

# For All, By All: Sarasota's "Embracing Our Differences" Public Art Exhibit



For seventeen seasons, Sarasota's popular public art exhibit "Embracing Our Differences" has celebrated diversity and inclusion through the eyes of an equally diverse group of artists

*Jessi Smith*

As the seasons change in Sarasota County, so does the view that greets visitors at Bayfront Park. Enscorced in sunshine and bay breezes, Sarasota's annual "**Embracing Our Differences**" art exhibit offers a vibrant view of humanity, as expressed through the eyes of artists young and old from around the world.

2020 marks the exhibit's 17<sup>th</sup> season, brightening **Bayfront Park** from January 18 through April 5 with messages of love, diversity, and inclusion displayed on billboard-sized banners throughout the park. Entry and exhibit viewing is entirely free to the public.

## **International Roots**

When the Florida Holocaust Museum first approached the City of Sarasota to discuss bringing a one-time traveling art exhibit to town, few could anticipate the lasting impact it would have.

Originating in Jerusalem at Museum on the Seam, "**Coexistence**" traveled to numerous locales including Berlin, Zurich and South Africa before reaching Sarasota in March, 2004.

The community's embrace of "Coexistence" led to the formation of a board tasked with creating Sarasota's own juried exhibit featuring diversity-focused artwork from around the world. "Embracing Our Differences" debuted in 2005, sparking a Sarasota tradition that's grown brighter every year.

"Embracing Our Differences" invites students, amateur and professional artists to submit pieces. Executive director Sarah Wertheimer notes the incredible response to the exhibit, both locally and internationally, was evident in the numbers from the outset.

In year one, Wertheimer says the exhibition committee received 124 submissions to fill 39 banners — no small task to judge! In 2019, Wertheimer says, the "Embracing Our Differences" judging committee was tasked to whittle submissions down 45 winners from an outstanding 11,791 admissions — hailing from 111 countries, 44 U.S. states, and 239 schools.

"It's a difficult process, and we're lucky to have incredible and dedicated volunteers on our art and quotation selection committees," says Wertheimer.

## A Different Worldwide Perspective Every Year



**April 18, 2019**

Our Digital Design class had an excellent tour of Embracing Our Differences, where one of our student's art is featured, at the Ringling! #ManateeTechnicalCollege ...

As global politics and concerns shift with the times, Wertheimer notes common thematic threads tend to emerge with each year — a reflection of what matters most in the moment to the human family spanning the earth.

"It's always interesting to see what new themes emerge each year through the submissions we receive," Wertheimer says.

"This year we're seeing a lot of happiness," she continues. "We've seen a lot of submissions, from all around the world, focused on immigration. [In 2019] we're seeing a lot of pieces that are centered on love and pieces that celebrate food."

"It's always so fascinating to see what people are using to express themselves."

## Life Imitates Art: "Embracing Our Differences" is a Year-Round Effort in Sarasota County



**January 17, 2019**

01.17.19 The 2019 international art exhibit "Embracing Our Differences" runs Jan. 19 through March 15 in Bayfront Park, Sarasota. Coming in January, jaw-dropping ...

The "Embracing Our Differences" exhibit generally goes on display between the months of January and April. However, its influence on Sarasota County K-12 students is a year-round carousel of education and arts appreciation programs.

In one such program, students from four local high schools are trained by Ringling Museum docents before guiding K-8 students on field trips designed to spark critical thinking and compassionate discussions.

"Over the years, the 'Embracing Our Differences' board has focused a lot of time and energy on education programs related to the exhibit," says Wertheimer. "We've grown from 1,200 students involved in the first year to more than 39,000 students in 2018."

Additional educational programs include a monthly ambassador program for educators to create more inclusive schools, an "Embracing Dr. Seuss" reading day in elementary schools, and art therapy in the Sarasota County Schools Restorative Justice Program.

"The exhibit is our public face, but our education program is really at the heart of what we do. Our goal is to reach kids at a young age and really open up their minds and hearts; to teach them to always be kind and respectful to others," says Wertheimer.

Visit Bayfront Park January 18 through April 5 to experience the seventeenth season of "Embracing Our Differences" in 2020.