Hilliard museum offers events centered around French language

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University of Louisiana at Lafayette French language instructor Agnes Cappello led a tour in both French and English through the Paul and Lulu Hilliard University Art Museum for the museum’s newest batch of programming targeted at preserving Louisiana’s French-speaking heritage.

Cappello, a Lafayette denizen for 30 years, considers France her homeland, and preserving the French culture in the “Bayou State” her raison d’etre.

“It’s very important that we preserve the language,” Cappello said. “Whenever you have any kind of heritage, it’s like gold. It’s priceless, and more important than we say it is.”

That “gold” is the centerpiece of the Hilliard’s summer offerings. Jolie Johnson, the museum’s marketing and membership manager, said the museum staff wants to emphasize the French language, as well as French culture, in its summer programming with classes including French Language Hour, Yoga En Francais Dans Les Galeries and French cooking classes.

All of these classes and more are open to the general public this summer.

“French is an important part of our history,” said, Jolie Johnson, the museum’s marketing and membership manager, “The Acadians migrated to this area to preserve and practice their religious beliefs, culture and language; it is important that we do the same.”

French Language Hour is one medium in which the museum seeks to accomplish this goal.

The program takes place within the museum’s exhibition of the artistic works of French artist Pierre Bonnard, which is composed of 24 selected works on loan from the collection of the Musée Bonnard in France.

As Cappello walked through what she called Bonnard’s “small but impressive exhibition” on June 28 with a small group, she took the time to thoroughly and enthusiastically explain the significance
of a few of Bonnard's works, giving brief details of the artist's life as well.

"Our graduate assistant, Kelsey Jagneaux, organized the program," said Johnson, "but as for the whole idea itself, it was a collaborative thing between the staff. We thought that French Language Hour would be a great way to celebrate this new exhibition, as well as to get more people to speak and feel comfortable with the French language."

The exhibition celebrates Bonnard's vision of his home, Le Cannet, and primarily focuses on his landscapes. However, a few of his interior paintings are featured as well. Le Cannet is uniquely distinguished as Lafayette's sister city in France, which is why the museum is the exclusive venue for this exhibition.

"We've had an average of about six to 10 people come every week," Johnson said. "We're hoping that we can get more people to come and participate. We are very informal with one another but very intimate."

French Language Hour occurs every Wednesday this summer from 10 to 11 a.m. until Aug. 12. It is open to people of all ages and basic admission standards apply. A movie about Bonnard's works will play in the exhibition continuously in both French and English while guests view Bonnard's art within the exhibit.

Pat Miller and her husband were two of the three people who participated in French Language Hour on June 28. Miller said she is a good friend of Cappello's and agrees with the notion of preserving the French language in Lafayette.

"It's absolutely vital to preserve the French language, as well as to advance our culture," said Miller. "It's a huge benefit to the community, because there's this personality to the language that you can't find anywhere else: Cajun French. It's important we maintain that connection in order to preserve that uniqueness about it."

Andre Dubois, who has been speaking French for 84 years, was also at French Language Hour. Dubois grew up in St. Martinville and learned French from his parents; he never learned French in school.

"The French language is embedded in our culture," said Dubois. "Back in my day, about 95 percent of Lafayette's population communicated to each other in French. It was a lot more common to speak French throughout the town than it is today. What makes Lafayette unique is that it was isolated from other areas; it was a place where the Acadians stayed with their language, which, as we know, is Cajun French."

The museum will host other non-French related programs as well, such as Play Day: The Art of Recycling, July 15 from 10 a.m. - 2 p.m. and Yoga in the Galleries, Aug. 12 from 11 a.m. - noon. However, the museum's goal this summer is to coax others to immerse themselves in the French language.

"We're always looking to produce more bilingual exhibits, as well as for more ways to create those French surroundings for people to get hooked with the language," said Johnson. "We're hoping all these programs we have planned will help accomplish this goal."

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