

Chapter 2



Sedona Arts Center. Photo by Bob Bradshaw.

Courtesy of Sedona Heritage Museum, Sedona, AZ.

NASSAN ABISKHAIROUN GOBRAN

AND THE SEDONA ARTS CENTER

Nassan Abiskhairoun's first trip to red-rock country, about 1950, set off an explosion of delights. He was extremely excited by the monoliths, mountains, creeks, and red dirt. He noticed everything—a mixture of desert and mountain plants as well as the array of rabbits, mule deer, javelinas, bobcats, lizards, and moose. He heard tales of mountain lions and bears. His heart leapt. He knew what he must do and started a search for the perfect spot—with the help of the citizenry. But first he had to grab their attention.

Nassan was in Cecil Lockhart-Smith's Sedona jewelry store one day in 1958 when he overheard several chamber of commerce members talking in the next room. Someone was saying, "We need something different in Sedona, something new and exciting."

The tall, slim Egyptian art teacher from the Verde Valley School bounded into the room: "I have what Sedona needs. I have the most important industry for Sedona. And that's art! We should start an arts center here!" He elaborated energetically on the subject of galleries, classes, theater, exhibits, concerts, and even ballet.

He was invited to present his ideas at the chamber of commerce meeting that very evening. "So I went and really expressed myself about how Sedona could be put on the map through art—to have an arts center, to have theater, to have a great cultural center right here among these red rocks. I talked to them with all my heart, and then I left."⁶

⁶ Courtesy of Sedona Heritage Museum, Sedona, AZ.

The next day F. L. “Bud” Hummel called and said, “Nassan, I think I have what you want.” He was the owner of seventy-two acres that had once been homesteaded by Frank Owenby and later became George Jordan’s orchard. It had a stone home, garage and two-story apple-packing barn that Jordan built in the 1930s. Hummel and Gobran checked out the property, visualizing the classes, exhibits and programs that might one day become a reality. The building had been used for apple packing but was simply sitting there waiting—waiting for Nassan Abiskhairoun to arrive and completely change its destiny. And that he did. He created such a stir in the community that artists, art lovers, organizers, and anyone willing to work came together as a strong, determined team.

Volunteerism began at a rate the inhabitants had never seen before. The board of directors and members cleaned up the barn and grounds, hung exhibits, sold tickets and memberships, made posters, wrote newspaper articles, and did everything in sight to make this undertaking work. Contractor John Joynt supervised the construction work. His perky wife, Isabel, was active in fund-raising. The Sedona Arts Center’s enthusiastic Barnstormers sold souvenir cookbooks to raise money. Al Nestler, an artist of note, temporarily became a janitor before he became an art instructor. There was a lot of cleaning up to do.

Besides Gobran and Lockhart-Smith, the founding group consisted of George Babbitt, uncle of former governor Bruce Babbitt; Sedona writers Douglas and Elizabeth Rigby; Tony and Marguerite Staude, builders of the Chapel of the Holy Cross; Helen Varner Frye, a landowner and artist; Eugenia Wright, a teacher at the Verde Valley School; attorney Willis Leenhouts; attorney William Stevenson; and Hamilton and Barbara Warren, owners of the Verde Valley School.

By April 1961 they were ready for a grand opening, exhibiting works by surrealist Max Ernst and his artist wife, Dorothy Tanning, who were part-time residents. Eugene Lombardi and the forty-five-piece Arizona State University orchestra happened to be in town, so they provided the music. The place was packed with 250 people inside the barn and approximately fifty more outside. SAC started fund-raising and collected \$10,000 to start the mortgage. Less than eight years later, they were literally burning it. Photographers were there to capture the image of Nassan putting a match to the document. It was a celebratory few minutes that brought joy to hundreds of cheering people.



Nassan Gobran burning the mortgage. Courtesy of Sedona Heritage Museum, Sedona, AZ.

Who would have thought that a dynamic, talented, well-educated Egyptian sculptor would arrive in Sedona to turn the town into a vibrant artistic community?

It all started during World War II when Nassan Abiskhairoun met many Americans—military personnel, members of the American embassy staff, and missionaries—who visited his studio in Cairo. Impressed by his obvious talent, visitors told him that he should come to America. He was ready for it. He had earned a bachelor of fine arts degree and a master of fine arts degree at Cairo University and the Royal Academy of Art, Cairo University. He headed the design and sculpture departments at the Fine Arts School in Cairo. He had received many awards and honors.

In 1946 he received a scholarship to attend the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts. As usual, he excelled, graduating three years later. He spent his first summer in the United States at the Berkshire Festival and Music Center at Tanglewood, Massachusetts. He met Gretchen Warren, the mother of the founder of the Verde Valley School, Hamilton Warren, who asked Nassan to head up their art department. He delightedly accepted and taught at the school until 1969.

He became a US citizen in 1958, the same year that the Sedona Arts Center was born. In an Egyptian accent, he expressed his exuberant feelings: “From the moment I arrived here, I was overwhelmed by the magnificent scenery and came to feel that this place was in many ways ideally adapted for the sort of center I’d had in mind.”

The professional artists who were already producing outstanding works became friends of this newcomer who was so full of ideas.

Nassan noticed the difficulties the locals had in trying to pronounce his name, so he changed it to Nassan Gobran. When he spoke, people listened.

There were volunteers, some who had experience in art, and others who simply felt the excitement. The organization initially was called the Canyon Kiva, but with the acquisition of the apple-packing barn in 1958, it became the Sedona Arts Center, informally known as “The Barn.”

Nassan started a summer art school for Arizona State University. Harry Wood, head of the art department at the University, and Nassan taught art teachers who came to Sedona from twenty-eight different states. Education has always been the driving force behind the Arts Center. Classes included photography, watercolor, oils, drawing, sculpture, ceramics, weaving, children’s art, creative prose, poetry, mosaics, dancing, and other subjects as the instructors suddenly appeared from out of the blue to share their talents.

The highly respected Eugenia Everett, a transplant from California, arrived with an impressive background in sculpture.



Eugenia Everett, sculpture instructor at SAC.

Photo courtesy of Jane Kempe.

She taught the subject well into her nineties. When she could no longer drive, students picked her up at home and drove her to the classroom. In exchange for the favor, she would give the driver a free sculpture lesson.



Maud Hardman taught ceramics to children.

Photo courtesy of Sedona Arts Center.

With all the activities happening, it was time for newsletters and memberships, which cost five dollars a year. Varied programs kept the community entertained. There were plays, dinners, dancing, receptions, and other social events. They held “Living Pictures” events in which participants dressed as subjects from well-known paintings. In 1972 Rollie Houck and Gerry Cray dressed as a woman and a man in farmers’ clothing and stood in front of a barn, he holding a pitchfork between them, portraying the Grant Wood painting *American Gothic*. Fred Perkins, assisted by his wife, Pat, with Fred as the old man, recreated *The Old Guitarist* by Pablo Picasso.

SAC had its own theater company under the direction of Earl Sennett, who directed the Eugene O’Neill play, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. They produced Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Ticket prices were only two dollars. Fran Zimmer, costume designer for all productions and a greeter at artists’ receptions, was there decade after decade to welcome attendees, right on up into her nineties. She made the evenings sparkle with her bright brown eyes, formal gowns, and cherished jewelry.

Nassan became a good friend of Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning. When Ernst made his cement sculpture, *Capricorn*, at his studio in his backyard on Brewer Road, Gobran agreed to

make the mold and a plaster model so that the piece could be duplicated in bronze, which was necessary in order for Ernst to sell it.

These processes are very difficult and time-consuming, but Nassan persisted until he had them done to his own satisfaction—perfection. He shipped the plaster model from Flagstaff to Paris to be cast in bronze.

Ernst agreed to have a copy made to put in the Arts Center. The first bronze copy was for Prime Minister Pompidou in France. Others went to museums all over the world. Nassan had reserved a place for the sculpture on a landing in the Art Barn, but it never arrived. “Capricorn made Ernst both famous and wealthy,” Gobran said,⁷ yet he wasn’t angry with him. “I think he was involved with so many things he just didn’t think about it.” When the Ernsts went to France, Gobran lived in their house and worked in the makeshift backyard studio until 1958.

Artist Joella Jean Mahoney knew Nassan Gobran. “He had wonderful social skills,” she said. “Everybody loved him. He loved Sedona because it reminded him of Egypt—the Valley of the Kings and Queens. He wanted the Sedona Arts Center to have all of the arts. The theater was wonderful! It was the social center of Sedona and an educational center.” By May 1971, when the siding was added to the barn, the center had five hundred members, a cause to celebrate.

Often Nassan’s maquettes of future monumental works were exhibited in the center’s art shows. One such sculpture was *Peace*, which in completed form is an elegant seated feminine bronze figure four feet tall, one knee drawn up, with her head resting gracefully on her arms.

⁷ Courtesy of Sedona Heritage Museum, Sedona, AZ.



Nassan Gobran and his bronze, *Peace*.

Photo courtesy of Sedona Heritage Museum, Sedona AZ.

Three castings had been made at this point. One was on display at the Valley National Bank on Jordan Road in Sedona, one went to a home in Paradise Valley, Arizona, and the third was installed on Lake Shore Drive in Corpus Christi, Texas, outside the Spohn Hospital. Cathy Cain donated it in memory of her philanthropist parents, Neil and Kelly Cain.

Nassan was proficient in all media but preferred direct carving in stone. “Stone has a live quality, its own spirit, and it is only while carving that the sculptor discovers that spirit. When the two spirits—the sculptor’s and the stone’s—merge, they create a new spiritual entity able to live forever in its own right.” He explained the process: “The sculptor sees the stone in darkness. He walks around it, communicates with it, loving it, touching it until at last he senses what is inside the stone waiting to be revealed and brought to life. It is an intuitive process that guides the sculptor’s hands.”

The true art of sculpture, Nassan believed, is based upon the integration of feeling, perceptions, and form so as to achieve unity of mass, a balance of volumes and proportions, strength and structure, to create perfect harmony between content and form—“form which lives, speaks beyond itself and marries space, illuminated and bathed with light.”

Not only did Nassan love his stones, but they loved him back. He would spend hours contemplating a rock, determining its soul, what it would one day become. He had those same thoughts when he was a twelve-year-old choirboy, but then his medium was clay from the banks of the Nile. He hauled heavy buckets of it to the roof of his father's house in Cairo and began a project—figures from Egyptian mythology. Many years later, examples of his work could be seen at the University of Arizona College of Medicine in Tucson; the Verde Valley School has a bust of its founder, Hamilton Warren; the Sedona Arts Center has one of Nassan's longtime friend and supporter, Cecil Lockhart-Smith.



Gobran's bronze bust of Cecil Lockhart-Smith.

Photo courtesy of Sedona Heritage Museum, Sedona AZ.

Nassan Gobran had works in public and private collections in Egypt, France, England, Scotland, and many in the United States. He also had a one-man exhibition of his works at the Phoenix Art Museum and in galleries scattered in many international locales.

From 1954 to 1964, he designed some of Sedona's finest homes in Cup of Gold Estates. He had studied architecture in Egypt. Beginning in 1969 Nassan divided his time between New York, Connecticut, and Arizona. He went to New York during the 1970s and toured art centers worldwide with Hopi jeweler Charles Loloma. He returned to Sedona and continued to work with stone in the late 1980s.

He died at age seventy-seven on March 20, 1992, in Sedona. A memorial service was held at the Sedona Arts Center to honor this gracious, dedicated man who gave so freely of his time and knowledge to help a small community nestled among the red rocks of northern Arizona. Sedona has not forgotten Nassan Gobran. The Sedona Arts Center stands as a monument to him—a building housing a fine arts gallery and classrooms and the weathered barn are still in active service.

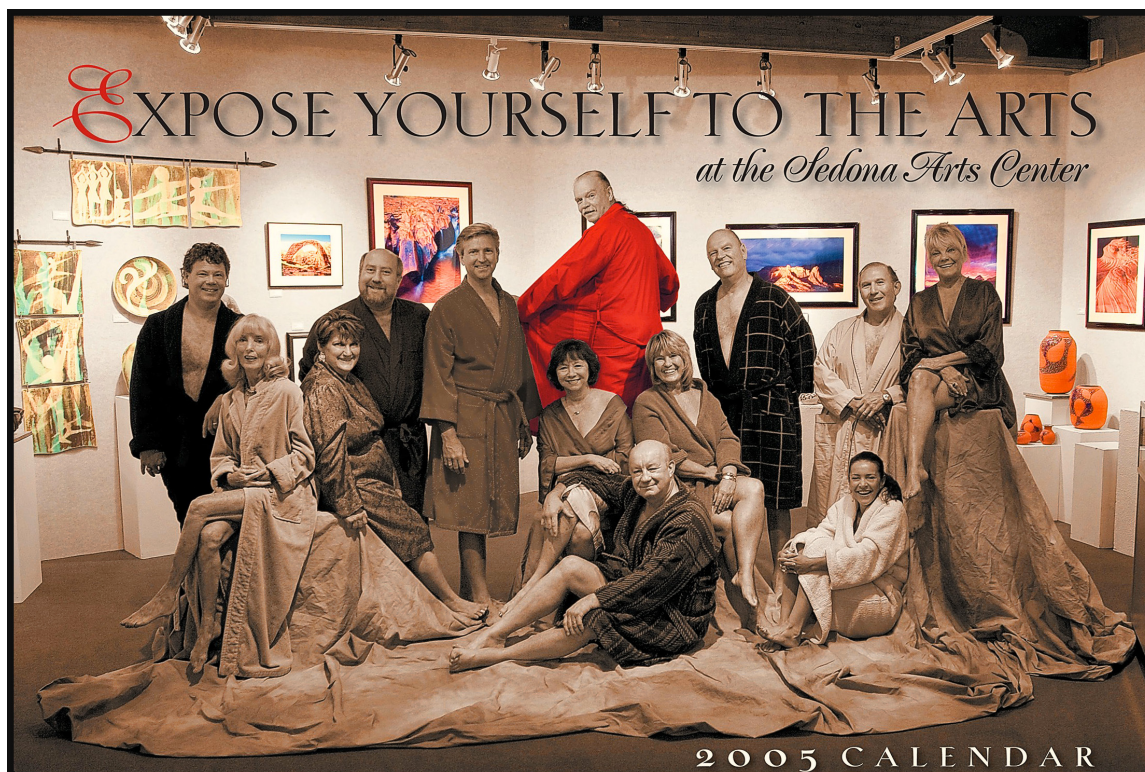
As he would have wanted, the Sedona Arts Center continued to flourish. New staff members took on their duties. Some of them started as students and ended up as instructors. For instance, Dennis Ott took a beginning ceramics class there about 1991. He climbed the ladder to success and now heads the ceramics department. His beautifully designed Ott Pots are award winners.

About the same time, SAC said good-bye to its Charles Raison Theatre with the production of an original musical, *Stiffs*. Debbie Winslow, a staff member for eighteen years in 2013, had performed in many of the plays, co-wrote this show with Dev Ross, John Reynolds, and Michael Gilbert. She had a role in this one. She remembered that the first play produced in the newly renovated theatre in 1994 was *Love Letters*, the one in which two actors sit at a table and read letters they have sent to each other over the years. After the last bittersweet performance in June 2001, people in the audience shared their memories. Some of them remembered Bob Kittredge as the butler in *Something's Afoot*. Something's Noel Schwartz, a Broadway performer and director in the original *West Side Story*, said he was hired to choreograph a play in Sedona in which all the dance numbers had been deleted. Fortunately, that was not the end of his career. He lived on to experience the time Dean Spotts interrupted his monologue and the two of them broke into an impromptu song-and-dance number. Before the evening ended, awards were presented and memories stored away.

In 1970 the exhibition/theatre added another space. A fund-raising campaign paid for the materials, and John Joynt was the volunteer contractor. The area used for theatre productions and special events is now used for workshops, meetings, and a special exhibition gallery. It's alive with activity. The members' fine art gallery displays exhibitions by our local artists, as well as other outstanding, well-known creative people. Annual events are held, such as the plein air festival, Sedona PhotoFest, and Loving Bowls. They have found room for performances again.

The staffs' offices are housed upstairs in the original Art Barn, and the ceramic studios downstairs. It takes hundreds of people to keep the place running smoothly, but not all at the same time. There is a small paid staff and hundreds of volunteers all working together. Outstanding instructors have included Vince Fazio, Gretchen Lopez, Jan Sitts, Joanie Wolter, Susan Kliever, Joyce Killebrew, Ken Rowe, John Soderberg, and Curt Walters.

There is a list of two thousand artists who have been, at one time or another, members of SAC. There is not space to list all of them here, but we acknowledge them for their efforts. Everyone is important, especially Executive Director Karen Ely, the genius who conjured up a creative fund-raiser: a calendar featuring the artists and art patrons of Sedona in nearly nothing—posing tastefully, of course. It was a tremendous success. You can bet that Nassan Gobran, if he had been alive at the time, would have had a grin on his face that couldn't have been wiped off. Long live the Sedona Arts Center!



Artists and art patrons pose for a Sedona Arts Center fund-raising calendar created by photographer Bob Coates.