



Fine Arts

**NANCY GREGG SIPPEL '44  
STANDS NEXT TO A BUST  
OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER  
KING, JR. SHE WAS COM-  
MISSIONED TO CREATE.**

# PHENOMS

BY CLENNON L. KING '78

IT'S NOT ALWAYS EASY TO KNOW where to find the works of Putney's accomplished visual artists. Sometimes, they're in museums. Sometimes, they're in private collections. And sometimes, they're found where you least expect them. Take the case of Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti.

When their top brass commissioned a bronze bust of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the late 1980s, they didn't host an international competition. Instead, they asked graduate art students to compete for the job. In the end, the selection committee unanimously settled on the work of a 64-year-old Putneyite named Nancy Gregg Sippel '44, whose work is now permanently enshrined in a plaza in the heart of campus.

"Putney gave me wonderful permission to follow my own curiosities with support and encouragement," said Sippel, who continues at age 80 to produce stunning landscape illustrations reminiscent of Putney. "Putney opened my eyes to the woods and fields and the colors, and that certainly influenced me as an artist."

Sippel is one of many Putney graduates who have chosen a professional career as a visual artist. Like her, many didn't see it coming. Critically acclaimed photographer Sally Mann '69 certainly didn't. She says she grew up around art but that her transformation into a photographer first came courtesy of time spent with a boyfriend in the Reynolds Building darkroom.

It was there she learned to develop film. Excited by film's possibilities, and inspired by photographer Wynn Bullock's image of the child lying in the forest which she had seen in the book *The Family of Man*, she borrowed her father's Leica camera and asked two schoolmates to pose nude in a nearby pine forest. The resulting image aroused some concern among the faculty, and taught the budding artist that photography can be a dangerous medium. So, did Putney influence her vision and work? "No doubt," says the Lexington, Virginia native, who pointed to an English teacher at Putney who had a great influence. "Oddly, it wasn't a photography teacher who influenced me as a visual artist; it was Jeffrey Campbell, who brought Southern literature alive for me. My artistic influences have always been as much literary as visual, thanks to him."

Mann isn't the only visual artist with Virginia ties to reach prominence in the art world. Roughly a decade before she arrived on West Hill, a precocious 19-year-old Putney grad was on his death bed down in Virginia. Artist-printer Charles Knowles '57 came to Putney with a rare kidney disease that took his life less than a year after he graduated. During Knowles' three years at Putney, he created, designed and printed a stunning series of drawings and block prints based on the biblical book of Psalms.

What became his senior project ultimately won the attention of a Harvard Library curator and *Saturday Review* editor and resulted in Viking Press publishing *The Psalm Book* of Charles Knowles. His affection for the arts "found full expression at Putney," Knowles' mother would later write. Moreover, Knowles spelled out just how intoxicating Putney's arts culture was in a 10th grade essay he called "The Type of Person That I Want To Be." "I've always loved art, music," he wrote. "I love the Friday night singing, and the Sunday night meetings for that wonderful tingling feeling in my spine that I always get when good music is played." Music was at the heart of Knowles' "Putney Experience."

For professional painter, sculptor, and glassblower John Hughes '84, a current adjunct faculty member, his transformation was different. The catalyst for this Harlem native had less to do with singing Mozart in the assembly hall on wooden benches in the dead of winter, and more to do with building his own cabin in a pine forest in the heart of summer. "Building a cabin really taught me that I was a sculptor," said Hughes of the cabin which stands within a stone's throw of the old amphitheater behind the library. "Putney provided soil to thrive on and do my own thing."

Many say Putney is "a magnet" not only for those who dream of becoming accomplished visual artists, but also for those who come from arts world royalty. It's one reason some point to old masters and collectors whose children, grandchildren and great grandchildren have found their way to Putney. Renowned art collectors Victor and Sally Ganz, who once held the largest private collection of Picassos in the world, sent two children to Putney, one of whom is NYC-based art dealer Kate Ganz Belin '62. Putney also schooled the heirs of painter Henri Matisse and pop artist Jim Dine. And, of course, there is Putney's long association with sculptor and mobilist Alexander Calder. Calder's eldest daughter Sandra Calder Davidson '53, a children's book author and illustrator, said while her father didn't send her to Putney because of its arts curriculum per se, he did make a surprise discovery once she arrived. Calder learned his old friend and fellow artist from his Paris days back in the '30s was now teaching art at Putney. Fernando Gerassi, a retired general of the Republican Army during the Spanish Civil War, would later spend Halloween night 1957 helping his old friend hang his 13-foot mobile in the KDU.



<above> A PAGE FROM *THE PSALM BOOK OF CHARLES KNOWLES* WHICH WAS PUBLISHED IN THE U.S. AND EUROPE WITHIN A YEAR OF THE 19-YEAR-OLD AUTHOR AND 1957 PUTNEY GRAD'S DEATH. <below> THE FAMOUS MOBILE THE LATE ALEXANDER CALDER DESIGNED AND HUNG IN THE KDU ONE HALLOWEEN NIGHT IN THE '50s NOW FINDS A NEW HOME IN THE CALDER AUDITORIUM.



And while Sandra was slow to give high marks to Putney's art department during her era, other things made up for it in her eyes. An engaging french class. Working on the Putney School farm. And a man named Norwood Hinkle, who took her love of classical music to another level and beyond. "He knew how to teach," said Sandra. "Everything he did was always tight-knit."

Does the school's arts heritage and focus distinguish it among its peers in the boarding school world? "You bet," says visual arts teacher Brian Cohen. Cohen pointed to a senior thesis regarding arts education written by a Dartmouth student who interned at Putney in the early 1990s. Contrasting two New England boarding schools, a survey found that only 2% of Phillips Andover parents were involved in the arts as contrasted with 50% of Putney parents. University of Pennsylvania photography professor Sandy Sorlien '72 shares those same instincts. "The kind of people who go to Putney are people who value the arts," she said. "It filters and attracts people with a spirit of independence, drive and love of the arts." Count Putney parent Marti Anderson P'08 as one example. While she is an amateur fabric and textile artist herself, it's no accident her daughter, Lyra Anderson '08, is fast becoming a master weaver at Putney. "I really trusted that Putney would let Lyra focus where she wanted to focus," Anderson said of her daughter, who by age 15 was doing commissioned work. "Lyra never was treated like a kid or novice or someone who wasn't capable." Putney extends that same degree of latitude to its teachers, says painting and drawing teacher Sue Brearey. "I knew Putney had a great tradition teaching the arts," said Brearey. "I knew it was a place where the arts were supported a thousand percent and we wouldn't have to fight that battle." Brearey organized the April 2004

Alumni Art Show to mark the opening of the Michael S. Currier Center, featuring the works of professional artists such as ceramicist Ragnar Naess '60 whose work is in the permanent collection at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. In Naess' eyes, Putney's legacy has less to do with mastering a craft, and more to do with mastering a defining life principle.

"*The doing* at Putney was key," Naess said. "You learned to do things and do them well, because they needed to be done, and because *you could*." That same 'can do' attitude marked two brothers, photographer Alex Webb '70 and painter Patrick Webb '73. "Putney's about embracing possibility thinking," said Alex, whose work has been shown in the Whitney Museum of Modern Art and featured in *National Geographic*. "It's one reason I built a darkroom in a store room in my dormitory. That's why I went to Putney." Patrick, who teaches at Pratt Institute, agrees. Putney "taught me about thinking and a way of looking at things, skills all artists need," he said. "It was helpful in developing my intellectual capacity."

Some say one needn't look far to discover why the arts have been paramount at Putney since Day One. They point to the school's mission statement penned by founder Carmelita Hinton herself circa 1935. In 33 words, she created what has become the bedrock of the school's arts focus. She wrote the Putney student is "To learn to appreciate and participate in the creative arts, where man gives expression to his struggle for communication of his inner life, and for beauty, and to grant these arts great prestige." Hinton's charge, coupled with Putney's integrated approach to educating the whole person, is the school's hallmark, says Denise Sackler Marika '73, a video installation artist known for integrating different mediums. "As an artist at Putney, you're taught everything is linked . . . and the world isn't about one track," said Marika. "So whether it is shoveling manure in the barn, or talking about politics in a classroom, my Putney experience taught me it's all interwoven." And under what conditions does the budding visual artist germinate at Putney? Hard to say, said historical documentary photographer David



<above> **SANDRA CALDER DAVIDSON '53 SHOWCASES HER CHILDREN'S BOOK TOM TURKEY AND LAIRD EAGLE. WHILE SHE STUDIED ART AT PUTNEY, IT WAS CLASSICAL MUSIC, FARM LIFE AND FRENCH THAT MADE HER TIME MORE MEMORABLE HERE.**  
 <below> **FAST BECOMING A MASTER WEAVER, LYRA ANDERSON '08 WORKS HER MAGIC ON A LOOM IN THE PUTNEY SCHOOL WEAVING STUDIO.**





◀left▶ **NANCY GREGG SIPPEL**  
**ISN'T JUST A SCULPTOR.**  
**SHE CONTINUES TO DRAW**  
**AND SELL LANDSCAPES AT**  
**AGE 80.** ◀below▶ **KATE GANZ**  
**BELIN '62 IS A FORMER**  
**TRUSTEE AND WELL-**  
**KNOWN NEW YORK**  
**GALLERY OWNER AND**  
**ART DEALER.**

Plowden '51. In his case, fingers point in three directions. He credits schoolmates John Yang '50, David Sapir '51, and the late Tim Asch '51 for teaching him the craft. Also worthy of “props” is his late history teacher, Tom Wendell, who spotted his passion for trains and recognized him as a “born historian.” And finally, Plowden points to a weekly indulgence. “I’d spend Saturday afternoons taking the train to Bellows Falls, and White River Junction and Rutland,” said Plowden, whose work is part of the permanent collection at both the Smithsonian and Library of Congress. “I knew all the engineers and station masters,” added Plowden, who ultimately gave up a promising career as a railroad executive to photograph full time.

And so to the question: “Where does one find the works of Putney’s top-tier visual artists?” “No telling,” says professional weaver Leslie Pfohl Quarrier '74 who studied under former Putney School weaving teacher Libby Mills. The New York designer for whom Quarrier works takes her hand-woven work and transforms them into throws and scarves for customers who include Barbra Streisand, Yoko Ono and Bill Gates. What’s more, Quarrier just delivered 80 yards of her signature hand-stitching that will serve as upholstery for a privately-owned 757 jet. How’s that for unpredictability?

TO LEARN TO  
 APPRECIATE AND  
 PARTICIPATE IN  
 THE CREATIVE ARTS,  
 WHERE MAN GIVES  
 EXPRESSION TO  
 HIS STRUGGLE FOR  
 COMMUNICATION  
 OF HIS INNER LIFE,  
 AND FOR BEAUTY,  
 AND TO GRANT  
 THESE ARTS GREAT  
 PRESTIGE.

—CARMELITA HINTON

