

Take an Art Walk in La Conner

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La Conner has a lot going on for a town of fewer than 1,000 residents: the Swinomish Channel where you can paddle a kayak or just watch the boats go by; waterfront shops and restaurants; farmer's markets; daffodils and tulips. But one of the most intriguing aspects of the village is its love of the arts. Whether you visit for an afternoon or a few days, set aside some time to take an art walk in La Conner.

John Leaver holds Position 2 on the Town Council and is the liaison to the Arts Commission as well. We strolled together to have a chat about some of the pieces on display in town. "I'm not an artist myself," John is quick to say, "but I've been the liaison between town government and the Arts Commission for some time."



Flotsam by Judith Heim, one of three salmon perched above a street end park in La Conner.

Photo credit: Cathy Enns

Play at La Conner Waterfront Park

A downloaded copy of the current Art Walking Tour map in hand, we began at La Conner Waterfront Park under the iconic Rainbow Bridge. This is an ideal place to start out, especially if you have kids in tow. There are picnic spots and the art you'll find here is designed for climbing. There's a 13-foot salmon slide created by Tom Jay, the late Chimacum sculptor who also made one for Carkeek Park in Seattle. Three more climb-able sculptures cast in concrete—a tug boat, a canoe and a wheel—are meant to unite the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community with local residents engaged in channel commerce.



Kids at play on the salmon slide at Conner Waterfront Park in La Conner. Photo courtesy: La Conner Weekly News.

Up the 2nd Street Hill

We headed north back into town and up 2nd Street. “La Connor invites local artists to display one of their works for a minimum of two years,” says John. This way, the pieces can be appreciated and perhaps purchased. Sometimes the town purchases a piece, sometimes a private party buys one and occasionally a community member will purchase a work and donate it to the town’s collection.

At the top of the Benton Street stairs, we find Conical Consonance 3, a piece created in steel by Richard Nash. Just down a block at Second Street and Washington Avenue is another steel work, Continuity II by Jan Hoy. Both are owned by the town. “There are a few examples of artwork in ‘Corten Steel,’ ” John points out. This is a type of alloy that, “takes on a rusty, weathered look quickly but retains its integrity,” he adds.



Christine Pearson shows a fused glass piece by Max Benjamin and Steve Klein at the Museum of Northwest Art in La Conner. Photo credit: Cathy Enns

Stop by MoNA

Making our way to 1st Street, we stop in at the Museum of Northwest Art, where Christine Pearson shows us around. The museum is dedicated to the works of the Northwest School, a style of modern art pursued by four leading artists and their followers in the middle of the last century in the Seattle area and here in Skagit County. These modernists were influenced by flavors of the Pacific Northwest from Native American and Asian culture as well as by the natural world.

One of the “big four” of the Northwest School, the late Guy Anderson, was acquainted with La Conner’s mayor, Ramon Hayes. Today Ramon makes it a point to prioritize art as one attribute that makes his town unique. “You can’t overstate the value public art brings to our town,” he says. “Art has always been part of the fabric of La Conner.”

Stroll by the Water Down 1st Street

La Conner boasts several small street end parks on the water side of 1st Street. No opportunity to display art is missed. Pieces in these parks range from traditional to unique to truly quirky.

Walking south on 1st, we stop at a small stainless-steel bird perched on a rusty backhoe bucket. Surrounded by herbs and flowers, the piece by local artist Peregrine O'Gormley is called "Meek." Passing a large steel globe, we come to another rusty composition, a fanciful Fiddler Crab by artisan blacksmith Zacaraya Leck, donated to the town by Janna Gage.

One of the more unconventional installations is three large fish fixed above a street end park near the foot of 1st Street. You can see how mixed media artist Judith Heim's Flotsam got its name—the fish and its pal Jetsam perch above the patio along with Salmon Survival Suit by Dan Rothwell.

Say Hello to Dirty Biter

At last we come to a town favorite, the sculpture of Dirty Biter. Though he had a home, this dog with the misshapen jaw was an institution in town for years, wandering the streets during the daytime and hanging out at the La Conner Pub and Eatery, known by locals as "The Tavern," hoping for a snack. When he was killed many years ago in a dogfight, citizens named the street end park next to his favorite restaurant in his honor. Bill Matheson created a bronze sculpture to commemorate "Our Hero." If your dog is along for the art walk, this is a perfect photo op.

Turning left and making our way up Commercial Street, we pass a few pieces in very different mediums. There's a soaring stainless-steel sculpture on loan to the town called Braves Ferocity near a Braille Stone and a



A stainless steel bird perched on a backhoe bucket in a street end park in La Conner. The work is by Peregrine O'Gormley. Photo credit:

Cathy Enns



Dirty Biter has his own forever bench in the little park next to The Tavern, his favorite restaurant, in La Conner. Photo credit: John Leaver

colorful painted wooden Spirit Wheel. Continuing our trek up the hill, we pass two more metal works: The Apple Tree, tucked away in a sidewalk garden and the Eye of the Beholder at La Conner Town Hall.

There are several more sculptures on display we haven't mentioned—you can see most in an hour or make an afternoon of it and linger a bit longer. Better still, stay a few days and take in La Conner's many museums and galleries too.

Download your own Art Walking Tour map of La Conner public sculpture and set a date to go for a stroll.