

Collectors and Museums

Brian Meehan, *Executive Director*

Ever since there have been art museums and galleries, these institutions have had close relationships with art collectors. And the relationship between public institutions and collectors has been a critical one.

The simple fact is that museum collections in Canada are primarily made up of works that have been donated by collectors and artists. And most often, the percentage of work in our public collections that has been received through donation is upward of ninety-percent.

This is a wonderful thing if viewed as meaning we have some very generous collectors in our community who are willing to share their passion and their works with our public institutions. Conversely however, it also means that much of what is collected is not necessarily what our galleries and museums would have chosen if their curators were simply given a blank cheque to acquire new work. For the most part, we are collecting what others have deemed important.

Thankfully, we have had, and continue to see, some very generous and enlightened collectors in our community

whose collecting practices do line up with the objectives of our institutions. In fact, the very existence of an institution like Museum London can be partly credited to a number of collectors in our community who both saw the need for a stand-alone public art gallery in London and used the potential gifts of their collections as a catalyst to getting the Museum built.

At present, the relationship between collectors and institutions is generally quite good. But I would argue it could be even better, and the ways of doing that can be a topic for a future column.

Making Connections

Brian Meehan, *Executive Director*

In a previous column I mentioned that the relationship between art collectors and art institutions is generally quite good, but that it could be even better. How it can be improved, like any relationship, starts, I think, with better communication.

I've always been surprised by how many collectors are unaware of the potential benefits of a relationship with an arts organization, not because of any conscious intent on their part to steer clear of an affiliation, but because the mutual benefits of the relationship have never been properly explained. Given that both parties have a great deal to gain from such a relationship, one might assume that both should want to explore just that. And given that I work for an arts institution, and I want to see such relationships occur, I'll start from the position that it's our responsibility to establish these relationships.

One other, critical part of this relationship equation is the commercial dealer, as a dealer has the knowledge of who is collecting, what they're collecting, and why they're collecting. And if the art institution is doing its job, the dealer also has knowledge of what the institution's collection looks like and what direction it's going in. And the dealer is in a position to make connections.

What the museum has to offer a collector is two-fold: knowledge and education related to its collections and its collecting, and knowledge and education as it relates to the financial and intrinsic benefits a collector can reap through gifting artworks. Museums have highly-trained curators who have in-depth knowledge of their collections and the historical context for the works in their collections. They have an understanding of what is important historically, and have informed opinions

on contemporary art, all of which should be of interest to an engaged collector.

Museum professionals can explain why they collect what they do (as well as what they hope to collect in the future), and talk about the relationship that can exist between donors who have a long-range vision for their collection and their collecting activities, including the cultural legacy of strengthening public collections.

These relationships are a sign of a strong arts community and most galleries and museums are anxious to play a role in making these happen. The opportunity that exists now in our community is to get interested parties together to explore what is possible now and in the future. And we are happy to lead that discussion.

