



Wurlitzer theater organ
Photo by Taylor Sherman



Discover the Awe-Inspiring **Blackwood Arts**

By Taylor Sherman

Blackwood Arts has been an ever-evolving immersive experience in art, music and nature since the 1970s, when Ben Robertson and Don Fink purchased the old farmland in Harrisville and began turning their visions into a reality.

The 501(c)(3) non-profit organization serves to promote the appreciation and development of the performing and visual arts through the private residence of Ben and Don. Two creative individuals in their own right, their passion for the arts has fueled them to create a magical experience by hand.

“Everything on this property we built,” Ben said.

“That’s what I feel is so amazing. This is 50 years in the making.”

Originally called Blackwood Theater Organ Society, the Blackwood Arts experience on the partners' estate began as a project for Ben Robertson and Don Fink. Purveyors of art, Ben and Don owned an art gallery and framing shop in the North Hills of Pittsburgh called Blackwood Gallery, which specialized in international art. For 35 years, the duo commuted 100 miles per day between the two — paving the way for art and music in the region in a manner different from most. In 2008, Blackwood Gallery closed and the two placed sole dedication to the estate.

All aspects of the estate can be considered particularly impressive, especially due to the partners' complete creation of each component. Neither of an architectural background, Ben and Don use their creative minds to design. The 30-plus-acre estate houses their own creations — from an arched bridge made of curved oak railing leading to the spring house and entertainment area; to the greenhouse and butterfly garden dedicated to Ben's sister, Betty; an underground water treatment system with 25,000 gallons of water to supply to the estate — Ben and Don have truly considered every detail.

Masterfully minded, additional awe-inspiring projects include the four-story clock tower that was made for a restored 1907 Seth Thomas tower clock that Ben found at an auction. "The face is 6-feet in diameter, so we used graph paper to design the proportions to fit. There are four stories and 9-foot ceilings on each floor," Ben said. The tower, in addition to its beautiful clock face and carillon that chimes every hour, serves as a single-person apartment.

Past the spring house and clock tower is the music room, which houses the most spectacular speculation — a Wurlitzer theater pipe organ, most commonly used



1907 Seth Thomas Clock Tower on the Blackwood estate (Photo by Taylor Sherman)

for sound effects to accompany silent films in the 1900s. The organ has been played by world-renowned organists over the years. During Blackwood Arts' concert season, several charity concerts are performed and all funds raised are used for music scholarships for high school students, as well as the Make-A-

Wish Foundation. "Make-A-Wish is one that is particularly special to us," Ben said. "Every dollar goes to the foundation. We have donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to Make-A-Wish and students in the region north of Allegheny."

Using their magnificent music concerts as a tool to inspire and educate music enthusiasts and musicians alike, Ben and the team at Blackwood Arts are grateful to

have the opportunity to give back. "We are very successful in that we realize that music education is expensive, so raising money allows students to continue music studies," Ben said.

Jason Wiles, vice president of Blackwood Arts and responsible for organ and electronic care on the estate, agreed. "Especially during the Make-A-Wish concerts, we watch and listen as organists play. Sometimes when they play hymn arrangements, I've seen people with tears in their eyes because they are so moved by the experience," he said.

An added element to the beauty of music alone, the music room is also full of visual stimulation. The organ is set beneath the floor and raised by a lift. An eight-foot square of the floor retracts and the console opens. Parachute silk capes painted by a local artist decorate the rear



Ben Robertson



Don Fink

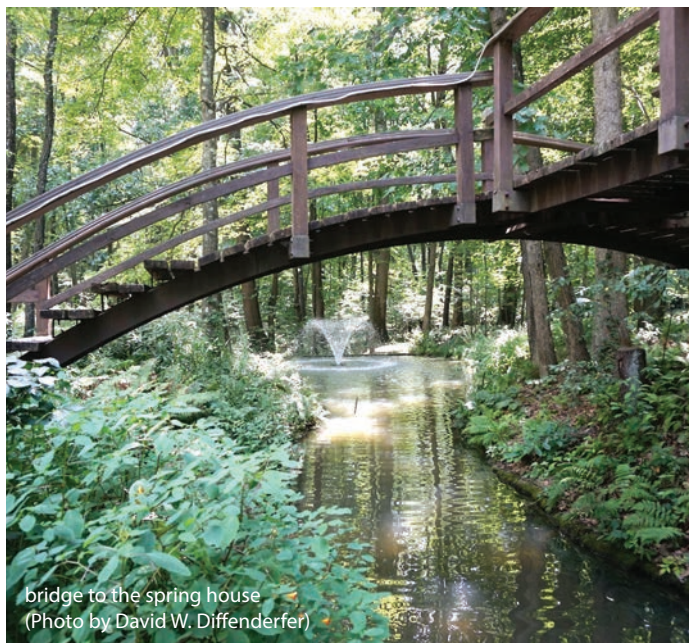
Photography by Audrey Pollock



Richard Hills performs at Blackwood Arts
(Photo by David W. Diffenderfer)



Ceramic Kemyffy Raku
in the music room
(Photo by David W. Diffenderfer)



bridge to the spring house
(Photo by David W. Diffenderfer)



entry to Betty's Butterfly Garden
(Photo by Taylor Sherman)



Clockwise from top: *Mujer Reclinada* by Francisco Zúñiga; limited edition bronze of *Nureyev* by Richard MacDonald; *The Raising of Lazarus* etching by Rembrandt; *Horse and Butterfly in the sapphire* Japanese woodblock by Tadashi Nakayama (Photography by David W. Diffenderfer)



wall and open as the organ emerges from the lower deck. A projection screen drops from the front of the room and the audience is treated to an up-close view of the hands playing keys and the feet pressing the foot pedals in real-time. Together, it's a pleasant moment of overstimulation — a room full of sheer talent, beautiful music and a set time to embrace it all.

It is easy to get lost in the music room, but there is even more to explore on the grounds. A post-concert refreshment room features a Wurlitzer military band organ that plays tunes reminiscent of a county fair or a traditional carousel ride. Professional photos of the property, shot by David W. Diffenderfer of Grove City, decorate the walls.

Then, a path through the gardens leads to the grand home. Just as cozy as it is contemporary, Don and Ben's art collection showcases the visual arts even further. "We have a very nice collection of contemporary Japanese art — mezzotints, serigraphs, original paintings and woodblock prints. You can also see works by Latin American artists Francisco Zúñiga and Rufino Tamayo. We have a very eclectic collection, so you can also see original etchings by Rembrandt and antique English watercolors — and a beautiful limited edition bronze of Nureyev by acclaimed American artist Richard MacDonald," Ben shared.

In addition to work by world-renowned artists, Ben and Don feature regional talents, as well, including watercolor paintings by Pittsburgh-based artist and illustrator William Vrscak, who is a signature member of the American Watercolor Society.

Between upkeeping the grounds for garden tours (The Blackwood Gardens and grounds are registered with Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Gardens (AAG) and the Garden Club of America Collection), hosting charitable concerts and youth music outreach, Blackwood Arts is constantly evolving within the realm of art.

"What you will see and hear at Blackwood can only be experienced here," Ben said. ▾

Information: 724.735.2813, blackwoodarts.org or find @blackwoodartsorg on Facebook and Instagram