

The Mysterious Obelisk in Ross

Fran Cappelletti, Ross Historical Society/Jose Moya del Pino Library

In criminal investigations, we often hear about the resolution of 'cold cases', those for which any leads are exhausted and no answer is found. Time passes until, it is hoped, evidence presents itself. If the same idea is applied to history, then there is one 'cold case' here in Marin. You'll find it as a mysterious obelisk attached to The Marin Art and Garden Center's Studio building, the former Frances Young Gallery and longtime headquarters of the Marin Society of Artists.

Discovered behind a growth of bamboo by Eloise Rauscher and other members in 2004, it was an object of much curiosity at the time. Don-Elda Boutwell, President Emeritus of the Society, took up the challenge of finding the sculptor. The Artists were curious about where it came from as no one recalled anything about it.¹ Further investigation suggested an intriguing 'suspect', Beniamino Bufano. It would be a great discovery to have his name attached, especially with the symbolic Bufano bear sculpture just across the street in front of Town Hall. As Tad Whitaker reported on January 10, 2005, Bufano expert Don Rich was consulted to try to confirm the creator.² Unfortunately, no conclusions appeared in print and the mystery remained.

Many years later, the artist did return to the scene of his handiwork. At the invitation of the Ross Historical Society, Cliff Hanssen came to visit. He was designer of the 1962 addition to the Gallery. He enjoyed seeing the old sliding display panels in the building and the curved benches outside. He then came to the obelisk, marveling that it was still there after so many years. Now retired after a long career in architecture, he remembered the obelisk well and discussed its design and placement.

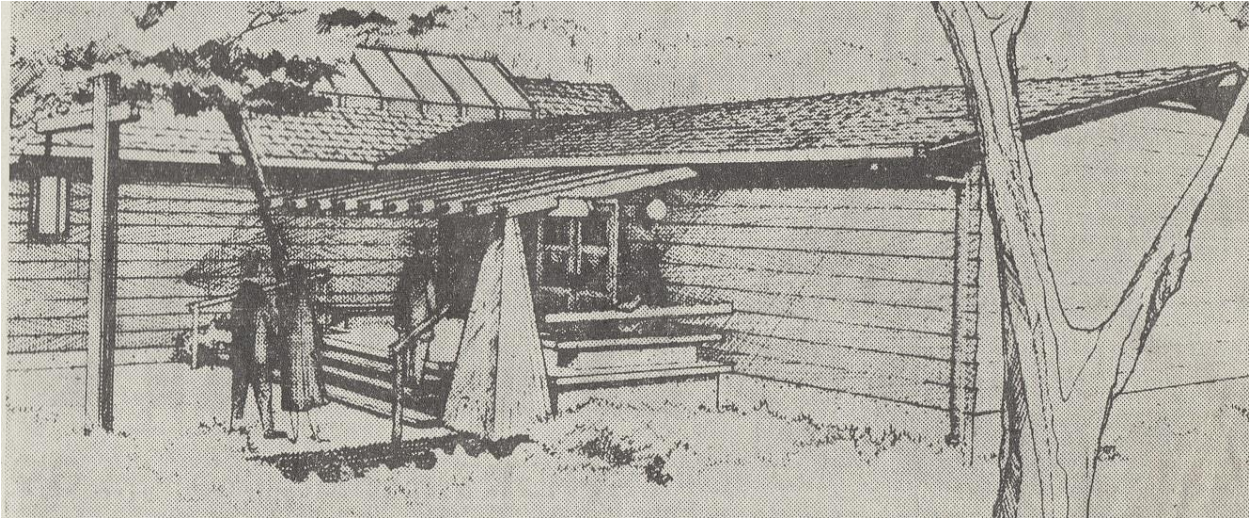
A few months after his visit, I came across those news clippings about the 2004 discovery while visiting the Anne T. Kent California Room at the Marin County Civic Center Library. The articles described the mystery and the parties involved. A few online searches led to contact Don-Elda Boutwell, who vividly recalled the sculpture and mystery after so many years. Further discussion with Don Rich confirmed that though it was interesting, he just didn't think it was a Bufano creation.



¹ "Mystery of the Ross Obelisk", Tad Whitaker, Marin Independent Journal, December 4, 2004.

² "Expert to Examine obelisk found in Ross", Tad Whitaker, Marin Independent Journal, January 10, 2005.

Just one more thing, a final piece of evidence was found in an old archive of press clippings donated to the Ross Historical Society by the Artists when they moved out of the Center. It is Cliff's drawing of the planned addition from 1962, clearly showing the obelisk as part of that plan.³ Further additions to the building would be made, but the sculpture is in the same place today.



Thanks to those who shared their first hand memories, to the local newspaper for its coverage, to the dedicated news clippers who saved the article so many years ago. There may be more cold cases of history where the answers are simply waiting to be found.

³ "Art Gallery Addition", Independent-Journal, March 28, 1962.