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SUNDAY, JUNE 5, 2005



Scene and herd

Bennington rounds up moose and art talent for tourist sightings

BY AMY E. TUCKER
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES UNION

Razzle Dazzle

Dana Rudolph and Ronda Jeffer designed a beast adorned with jewels and shiny mosaic pieces.

A rain-teased holiday weekend drew curious onlookers to Bennington, Vt., to peer, admire, touch and have their photos taken beside the town's moose. It's true that moose sightings in this area are usually rare (the stately, curious creatures prefer more northern climes), but of late, the town has been overrun by a herd some 57 strong.

The recent surge in the moose population is not exactly a natural phenomenon, but rather the brainchild of the Bennington Chamber of Commerce, using animal sculptures as tourist attractions, following a trend that has brought cows to Chicago, buffalo to Buffalo (of course), sheep to Pittsfield, Mass., and thoroughbreds to Saratoga Springs.

It seems all Vermont is capitalizing on such ventures this summer. The Brandon, Vt.-based Brandon Artists Guild (in

Bennington, Vt.

central Vermont) is on its third annual outdoor sculpture fete. Previous years brought decorated pigs, which inspired Bennington's Moosefest, and birdhouses to downtown. This year, 31 hand-built and painted Adirondack rocking chairs are featured for "Brandon Rocks." And Manchester's shopping district is showcasing some 21 painted ponies this summer.

But it's the hulking fiberglass moose sculptures — bodies adorned with beads, mirrors, twigs and photographs, or painted with scenes of sprawling farmyards, covered bridges and the pine-topped mountainsides — that characterize the Vermont landscape and entice crowds to Bennington.

Marty Gardner of Malta stumbled upon the moose by accident while out for a Sunday drive with his 6-year-old daughter, Francesca. "We've typically gone through Bennington and Manchester in the past,"

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Salvador Dali

Tony Conner, a representational landscape painter, brought a surrealist bent to his mooseterpiece.



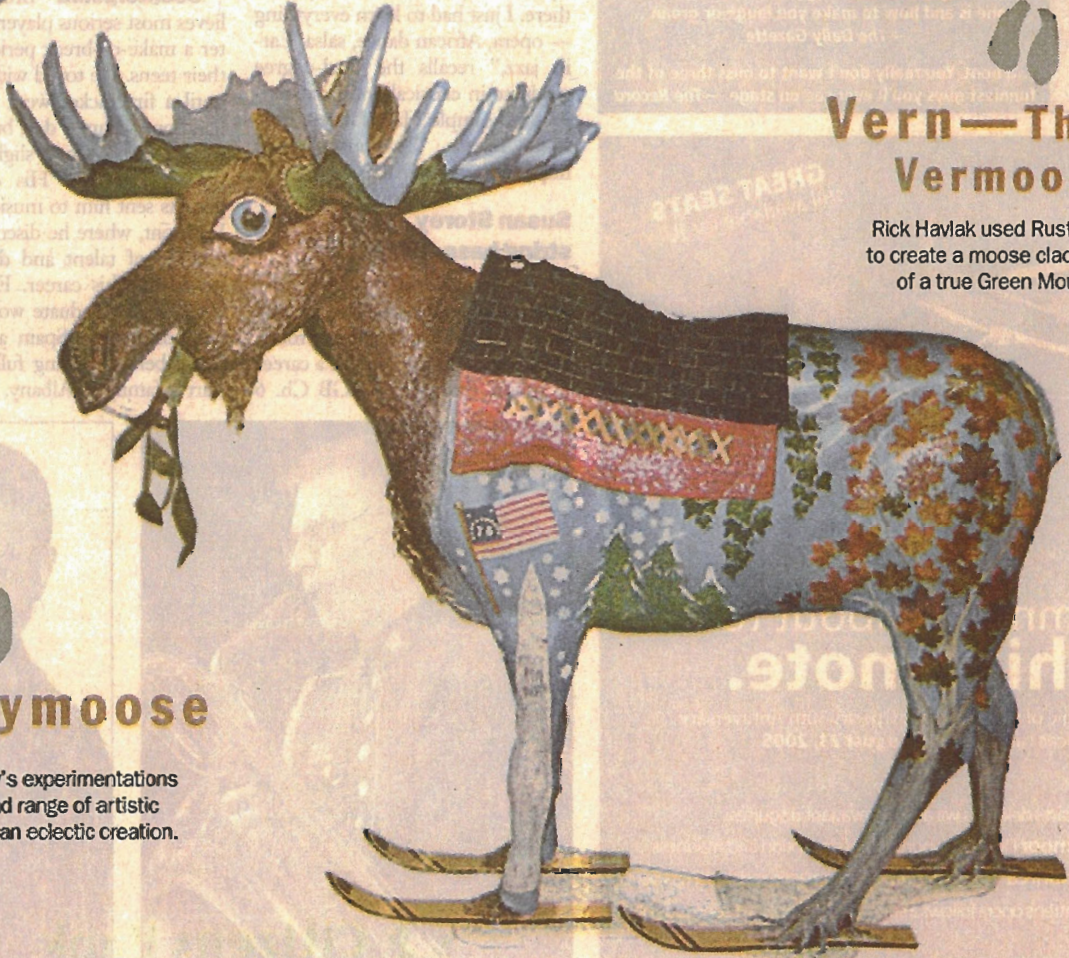
Vern—The Real Vermooster

Rick Havlak used Rust-o-leum paints to create a moose clad in the manner of a true Green Mountain man.



Anonymoose

Lucy McNulty's experimentations with a broad range of artistic media led to an eclectic creation.



HERD: Artsy moose draw tourists to Bennington

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Gardner said, "because we enjoy the shops. But we didn't know about Moosefest. When we got to town and saw some of the moose, Frankie got excited and wanted to see more."

"I liked Razzle Dazzle the best," she said. "It was pretty with all the sparkles and beads."

Regional artists

It turns out the moose named Razzle Dazzle is the creation of Capital Region-based artists Dana Rudolph and Ronda Jeffer. It's a mosaic, created with acrylic beads and broken mirrors arranged in swirling patterns, mapped over the body of the moose.

The pair, who often collaborate on projects, had never worked in the medium before. Jeffer typically specializes in 4-inch drawings. Rudolph — perhaps best known as a jewelry designer and owner of the bead and gift shop, Dana Rudolph and Company in Troy — is also a sculptor and installation artist, and therefore is used to manipulating 3-D objects and space. Still, the mosaic moose presented its share of challenges: "It took about seven or

MOOSE FUN

■ **What:** Bennington Moosefest 2005

■ **Where:** Bennington, Vt.

■ **When:** Events run through October

■ **Info:** Bennington Area Chamber of Commerce, (800) 229-0252, Ext. 16, or visit <http://www.benningtonmoosefest.com>

■ **Also,** Saturday, Oct. 29, the Moosefest Grand Gala & Auction will be held to auction off the Moosefest sculptures. Proceeds will benefit local children's arts and history education programs, participating artists and future Bennington promotions.

eight days of beading and one 14-hour day of grouting," said Jeffer. "It was an intensive process."

"We were originally going to place random jewels all over the moose," Rudolph explained. "I started looking at a book of work from Spanish architect Antoni Gaudi a few days before we started the moose. He did a lot of incredi-

ble, organic looking mosaics in his architecture in Barcelona. I had also been in touch with a local mosaic artist, Carol Albright, and she recommended we do a pattern and not place jewels randomly or haphazardly on the moose.

"We tried the patterning, and it worked a lot better," continued Rudolph. "Right away, we started drawing some swirl shapes on the moose and experimented with the idea of using different values of light and dark colors, and warm and cool colors throughout the mosaic. We would place a mirror, which is a light value, next to a dark value to help pop out the patterns. So you'll see swirls and patterns of light and dark, and that's a direct result of our art school training."

When Harwood Hill Motel owners Chet Chapin and Mike Dougall saw the proposed sketch for Razzle Dazzle, they fell immediately in love with the idea; they underwrote the initial cost for the moose. Now it's on their property. "It's been a blast," said Chapin. "Already this morning we've had at least 40 to 50 people stop by. Parents bring the kids, and you have people taking pictures of it constantly."

Defraying the cost

Given the exposure and foot traffic one of the beasts may bring with it, it's understandable that business owners throughout town signed on to sponsor the fibercast creatures. Many of Bennington's moose were sponsored by multiple vendors to help defray the \$1,500 cost — \$500 of which went to the artist(s) as a stipend, with the remainder paying for the purchase of the moose figures and Chamber of Commerce expenses.

A slew of events running through October come under the rubric of Moosefest, including artists' fairs and scavenger hunts, a croquet tournament and a moose maze (scheduled for the fall). The event concludes with a gala auction on Saturday, Oct. 29, at which the moose sculptures will be sold to the highest bidders. Proceeds from the auction benefit area children's arts and history programs, participating artists and future Bennington promotions.

Not everyone arrived in Bennington by chance. The Dills of Manchester, N.H., came with an agenda. "I'm originally from Buffalo, New York," explained Jane Dill. "I had seen the buffalo there a few years ago. So we are out



RONDA JEFFERSPECIAL TO THE TIMES UNION

ARTIST DANA RUDOLPH, at her studio in Troy, painstakingly pieced together the components of the mosaic moose decorations she created with Ronda Jeffer.

hunting moose this morning, then, we're headed up to Manchester next to see the horses."

"We've seen all but five of the moose at this point," she said proudly. "We have the map and have taken three or four rolls of film already."

'Real' art

Over the years, there's been debate in certain circles about whether such exhibits are "real" art. The people who come to Bennington don't seem to be concerned with such matters. What's clear is that there's something here that has

captured their imaginations, made them curious and, just maybe, caused them to think about something in a different light.

"A lot of people are pooh-poohing these animal projects," Rudolph said. "I used to have mixed feelings about them, because I'm an artist and I teach fine arts. But having worked on one, I can honestly say it's just too much fun. I believe, still, in my heart that art should be fun at some level and it should be a wonderful experience."

► *Amy E. Tucker is a local freelance writer.*

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