

SOCIAL PAINTING GROWS POPULAR AT BARS, ART STUDIOS

By KATHY MATHESON — Mar. 26, 2014 7:08 AM EDT

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In this Tuesday, March 25, 2014 photo, artist Andrea Vann demonstrates painting techniques during a Paint Nite event at the Field House sports bar in Philadelphia. Cities like Philadelphia, Boston and New York are offering a creative way to socialize and bring out your inner artist: Paint Nite. A ticket buys you a small canvas, brushes, paints and an easy two-hour lesson at a neighborhood bar. (AP Photo/Matt Slocum)

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — The Fox and Hound pub in downtown Philadelphia boasts all the fixings of a standard sports bar: huge TVs, numerous beers on draft and a menu filled with burgers, wings and nachos.

So what are all the easels and canvases for?

Welcome to Paint Nite, an opportunity to tap your inner Van Gogh. Just order a drink, put on a smock and lighten up a bit as a friendly instructor takes you step-by-step through the brush strokes of a landscape, still life or skyline.

But be sure to reserve your spot ahead of time. The two-hour event, like more than a dozen others held weekly in Philadelphia, often sells out.

The experience known as social painting is seeing explosive growth in cities across the country as people seek to imbibe and relax while rediscovering their creative side.

"It's been crazy," said Laura Romaine, assistant manager of Painting with a Twist, another paint-and-sip business in the city. "They're like banging down the door to come in here and paint."

Not an artist? Join the club. The crowds include couples on dates, co-ed group outings, bachelorette parties and the simply curious. Many can't remember their last encounter with a palette.

Yet something clearly resonates. Painting with a Twist opened its BYOB studio in Philadelphia's funky South Street area in October and already is looking for a second location downtown, Romaine said.

The Louisiana-based company, which offers lessons as well as private painting parties, had 126 franchises nationwide as of last year — more than double its total in 2011, officials said.

And Paint Nite, which started with one event at a Boston bar in March 2012, has grown in two years to 55,000 people attending 1,100 events per month in the U.S. and Canada, co-founder Sean McGrail said.

The company has been adding 10 cities a month and just started its first overseas operation in Sydney, he said. Next up: Johannesburg and Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Paint Nite has also allowed artists like Andrea Vann, 26, to quit unrewarding day jobs and focus full time on their passion. The business operates on a revenue-share model with its licensees, and the hosting pubs and restaurants get extra patrons out of the deal.

Vann, who served drinks in bars for years, now teaches her craft there and creates new artwork on the side. As one of two Philadelphia licensees, she also runs the financial end of her operation, which has included hiring help to keep up with demand.

"When I saw this job, I couldn't believe it because it seemed way too good to be true," Vann said.

On one recent night at Fox and Hound, Vann humorously walked a group of 40 through the creation of "Heavenly Stream," an ethereal depiction of a forest in autumn.

First, she made the budding Renoirs pledge not to whine about how badly they paint or how they screwed up the size of the tree trunk. And, she warned, don't even think about asking her to fix a "mistake."

There are no mistakes at Paint Nite. Well, except for the occasional brush in a beer glass, which often sits next to the plastic water cup used to rinse bristles.

Allyson Meng, who works in customer service for a transportation company, said she took the art excursion because she wanted to "step outside my boundaries."

"It was a challenge for me, but I really did enjoy it," Meng said. "I don't have an artistic bone in my body."

Some said they came to shake up their night life — to "drink creatively," as the Paint Nite motto says.

Yet Romaine suggested that perhaps participants are attracted to the idea of doing something tactile, making an object they can touch and take home.

"People don't do a lot of things with their hands anymore," she said. "We're all on screens all day."

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