



Once class begins at the Vero Beach Museum of Art, Maryann Grodin, below, and her classmates hang up their hats and get started painting.



# At Easel!

VBMA CELEBRATES MILITARY VETERANS WITH ART CLASSES FOSTERING CREATIVE EXPRESSION AND CAMARADERIE

BY ANN TAYLOR  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVEN MARTINE



Maryann Grodin literally skips up the steps to the Vero Beach Museum of Art, where, on Tuesday evenings she and other veterans meet up in an art studio, hang their service hats on easels, learn, create, and share experiences. Grodin, a retired Naval JAG (Judge Advocate General's) Corps captain whose military career spanned 35 years, has plenty of them.

"Having served in a variety of billets and assignments around the world, there were unique challenges as one of a few female JAGs. Like most of my peers, I succeeded with the support of my shipmates and by focusing on the mission," says Grodin, who received numerous medals and awards for her service.

"After I moved to Vero from the D.C. area two years ago, I became a member of the museum, so I receive the quarterly publications and class catalog," she explains. "The minute I read that the museum was offering classes for veterans, I signed up online. I'm so glad I did. They're professional,





Eager-to-learn veterans filled VBMA's winter painting class. All supplies were provided by The Circle, a philanthropic group of women at the museum.



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degree in art history and a certificate in museum studies from Florida State University. "Then I got into the real world and realized that's not always the case. My college thesis was about the importance of providing access to art for all kinds of people, including the veterans who have put their lives on the line for our country."

"As a department, we did an audience survey looking at the population of Indian River County," she explains, "and it became clear there was an overwhelming number of veterans living here, but there were no art programs available. Not one. At that point we were fact finding."

Those facts indicated clearly that a program for veterans was not only needed, it would be well received. It's been documented that art is therapeutic for the mind, body, and soul, and that it can help veterans express themselves, connect with others, focus on the positive aspects of life, and find purpose.

It was decided to form a focus group and work toward developing a format that would be instructive, engaging, and inspiring.

"We were very careful how we structured the classes," Klein muses. "For instance, they had to be at night in order to accommodate those who are still working. Also, we found out it was really important to have a snack time."

"What also emerged in our

with thoughtful preparation by instructors, and quality supplies are presented in an organized fashion to facilitate an immediate immersion in the art.

"Also, because the classes are visually oriented, hearing issues and other invisible disabilities, which could impede so many other interactions, are less of a problem."

"And," she adds, breaking out in a big smile, "the museum provides food—really good food, like sandwiches—during a break, so we have time to get to know one another and look at what they're doing. You can't ask for more. After the class I feel renewed and energized!"

Grodin's words are like music to the ears of Sara Klein, the museum's director of education. The veterans' art program began incubating not long after she arrived a few years ago.

"I grew up going to the Art Institute of Chicago every weekend, and I just always thought everyone had access to a museum," says Klein, who earned a master's







## Landscape

Given the history of the French Academy, which was the lowest and thus least respected of the academies, as painters in the 18th century, landscape painting was considered a minor genre. It was not until the 19th century that landscape painting became a critical and commercial success. The Impressionists, in particular, played a role in this. They used a new, portable paint tube, which allowed them to paint outdoors in order to capture natural light. This led to a new way of seeing the world, one that emphasized the atmospheric effects of light and color. The Impressionists' bold vision became one of the defining features of modern art.



One of the winter art classes for veterans at the museum began with a guided tour of "French Moderns: Monet to Matisse" before students started their own work.

original focus group," she continues, "was that there were some financial concerns, so it was decided that the classes would be free and the museum would provide quality supplies. We really lean on our instructors, who are already involved with our other educational offerings, to provide a list of supplies, as, quite frankly, they're the experts, and we give them a budget they have to stick to."

"Then at the first class everyone gets a bright-red bag stuffed full of everything they'll need. We wanted to make it easy for our vets so they could get going right away."

Thanks to financial support from

The Circle, whose members fund the museum's community outreach initiatives for underserved youth and adults, the veterans art program was launched.

"We have a relationship with the Alzheimer & Parkinson Association, we have a program for young adults on the autism spectrum, and a robust program where we send instructors into the schools," Klein points out. "The vets program nestles into that."

"Our current class, which is half men, half women, filled up right away, and we have a long waiting list, so we're looking at ways to expand

the program. We're offering at least three sessions this year, and we're looking at adding another one."

Barry Shapiro, one of the museum's busiest, most energetic, and most sought-after instructors, hopes that happens. He's seen firsthand the positive influence the veterans' art classes have. "These are people, whether they're young or old, male or female, who have served our country admirably. They have a common bond, and now here we are acknowledging them with an opportunity to learn. It's very special to be part of that," he says.

"How the class usually works for

me," Shapiro continues, "is that everyone meets in the art studio first and we do a quick review of what they did the week before. Then we go into the gallery to view the current exhibit, which is 'French Moderns: Monet to Matisse.' I really like the way the museum has laid it out. You're greeted with an amaz-

ing abstract painting by Monet and then you move into the gallery and see the work of other Impressionists, like Degas and Léger, who took that torch and really explored.

"It's a wonderful show and a wonderful experience for the veterans because they get to see the many different approaches. From there

we go back into the studio, where they have everything they need—an easel, canvas, paints, water—so they can get right into the project. When class is over they're encouraged to take it home and work on it during the week. It's really exciting to see what they're able to do."

Maryann Grodin feels the same way. "Toward the end of the class I take time to walk around and look at what everyone else has done. There's such a sense of accomplishment. I can't wait to sign up for the next class." ❁



Teaching artist Pearl Lau walked students through the galleries before heading to the studio for painting instruction and encouragement.