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For the love of art

By Michael J. Solender – April 21, 2014

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Claude L. Harding lists Alberto Giacometti, Joan Miro and Victor Vasarely among his special work friends, even though he's never met any of them.

Harding, 56, is surrounded by these contemporary artists' work and many others in his part-time job as a gallery attendant at Charlotte's [Bechtler Museum of Modern Art](#).

The University City-area resident has made it his mission to help visitors experience the same joy and pleasure he has found in the museum's offerings since he first began work there in 2010. He began his art-filled journey as a security guard with the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center on assignment to the Bechtler. Harding then took on his current role in October 2013 after the Bechtler established its Gallery Attendant program.

Harding, a Philadelphia, Pa., native, relocated to Charlotte in 1998 as part of the CoreStates/First Union Bank consolidation. Today, he works two other jobs in addition to his position at the Bechtler. Still, he finds time to learn about the art and artists whose work surrounds him.

"I look forward to sharing my knowledge of the art, the museum and the Bechtler family back story with the visitors that come to the museum," he said. "The absolute best part of my job is the people and helping them enjoy the treasures we have here. The Bechtler is really a gem, and it's my pleasure to help show it off."

The most intriguing aspect of the job, Harding said, is the diversity of people he meets.

"We get people visiting who are on long-layover from the airport," said Harding, who noted that the museum's reputation for unique modern art from European masters draws patrons from not only across the county but from across the world.



Claude L. Harding, a gallery attendant at Bechtler Museum of Modern Art, began working there as a security guard in 2010 and found he had a calling to help others appreciate the joy of art. He said he gives visitors "permission" to develop their own interpretations of the works they see. (Photo: Michael J. Solender)

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“One day we had the ambassador and council general from Myanmar visit the museum. During our Giacometti exhibit (Giacometti: Memory and Presence) I recall seeing a gentleman in the gallery for the entire morning and then again after lunch.”

It turned out that the man had driven from Cincinnati to see the exhibition at the behest of his art professor.

“It’s really special for me when I see people engage and enjoy what we offer,” he said.

Harding has an unassuming style that helps to demystify exhibitions for casual art fans visiting the museum. He said he gives visitors “permission” to develop their own interpretations of the works they see. He is particularly fascinated when school children – frequent visitors to the museum – interact with the art.

“During a recent school group visit, I noticed one child lagging behind the others, mesmerized by and intently focused on a particular piece,” Harding recalled. “I approached him and asked how long he’d been drawing. I knew he was an artist by the way he studied the work. I told his teacher that visiting the museum was a great way to get him where he lives – I truly believe that.”

Harding said he has seen Charlotte’s arts and cultural offerings improve significantly over the years.

“We have a rhythm here in the city now with the Levine Center for the Arts (the Bechtler, the Mint Museum and the Gantt Center) and the ballpark,” he said. “There is a great deal going on here besides the exhibitions. We have our [Modernism & Film Program](#), [Jazz at the Bechtler](#), [Modern Mondays](#) and other rich programming.”

What is Harding’s advice for those who have never visited the Bechtler or may be on the fence?

“Just come and try one program, one exhibit or one visit,” he said. “You’ll be hooked.”

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