



Work of Art

At Blackwood, two Pittsburgh art experts have created a paradise of their very own at Rainbow's End.

By **Melissa Rayworth**
Photos by Laura Petrilla

Left: Looking east from the top of the clock tower at Blackwood, visitors can see a paved pathway winding through the trees to the main house.

Ask partners Don Fink and Ben Robertson why they're adding yet another building to their sprawling property and Robertson smiles. "We just wanted to do another project," he says, gesturing across the estate, Blackwood, toward a small house-in-progress. The "projects" they've completed so far - the grand

main house, the stunning four-story clock tower, the picturesque pool house, the serene reservoir and springhouse - look like the work of skilled architects and craftsmen.

But Fink and Robertson have actually built each of these gorgeous structures themselves with no architectural training, from collaboration by the two and sketches by Robertson on graph paper. They don't refer to any plans as they build, says Robertson: "Don keeps all the plans in his head and we just start building."



They bought a portion of the 35-acre property - a scenic expanse of slender trees, grassy hills and natural springs in northern Butler County - in the late 1960s and more in the early '90s. By day they ran Blackwood Gallery, a popular art gallery and framing shop on Babcock Boulevard in Ross Township. On evenings and weekends, they would design and build. They started small, with a simple building to live in while the larger construction was under way. By 1976, they'd built the main three-bedroom brick and cedar house with a cathedral ceiling in the living room and skylights along the sloping roof.

The house feels both grand and informal, and that's a trait their other buildings share. The dimensions of the living room and dining room aren't huge; they're proportioned perfectly for a family of two. But these rooms are filled with more treasures than you'd expect in a space twice the size, including three Rembrandt etchings, lithographs and drawings by Francisco Zuniga and a bronze statue by Richard MacDonald. During their years as art dealers, the collection at home would change periodically. Today it is a stunning mix of traditional and contemporary art.

Left: This four-story clock tower serves as a two-bedroom guest house for visitors to the estate. The enormous Seth Thomas clock was originally constructed in 1907.

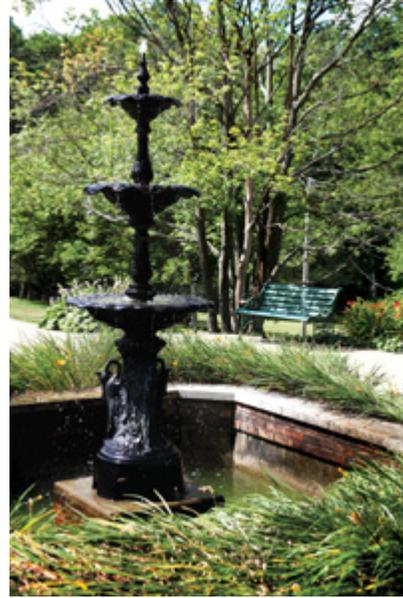
Each room reveals unexpected surprises. The dining room has plaster crown molding with gilded edges, which Robertson gilded by hand. An upstairs bath has built-in storage that uses the space behind the walls that most contractors would leave empty. In the kitchen, a tiny fireplace is nestled high on one wall. "We thought it would be great to have a bit of extra warmth," Robertson says.

Below: At the center of Blackwood, the main house is surrounded by a pool, pool house, gazebo and garage. To the left, a path leads toward the springhouse and reservoir and the stunning, four-story brick clock tower, which are just out of view. Photo by American Images, Marshfield, WI



Below left: Ben Robertson climbs a bridge over the natural spring and reservoir that provide water to his 35-acre property.

Below right: This fountain and benches near the entrance to the main house add to the park-like feel of Blackwood.



In 1981, a new phase of construction was inspired when they bought a spectacular Wurlitzer pipe theater organ. Originally the organ was housed in their barn, and that became the site of their first fundraising concerts. The couple began inviting well-known organists from around the world to play, and hundreds of visitors flocked to hear the music. Fink soon began designing an addition to the main house - a large music room, which includes a homemade elevator hidden beneath the parquet floor.

At the press of a button, the floor opens up and the glittering theater organ rises out of the floor as if by magic. The room can seat 100 and is packed during concerts, which they've now been hosting for 19 years. The most recent concert, a benefit for the Make-a-Wish Foundation in July, raised more than \$19,000. Along with hosting these fundraising concerts, the couple also offer music scholarships for high school students. Auditions are held each year at Heinz Hall, and members of the Pittsburgh Symphony assist with judging.

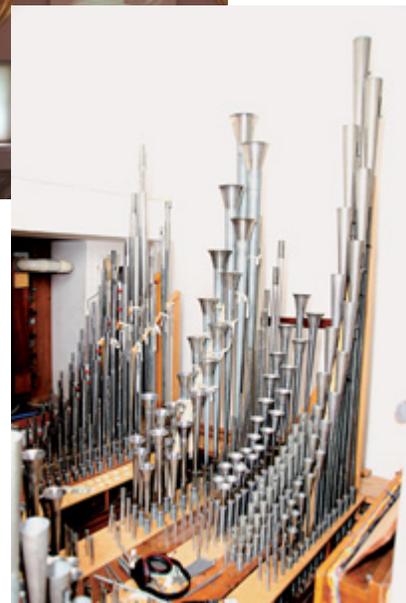
Below: In the music room, this stunning Wurlitzer theater organ rises out of the floor on an elevator designed and constructed by Don Fink. It has been played by some of the country's finest organists.



Right: The organ's elaborate system of pipes is located in a loft above the music room in the main house.

More music was added to their property when they acquired a carillon from Slippery Rock University and also purchased, around the same time, a restored 1907 Seth Thomas tower clock. These items needed a home, so Fink designed a clock tower, which

Featured in **Pittsburgh Magazine**, September 2009



includes two guest bedrooms and a full kitchen. On a clear day, they estimate that music from the carillon can be heard for a 2-mile radius. Each hour, as the clock strikes, soft music fills the air along the winding, tree-lined paths of the estate.

With all of this sophisticated equipment to maintain, they began working with Jason Wiles, an audio specialist. He became the in-house expert on the carillon and theater organ, and quickly learned to install and maintain the enormous vintage clock. Wiles also works on various design and construction projects around the property. Fink and Robertson are nearing completion on a lovely brick house on one end of their property for Wiles and his wife, who were married last year in the music room.



Above: In the clock tower's fourth-floor bedroom, guests are treated to a stunning view of the vintage clock.

Projects at Blackwood are a team effort. Fink is quick to point out that friends and family have always pitched in and still do. An 80-year-old friend, Bob Emery, drives from Penn Hills most Mondays to help with mechanical issues, and Wiles' parents often lend a hand as well.

A spirit of cooperation and generosity infuses the entire estate. It feels a bit like a collage that's always developing. "All of this," says Wiles, glancing around during a walk through the gardens, "they built not to hoard, but to share."

Fink, 73, and Robertson, 67, retired from the gallery business last year, but their schedule of construction projects and fundraising events can hardly be called "retirement." Their energy and optimism are palpable. During a recent stroll through the garden, Fink mentioned that they've planted several giant sequoia trees. "In 5,000 years," he says with a twinkle in his eye, "we'll take a look at it again. See how it's growing."

Right: A gazebo and greenhouse are located in the gardens just behind the main house. Robertson and Don Fink do their own gardening.

Fun Facts about Blackwood:

Featured in **Pittsburgh Magazine**, September 2009



- The roof of the clock tower weighs 8,000 pounds. It was constructed on the ground and lifted into place by a crane.
- The elaborate elevator and sound system for the theater organ includes a smoke machine. But it's rarely used, because it tends to set off the smoke detectors in the house!
- The clock tower is named Rainbow's End. They chose the name because Robertson's mother, who passed away recently, always thought of the estate as a wonderland found over the rainbow.
- The music room, including the unique homemade design of the elevator and the storage areas for the organ pipes, took five years to complete.

Scholarship for Gifted Musicians

Know a high school student who is a gifted musician-in-the-making? If so, check out blackwoodmusic.org for details about the scholarships that Robertson and Fink award each year. These scholarships offer between \$3,000 and \$5,000 to students planning to pursue a career in instrumental performance. Applicants are chosen based on several factors, including a personal essay and their performance in an audition that is held each year at Heinz Hall.



Left: A close-up of the intricate mechanism at the center of the clock face. Right: Behind the main house, a storybook pool house is nestled beside the swimming pool. Scalloped trim, window boxes, crown molding and, of course, gorgeous art add to the charm.

Melissa Rayworth writes about American culture, sexual politics, home design and parenting for a variety of national news outlets, including The Associated Press and Babble.com. Her work regularly appears in publications and on Websites across the globe, including The Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times and CNN.com. She also covers Pittsburgh's philanthropy and nonprofit community for Pop City Media. A Long Island native, she now lives in Hampton Township with her husband and two sons.