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The TOM –So Much More than a Gallery

By Kim Skene, Audience Engagement Manager, Tom Thomson Art Gallery



Local High School students view the display *Be Our Ally* during Slow Art Day

So, what is a gallery? By the most basic definition, a gallery is “a room or building for the display of works of art.” But I think that we’d all agree our Tom Thomson Art Gallery is much more than that. I believe that the gallery is more than four walls and a door; the TOM is a composite entity, given life by its art, artists, supporters and audiences, and nurtured within a healthy, symbiotic relationship with its community. And that community can sometimes be local, regional and national, even international, and is supported appropriately at those different levels by generous volunteers, patrons, donors, sponsors, business partners and governmental funding agencies. My focus at the gallery is audience engagement. The Canada Council for the Arts defines public engagement in the arts as: “Actively engaging more people in the artistic life of society notably through attendance, observation, curation, active participation, co-creation, learning, cultural mediation and creative self-expression.” I translate that as “let’s experience, think, discuss and create together”, and that’s how I approach things here at work, aspiring to do my part at bringing the gallery to life.

From medieval times when wealthy estates and religious institutions would open their doors to share their vast collections of artwork with the outlying communities, to the nationalization of many private collections in the late eighteenth century, the art gallery or art museum has had the worthy if not onerous task of collecting, protecting and disseminating, not only the art of the day, but the significant and contributing art of days past, for the public. Each institution was characterized by the focus of its themes, genres, media, or artists, and on the whole became distinguished by its collection.

And yet, a gallery is more than its collection; a successful gallery’s image is also dependent upon the accessibility of that collection, and the innovative ways that the collection is interpreted and re-interpreted, displayed and celebrated. The Ontario Arts Council, in its new strategic plan entitled *Vital Arts and Public Value: A Blueprint for 2014-2020*, has made “fostering participation in, and the appreciation of, the arts” a main theme, where the goals are to “support public engagement” and “build public awareness of the value of the arts.” A gallery can become a mediator of sorts, initiating dialogue between the art, the artists and the audience. Response and feedback are integral components of the process, determining how a gallery adapts to continue to be relevant. Part of what I do at the gallery is to add that extra layer of access through artists’ talks, and expanded explorations of themes brought to

light by our art and exhibitions. We participate in national programming initiatives like International Museum Day, Slow Art Day and Culture Days to initiate fresh, fun ways of experiencing and engaging with our art, our collection, our peers and all the members of our audience, provoking discussion and encouraging debate.

The gallery as classroom is as old as *The Grand Tour* itself and as exciting as that phrase we all remember – “Field Trip!” Art galleries have always been and continue to be a place of investigation, exploration and learning. A gallery not only introduces the historically significant artists and their works, but also presents the work of contemporary artists and current practices, highlighting broader cultural themes, and ideologies of self expression and creativity. And the role of the public gallery as educator is significant enough to be fundamental in our governing and funding organizations’ strategic plans and mandates. In *Facts About the Presence of the Visual Arts in Canadians’ Lives* authored by T J Cheney Research Inc. for the Canada Council for the Arts, Department of Canadian Heritage, Department of International Affairs and Foreign Trade, the report noted that “[a]rt gallery programs also occupy an integral place in communities, especially through links with children: art galleries funded by the Canada Council for the Arts report over 30,000 tours offered to school groups representing nearly 1 million children a year”. So far this year at the TOM we have welcomed 1200 students. With the new school year underway and tour bookings coming in daily, we are more than thrilled to be partners in the education of the youngest members of our community, through guided tours and creative workshops. And learning is fun for everyone at the gallery with free drop-in programs like Make Art for the whole family, and Art Historia for teens, as well as ongoing workshops and studios for adults. We welcome community groups into our space for themed sessions, creative teambuilding, and social events – because it’s fun to learn at the TOM.

Relevant galleries become integrated and active members of their communities, becoming leaders within their own cultural milieu, taking initiatives and programming out into the public domain, beyond the walls of their buildings. In fact upon release of their annual report, The Canada Council for the Arts stated that they “champion and invest in artistic excellence so that Canadians may enjoy and participate in a rich cultural life” and they “work with partners to advance the sector and help embed the arts more deeply in communities across the country”. New Canada Council CEO Simon Brault remarks: “Canadians are increasingly seeing the arts as a ‘must have’ rather than a ‘nice-to-have. We’re beginning to more deeply understand the ways in which the arts contribute to our well-being and our success as a nation” and he commits the Canada Council as “responsible for investing wisely, responsively and with impact, on behalf of the Canadian government to support artistic excellence and public engagement in the arts.”

Whether the gallery is presenting films at Galaxy Cinemas, providing hands-on activities to community arts festivals like *Summerfolk*, coordinating with other presenters like Sandcastle Theatre to offer youth programming, partnering with local organizations like Grey Sauble Conservation to take our painting studios outdoors, hosting local groups like Autism Ontario Grey Bruce Chapter during their creative projects or installing public art works such as those created this past year in the project *How Deep Our Roots*, the Tom Thomson Art Gallery has a remarkable presence felt throughout the area, and certainly beyond the walls of the building on 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue West.

So how do we define our gallery? Collector and protector of the art? Facilitator of artistic dialogue and debate? Educator? Workshop leader? Community partner? Cultural ambassador? Host-with-most? The Tom Thomson Art Gallery is all these things, and yet, still more than an amalgam of its different functions. The TOM is a character in and of itself –and definitely, so very much more than just a gallery.