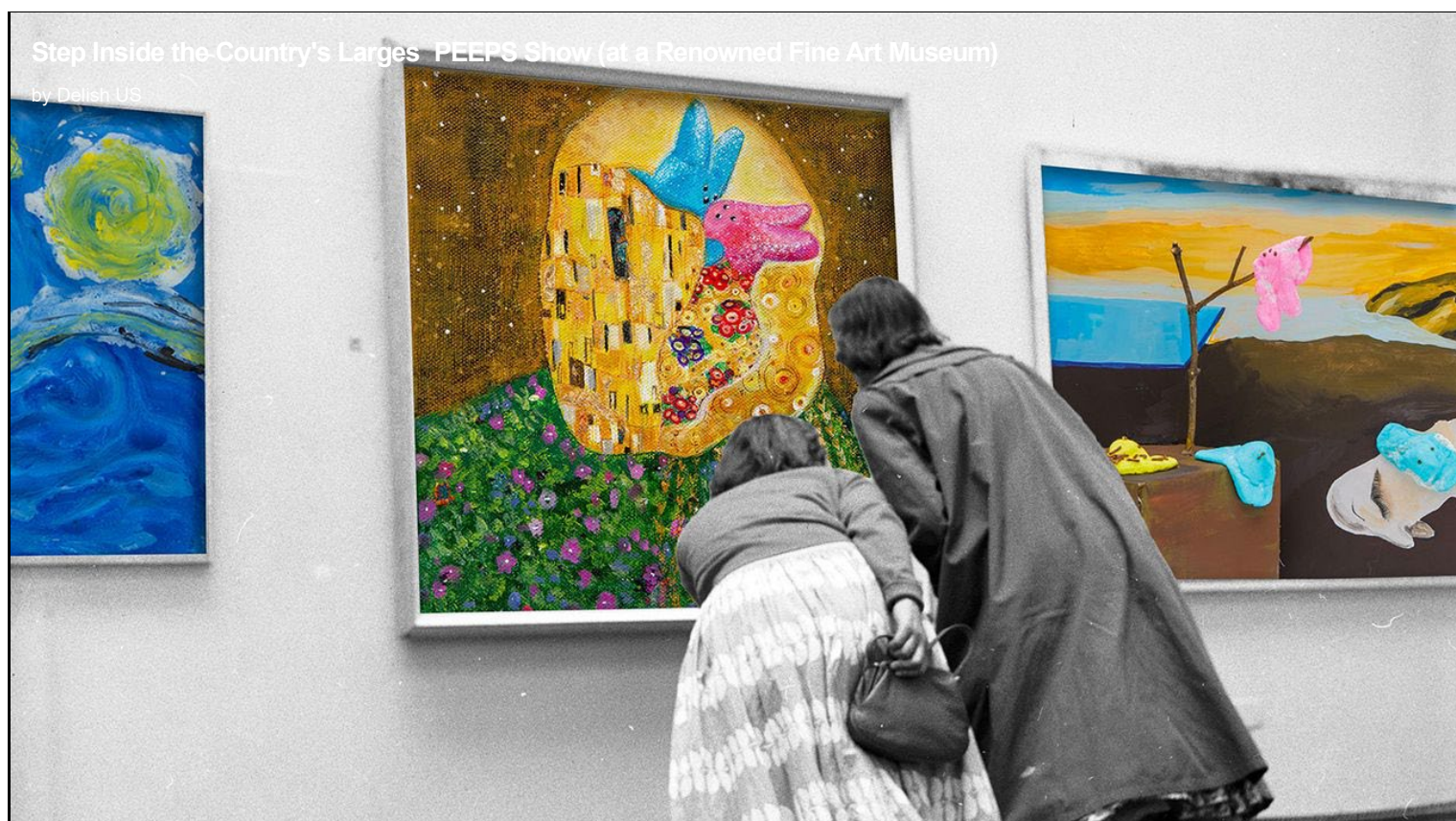


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Why a Renowned Wisconsin Museum Hosts a Giant PEEPS Art Contest Every Year

How an idea to bring more color to a dull Wisconsin winter turned into an event that sees hundreds of submissions every year.

by [TESS KOMAN](#) MAR 25, 2021



Every year come March in Racine, Wisconsin, a small city 45 minutes south of Milwaukee, you can't get your hands on [PEEPS](#) within a two-mile radius. People, both locals and visitors from across the world, buy out stores of the neon marshmallow chicks and bunnies.

They're looking to put together actual (*totally* PG) art pieces with and of the candy for the country's largest peep show—hosted by the town's world-class, internationally recognized [Racine Art Museum](#).



Artiss submissions for the 12th annual PEEPS exhibit.

Since its inception 12 years ago, the now-formally titled *Annual International PEEPS Art Exhibition* has grown from a community-oriented, family-centric event to one that has celebrated artists in complicated fields thinking months ahead of time on what to submit. The prizes are coveted restaurant gift cards and such, but most everyone we chatted with confirmed: Competitors are after the museum's ordained First Peep, Second Peep, and Third Peep honors, or the attendee-voted PEEPls Choice Award.

While ceramics, metals, and quilts are the most common mediums for submissions—a quarter of which are by professional artists—visitors will also see canvases painted with melted PEEPS, glasswork, and so, so much more.

We spoke to the brains behind the marshmallow curtains, as well as one PEEP show donor-slash-enthusiast and five acclaimed repeat PEEP artists about how an idea to bring more color to a dull Wisconsin winter turned into an event that sees hundreds of submissions every year.

WHY IT HAPPENED

Lisa Englander, founder of the PEEPS exhibition and Principal, Guest Experience and Retail Division at RAM: Listen. Living in Wisconsin can be very gray in the winter—people tend to be gray and dress gray. About 14 or 15 years ago, I was in my local grocery store and the store was just...gray, but when I walked down one aisle, I noticed all this wonderful holiday color unlike Christmas or anything. I immediately came up with the idea: a PEEP show. It took me a year to work around the title and not have it sound salacious. When I finally presented it to the museum staff, we all thought, "Hey, let's give it a try." We sent it out to the public as an informal and free invitation. To be clear, we accept virtually everything that's submitted on the basis that...it is family-friendly. We won't take anything inappropriate.

HOW IT HAPPENED

Lisa Englander: We believe that things made by the hand are as important as painting is on paper, and so that is the focus of this museum. Just because something is made by the hand doesn't invalidate its importance.

Introducing the Mona Peepsa.

Nancy Wheeler, former RAM Board Member and underwriter of the PEEP show: PEEPS to me is, in a way, a distant relative or an extension of craft—[the candy is] moldable, they're meltable, and I thought the creativity that could go into using PEEPS is at least akin to crafts.

Nancy Wheeler: Plus, I thought it would draw in a population that might not otherwise walk through the doors of a fine art museum.

Jessica Zalewski, Marketing and Publications Manager at RAM: We made it clear it was open to any and everyone—artists and non-artists alike, but we didn't know what to expect. In that first year, we already had over 40 pieces.

HOW IT TURNED INTO A RECURRING THING

Lisa Englander: After that first show? I don't think we were given the choice [to not do the show again].

Jessica Zalewski: In the very first year (2010)—attendance for that time period doubled over 2009. So, the show’s impact was pretty immediate. Now, 8 to 10 percent of our total attendance for the entire year comes to the show in those two-and-a-half weeks. That's more than 4,000 people.

Amanda Pafrath, glassblower and maker of the PEEPlE Choice Award: I have customers who are huge art collectors, but they will come every year specifically for this exhibit because it's so playful and clever and funny. You just never know what you're going to see.

Nick Schroeder, ceramist: Every year, there are not only actual lines to get into the museum, but there will also be lines to get into the exhibit room itself.

PEEP THESE RECIPES!

PEEPS Jell-O Shots

GET THE RECIPE

HOW IT BECAME A LEGITIMATE ART CONTEST

Bill Reid, metal sculpture, artist in residency at The Prairie School: About ten years ago, RAM sent out a flyer about the show. And I thought ‘Why is the museum—a really fancy museum—doing this kind of thing??’ It threw people for a curve. Listen, I honestly did not know anything about PEEPS until these shows started popping up. Between you and me, I have never eaten a PEEP.

Nick Schroeder: The art world can take itself pretty seriously. So when I first heard about this four years ago—I believe it was on a local news show—I thought: “This is

outside of the standard. This is fun. We can have some fun with this.' And, unfortunately, I'm a PEEPS lover. That's my confession. I'm about a 45-minute drive from the museum, but I've gone to see the exhibit every year I've entered.

Lisa Englander: People started coming into town from across the state or country to see the show, and they often wanted PEEPS because they'll get a hankering for them. Now? You can't get PEEPS within two miles [of Racine] the month before and of the show because they're sold out. If you want PEEPS here when they hit shelves, you've gotta go way outside the area.

PEEPS get Banksy-ed.

Jessica Zalewski: After local coverage became consistent, *The Journal Times*, which is the ritzy local paper, covered the show, and from there it got picked up by papers as far away as Alaska. We were thrilled to see the number of pieces nearly double from 2012 to 2013, when we hosted 110 pieces by 145 artists. I knew it was really here to stay when about three years ago—we actually were worried about the space that is allotted for the show because there were so many entries. The most we had was in the show's tenth anniversary year—2019—with 173 pieces by 237 artists.

Rachel Carren, polymer jeweler: I've never participated in the show itself. And honestly, I've never had a PEEP either. But for the past at *least* four years, it's been important to me to contribute.

Jefrey Lloyd Dever: In 2020, Lisa [Englander] reached out to artists who had relationships with the museum in an attempt to add another layer to the range of people that this was open to. That intrigued me, so even though [I was recently retired], I made the time to create a unique piece for last year's exhibit. I loved it.

HOW IT BECAME A FIERCE COMPETITION

Amanda Pafrath: I keep a year-round PEEPS file for when inspiration strikes. It can get competitive when people around town know you're into doing things for the exhibit. So don't tell anybody, but next year I think I'm going to do a [redacted].

Rachel Carren: I have been making patterned PEEPS pins that are sold at the RAM shop. The colors change every year. My particular artwork is very textile-influenced, and I just kind of got tickled with the idea and they were fun for me to make. The ones that I'm making are about the size of an actual PEEP so people can wear them on their lapel or collar.

Jessica Zalewski: The pins sell out every year. We see people wearing them around town and to the exhibit all the time!

WHY PEOPLE (SORRY, PEEPLE*) KEEP COMING BACK

Bernie meme, PEEP-ified.

Rachel Carren: This PEEPS contest is egalitarian—it allows everyone from all over the country and the world to do something colorful and creative and clever.

Jeffrey Lloyd Dever : It just draws people in, giving permission to people who don't otherwise consider themselves artists. From somebody who's never made anything before to somebody whose livelihood is dependent on being a maker and a fine studio crafts person—that's a wide range. You see that reflected in their shows and the range of what comes in evolves every year. I would anticipate too, that in a COVID world, people need the release of something optimistic and playful. And I think that's the essence of a PEEPS show.

The [RAM 12th Annual International PEEPS Art Exhibition](#) is live through April 10. Visit the [museum](#) or sign up for a virtual tour of the exhibit [here](#).

[TESS KOMAN](#) Digital Director

Tess Koman covers breaking (food) news, opinion pieces, and features on larger happenings in the food world.

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