year being water.

In April, the museum enacted a series that they decided to do annually, in which they invite members and the general public to attend, provide feedback and express how they'd like to be served from the museum. “Attendance was fairly small, but we had really great, thoughtful responses from people, and a lot of really wonderful conversation,” Hougen said.

Undated photo from the Letitia Carson Digital History Collection of Letitia's daughter Martha and her children, Letitia's grandchildren. It is unclear which children these would have been. Together, Martha and her husband Narcisse had five daughters and four sons, whose descendants remain prominent Walla Walla members of the Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Indian Reservation. Photo © Joey Lavadour

ALTHOUGH OREGON BLACK PIONEERS doesn't have another booking for the Letitia Carson exhibit after it leaves the Corvallis Museum, it hopes to display it at the Umatilla Indian Reservation east of Pendleton, and home to many members of the Walla Walla tribe, along with Umatilla and Cayuse.

"Letitia's daughter Martha ended up moving there," Stocks said. "That's a part of the Letitia Carson story that we'd like to be able to share."

Martha Jane Carson moved to the Umatilla Indian Reservation in 1886, after marrying Narcisse Lavadour – a French-Canadian and Walla Walla tribal member through his Indigenous mother. They received an allotment of land on the reservation. Martha Jane had 10 children.

"There are many stories to tell, they're interwoven (and) understanding of them is evolving. And we are an organization that is here for the entire community," Hougen said. "Not just for the white community."

CORVALLIS MUSEUM

- **On view:** *Letitia Carson: An Enduring Spirit of Hope and Freedom*

(<https://bentoncountymuseums.org/exhibits/letita-carson-an-enduring-spirit-of-hope-and-freedom/>), through July 16

- **Address:** 411 S.W. Second St., Corvallis
- **Hours:** 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays, noon-4:30 p.m. Sundays, closed Mondays-Tuesdays
- **Parent organization:** Benton County Historical Society

PHILOMATH MUSEUM:

- **On view:** *Water Works* (<http://Water Works>, a show that looks at the sources of water and how it's used and preserved, is on view now.) exhibition
- **Address:** 101 Main St., Philomath
- **Hours:** 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays; closed Sundays-Tuesdays
- **Parent organization:** Benton County Historical Society

(<https://www.orartswatch.org/membership/>)

Alexander Banks

(<https://www.orartswatch.org/author/alexander-banks/>)

Alexander Banks is a journalism student at Oregon State University. Outside of writing, he also works as a news contributor and columnist for *The Daily Oregonian*, a student-run newspaper at the university. He enjoys photography, video editing, graphic design, and watching movies in his free time. He is also an introvert and cat lover.

SHARE:



3 responses

Kate McPherson July 8, 2023 at 5:36 pm (<https://www.orartswatch.org/from-slave-to-homesteader-in-oregon/#comment-152023>)

Thank you for covering this story and providing helpful information about the various people and organizations working to research and showcase the racial histories of Oregon. Nicely done!

Reply (<https://www.orartswatch.org/from-slave-to-homesteader-in-oregon/?replytocom=152023#respond>)

Peg July 10, 2023 at 10:28 am (<https://www.orartswatch.org/from-slave-to-homesteader-in-oregon/#comment-152050>)

BTW the IDENTITY POLITICS aren't working, I come from Hispanic and Anglo heritage, my very white great grandmother who moved here when she was 14 from Denmark was an INDENTURED SERVANT for the USA to get her and citizenship for YEARS. So quit with the virtue signaling. She did this for YEARS. Where's her respect?

Reply (<https://www.orartswatch.org/from-slave-to-homesteader-in-oregon/?replytocom=152050#respond>)

↳ **Bob Hicks** July 10, 2023 at 12:17 pm (<https://www.orartswatch.org/from-slave-to-homesteader-in-oregon/#comment-152054>)

The story of indentured servitude is a part of American history, although a lot of people don't know about it. A difference between slavery and indentured servitude is that indenture, which was a contract freely entered into by both parties, was for a fixed, limited amount of time, after which the servants were free of their debt and any further obligations. Until emancipation, slavery was both compulsory and for life. Sounds like your great grandmother's story is interesting; a story waiting to be told. The history of Oregon and its race relations is history, too, and learning about it is a good thing. It is neither "identity politics" nor "virtue signaling," but an openness to the full story of this place, and a deeper understanding of who we are and how our current culture came to be. Knowledge is a good thing.

Reply (<https://www.orartswatch.org/from-slave-to-homesteader-in-oregon/?replytocom=152054#respond>)

LEAVE A REPLY

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment *

Name *

Email *

Website

POST COMMENT

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. [Learn how your comment data is processed \(https://akismet.com/privacy/\)](https://akismet.com/privacy/).

READ MORE >> (https://orartswatch.org/?post_type=post)

At the Jewish Museum, the humanity of the moment
(<https://www.orartswatch.org/at-the-jewish-museum-the-humanity-of-the-moment/>)

Friderike Heuer | July 12, 2023

(<https://www.orartswatch.org/at-the-jewish-museum-the-humanity-of-the-moment/>)

Aquilon Festival and the future of opera
(<https://www.orartswatch.org/aquilon-festival-and-the-future-of-opera/>)

[\(https://www.orartswatch.org/aquilon-festival-and-the-future-of-opera/\)](https://www.orartswatch.org/aquilon-festival-and-the-future-of-opera/)

Gabe Braukman | July 12, 2023

(https://www.orartswatch.org/aquilon-festival-and-the-future-of-opera/)

Whirling divas at The Reser (<https://www.orartswatch.org/whirling-divas-at-the-reser/>)

Joe Cantrell | July 9, 2023

(https://www.orartswatch.org/whirling-divas-at-the-reser/)

21st Yachats Celtic Music Festival announces November lineup (<https://www.orartswatch.org/21st-yachats-celtic-music-festival-announces-november-lineup/>)

Ceryl Romano/YachatsNews.com | July 7, 2023

(https://www.orartswatch.org/21st-yachats-celtic-music-festival-announces-november-lineup/)

WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

Sign up for the latest news, coming events, recaps of key stories, and links to great reads.
Having trouble subscribing? Sign up [HERE](https://orartswatch.us2.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=938dc0fa571e3c1e731adedc3&id=4401655c35) (https://orartswatch.us2.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=938dc0fa571e3c1e731adedc3&id=4401655c35).

SUBSCRIBE

ARCHIVES




- July 2023 (https://www.orartswatch.org/2023/)
- June 2023 (https://www.orartswatch.org/2022/)
- May 2023 (https://www.orartswatch.org/2021/)
- April 2023 (https://www.orartswatch.org/2020/)
- March 2023 (https://www.orartswatch.org/2019/)
- February 2023 (https://www.orartswatch.org/2018/)
- 2017 (https://archive.orartswatch.org/2017/)
- 2016 (https://archive.orartswatch.org/2016/)
- 2015 (https://archive.orartswatch.org/2015/)
- 2014 (https://archive.orartswatch.org/2014/)
- 2013 (https://archive.orartswatch.org/2013/)
- 2012 (https://archive.orartswatch.org/2012/)
- 2011 (https://archive.orartswatch.org/2011/)

BECOME A MEMBER

ArtsWatch is a 501(c)(3) non-profit and ALL donations go toward paying contributors to publish our essential arts journalism.

DONATE
(<https://www.orartswatch.org/membership/>)

Follow us

-  (<https://www.facebook.com/ArtsWatch>)
-  (<https://twitter.com/orartswatch>)
-  (<https://www.instagram.com/orartswatch/>)

All content posted on Oregon Arts Watch remains the intellectual property of its authors. Republishing, in whole or in part, with or without attribution, unless agreed to in writing by the author or copyright holder, of any content is prohibited. Oregon Arts Watch will take all reasonable and necessary measures to enforce its contributors' rights.