

virginia | gwen woolf

Artistic discoveries await visitors at Virginia's Belmont

Encountering the sign for Belmont, the Gari Melchers Home and Studio in Falmouth, Va., is intriguing for many passers-by.

"Most people don't know what to expect," said docent Trudy Hardcastle.

After a tour, though, "most people are completely blown away by his [Melchers'] artwork," she said. Their next reaction is: "Why haven't we heard of him?"

You'll get a chance on the afternoon of Sunday, April 28, dur-

ing the annual free spring open house. You'll hear the engaging story of Melchers, an internationally known American artist in his time (1860-1932). He painted the likes of Rockefeller, Vanderbilt and Mellon; important murals (such as "Peace and War" in the Library of Congress); and everyday people and places.

It's also a romantic story about the 29-year marriage of Melchers and his Baltimore-born wife Corinne, whom he met on a cruise

to Europe and wed when he was 43 while she was a 23-year-old art student.

Corinne's devotion to her husband's memory made access to Belmont possible for future generations when she donated Belmont to the Commonwealth of Virginia upon her death in 1955. It's now administered by the University of Mary Washington. The 27-acre estate at 224 Washington St., Falmouth, is 50 miles south of Washington, D.C.

Going back in time

Visiting Belmont is a fun outing for the whole family. Explore the 18th-century home and outbuildings; the handsome stone artist studio; the special-event Pavilion; the expansive lawn and garden (Insider tip: Look for dinosaur footprints in the stone pathway and the "ivy tree"); the summerhouse overlooking the Rappahannock River; and the nature trails.

"It's one of the most complete artist residences and studios in the U.S.," said Scott Harris, who over-



Belmont

Gari Melchers' art studio is among the sights at Belmont's spring open house on April 28 in Falmouth, Va.



Belmont

A Beeping Egg Hunt on April 14 at Belmont in Falmouth, Va., features audible eggs and sensory activities and crafts for visually impaired and blind children and their families.

Winner!
2018 Hotel of the Year
Virginia Restaurant, Lodging & Travel Assoc.

MOUNTAIN LAKE LODGE

Slide into Summer Package!
Stay 2 nights,
get the 3rd night
FREE!

Mountain Lake Lodge
115 Hotel Circle, Pembroke VA 24136
540-626-7121 www.mtnlakelodge.com



Belmont

A spring open house will be held April 28 at Belmont, the Gari Melchers Home and Studio in Falmouth, Va.

sees Belmont and the James Monroe Museum in Fredericksburg, Va.

Harris finds it noteworthy that Melchers, a Detroit, Mich., native who lived in Holland for years and traveled extensively, became a Virginian by choice, making the small village of Falmouth his sanctuary.

"It says something about the allure of this area," he said.

Although Belmont is open year-round, it should be especially fetching in the spring, with daffodils, tulips and hyacinths in bloom.

Enter the property through the museum shop that also serves as the Stafford County Visitor Center. There is information on area attractions, hotels and restaurants, as well as art books, prints, and gifts.

After a 15-minute introductory film, tour the 16-room Georgian-style home, a National Historic Landmark, which remains almost exactly as Corinne left it. The stately manor, purchased by the couple in 1916, is unpretentious inside. The rooms are furnished with an eclectic mix of antiques and decorative items they collected.

Though Melchers didn't allow his own art to hang in the house during his lifetime, several of his works and those of other artists are now on display.

Cows, chickens and turkeys once roamed the country retreat, the Melcherses enjoyed entertaining (guests included Calvin Coolidge) and were plugged into community life.

"People loved them," said Hardcastle about the couple. "They were the kind of people you'd like to have as neighbors."

Viewing the art

A highlight of the Belmont experience is Melchers' art studio, flooded with natural light from a large window. The studio and three galleries showcase some of his 1,600 paintings and drawings — the largest collection anywhere of his art.

Two of his themes were Dutch peasant life and (still-recognizable) scenes of Falmouth and its residents. One painting shows his estate's caretaker getting a shave from the local barber. Domestic life, often with Corinne as a model, also captured his attention.

Although childless, Melchers revered motherhood.

"A mother with a baby in her arms is lovelier than all else," he said.



Belmont

A gallery at Belmont displays some of Gari Melchers' paintings. The artist's studio and 18th-century home in Falmouth, Va., will be available for tours at the spring open house on April 28.

An American impressionist, Melchers is known for his portraits, murals and landscapes. His traditional form of art fell out of fashion as more avant-garde styles came along, though it still holds a timeless appeal.

Melchers also was an arts advocate, helping establish what is now the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Corinne was a founder of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

Other events on tap

The open house also includes a tour of the Fannie Roots House, an 1880s workman's cottage that is under restoration.

There also will be a Preschool Palette class for ages 2 to 5. This educational program, which includes art projects, age-appropriate studio tours and exploratory garden walks, is also available

three times a month by registration.

Echoing Corinne's well-known Easter Egg hunts of the past, a free Beeping Egg Hunt for visually impaired and blind children and their families will be held on April 14. The reservation-only event includes a miniature animal petting zoo, sensory crafts and activities, and refreshments.

Another upcoming event, "Art After Hours," on May 23, features music by Cabin Creek, a modern folk and old-time string band, food trucks, beer, wine and studio tours.

Behind a plaque on the exterior studio wall rest the ashes of Gari and Corinne Melchers, their spirits still keeping watch over their beloved Belmont.

For more information:

garimelchers.org

\$1 ADMISSION
Newport News, VA

