salon focus

A great artist uncovered

The 40th anniversary of the Restigouche Art Gallery's permanent home sheds light on its founder, and highlights the importance of recognizing the province's talented artists. By Adam Hodnett

Bang!

Archie Harper slammed his hands on the table.

It was the 1960s. The young artist had recently moved to Campbellton, and the women in a painting class he taught were complaining that their children were growing up in a town without an art gallery – or a library, for that matter.

"Instead of saying it's too bad – let's do something about it," Gladys Swan remembers Harper saying.

"That's how it got started," she said. "When he wanted to do something, he looked right straight ahead and did it."

The push for a gallery turned into a city-wide, several-year project. People used every resource they had, and called "anybody that knew anybody, that might know somebody" to get support, Swan said.

This year, the Restigouche Art Gallery celebrated its 40th anniversary in its own building.

More than 100 people gathered in the two exhibition spaces and the Athol House Museum that make up the gallery's home to celebrate on Jan. 30. There were more than 40 pastel works from Denyse Bouchard's show, Moments, hanging in the Jeannette Macdonald room. Well-known artists such as Nicole Bolduc, Kathleen Gallant, and Bouchard worked on pieces live throughout the evening. Musician Marco Landry played from the grand piano in the corner.

Emphasis on local talent represents somewhat of a transformation from the early days of this gallery. It was once a national gallery, bringing in expensive exhibitions from internationally renowned artists. But at that same time, local artists weren't able show their work. Times changed, in many ways.

"I couldn't pay $4,000 to get an exhibit," said Charline Lanteigne, the current director.

When Lanteigne took over the job 15 years ago, she announced that she would put up exhibits from local artists. This was partially driven by necessity, and partially by vision. Lanteigne has held a local abstract show every year since.

Early on, Lanteigne decide to organize abstract classes – meant to encourage original work. Lanteigne has made a point to hold a local abstract show every year since she's been the director.

This revival – and emphasis on abstract work – unknowingly links the gallery back to its very first "instigator." However, the gallery's struggle to get local artists recognized also parallels the life and work of Archie Harper.

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"This is really interesting," said John Leroux, a New Brunswick architect and art historian, while on the phone. He was looking at Harper's work for the first time.

"I can't believe I have never heard of this guy."

Most people haven't – even people from the area. But, for a time, many people knew his reputation.

"He was very well liked, and very unusual," said Susan Shalala D'Aoust, a reporter and editor at the local paper, The Tribune, from 1984 to 1996. "He was a real artist."

People who knew him loved him. He managed to make friends with the prominent families of the time while in Campbellton, and he continued to develop great friendships into his final years, after moving to Fredericton in 2003. He died in 2013, at the age of 88.

"Everybody seemed to know him, after he was here for a while," said Beatrice Gilmore, his only surviving sibling. She was the only sibling to have children, so Archie and his sister, May, moved closer to Gilmore's family in Fredericton toward the ends of their lives.

Harper was known to have strong convictions. Some called it the "temperament of an artist."

"Archie was a perfectionist though, (and) we didn't always quite measure up to what he expected" said Gilmore. "We'd say, 'Oh, that's just Archie.'

"That was his thing – whatever he did, he did very well. And he studied it, you know. (He) knew all about it before he ventured into anything."

While still in his 20s, Harper had the idea to go to school in Virginia. He actually became the first registered male occupational therapist in Canada. The career brought him to Campbellton, to work at the new psychiatric hospital, where he would stay beyond his retirement.

Before going to Virginia, though, Harper was clearly focused on his art.

In Grade 1, he won a drawing contest, and was a known talent ever since. His teachers reported that he was very smart, but spent a lot of time looking out the window. He grew up in Petitcodiac, where his father's factory made butter and cheese during the war.

He worked a short while after high school, and then went to the Saint John Vocational School – an institution now known for fostering a lot of artistic talent. Harper arrived in 1945, one year after Fred Ross – who is among New Brunswick's best known artists. It was during this time that Ted Campbell taught at the school.

The school, and the artists that grew around it, were known to be open to modern trends. While other parts of Canada were arguing over whether landscapes were the true national form or not, those in Saint John were looking to New York's art scene.

Harper kept pace with his contemporaries. His abstract works date back to a time when New Brunswick's biggest artists were moving in the same direction, even if patrons weren't necessarily buying that kind of work.

"(These) were very much of their time," said Leroux, still looking through pictures from the Citadel Gallery. "I mean, that's still some pretty technically adept abstract works, for New Brunswick, at that time. So, yeah, this is some serious stuff."

Harper kept his focus directed mainly on art after completing his program at the Vocational School in 1947. He was 22 years old.

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>
> JOHN LEROUX

He found a job as a designer in Fredericton at some point in his mid-20s. He won prizes for handweaving and woodworking "several years in succession at the Canadian National Exhibit in Toronto" during this period. His sister kept a program from an exhibition he held in 1974 that listed his accomplishments.

Harper also had a rug design published, and was chosen to have work included in an international travelling show sponsored by the Canadian government. Harper's obituary cites an ongoing passion for interior design.

But his development as a painter remained important. While still in his mid-20s, he enrolled in a summer program at the University of New Brunswick, to study with Fritz Brandtner. Brandtner was a German abstract and figurative painter that moved to Canada in 1928, and was known for bringing elements of German Expressionism with him.

Then the idea to go to Virginia came up. Harper was 28. Gilmore doesn't know where the idea came from.

He came up with all these ideas on his own," she said. "Nobody told him he should go and be an OT, or anything like that."

He completed his three-year program in 1956 and went to Campbellton, where he obviously found something he liked. It's where he stayed.

He found friends, taught classes and created the Restigouche Art Society, which eventually led to the creation of the Restigouche Gallery. And he continued to paint.

"He never made a big point of (his work)," Gilmore said. "He never really pushed to have shows and things. You know, he could have had a show a long time ago, and he talked about it. But then his health started failing him, you know. He always planned to have a show, so we had it after he went."

Mario Brideau of the Citadel Gallery in Saint John helped the family organize an exhibition after his death in 2013. The family then entrusted his work to the gallery. A lot of the paintings and sketches have sold, but some are still there.

"It's surprising to me," said Leroux, after looking at a few more photos of the pieces in the Citadel Gallery.

"You know, I always like to think I'm kind of on top of who was working at the time. I'm surprised I never heard of him. But, he should be better known than he is. He was a very serious and skilled artist."

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A talented, contemporary, determined, socially connected and influential artist like Harper went unrecognized.

How is it possible?

Anthony Tremblay at the St. Thomas University is a professor and Canada Research Chair. He teaches courses on New Brunswick and Maritime literature, film, and art. He says there's been a trend.

New Brunswick artists have often been reluctant to promote themselves. This may, partially, have been the result of an "infrastructure deficit" in the province.

"New Brunswick's artists had to send their work outside the province, and as a result, they were subject to some stereotyping that was directed – and continues to be directed – at the East Coast," he said. "That's a problem that tended to shut down local artists."

Today, Lanteigne likes to see the role of the Restigouche Gallery as somewhat of a promoter. While she doesn't have the time to be an agent, she tries to provide as much support and opportunity as she can.

She's been holding at least two or three local exhibits a year, all while trying to bring in the most interesting shows possible. Collaborations with the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, New Brunswick Art Bank, and New Brunswick Museum have been hugely successful.

So everything is there for the artists of the region – space, inspiration, teachers, and peers. But the next step is a little more complicated – how do the artists get recognized outside the area?

Some of the painters connected to the gallery may be hobbyist and enthusiasts, but there are also serious, lifelong artists.

"They say you have to be recognized by your peers," said Lanteigne. "But if you sell 30-40 paintings, aren't you recognized?"

Some of the artists that come through the doors have shown their work internationally. Some have taught in colleges. Some have trained with famous artists. Some have their works in large galleries across in the country.

"They should have recognition for their experience," Lanteigne believes.

But that is the next step.

So far, by all accounts, the gallery has fulfilled its roles well. It is now more than a gallery, it's a cultural centre.

Still, without the ability to elevate and recognize the serious artists, we run the risk of missing the next Archie Harper entirely.

Adam Hodnett is a freelance writer and videographer based in northern New Brunswick

1. Archie Harper was a talented abstract artist who trained under Ted Campbell at the Saint John Vocational School in the 1940s. PHOTO: SUBMITTED **2.-6. Examples of Archie Harper's work, found at the Citadel Gallery in Saint John.** PHOTO: MARIO BRIDEAU/CITADEL GALLERY **7. More than 100 people were in the Jeannette Macdonald exhibition room at the Restigouche Art Gallery on Jan. 30, celebrating the gallery's 40 years at that location.** PHOTO: ADAM HODNETT **8. An example of Archie Harper's work, found at the Citadel Gallery in Saint John.** PHOTO: MARIO BRIDEAU/CITADEL GALLERY **9. Forty pastel works, from the past four years of Denyse Bouchard's life, were on display at the gallery on Jan. 30.** PHOTO: ADAM HODNETT **10. "Out of the mist" by Denyse Bouchard. More than 40 works of hers were on display during the 40th anniversary celebration at the Restigouche Gallery.** PHOTO: ADAM HODNETT **11. A painting by Nicole Bolduc, in the Athol House Museum.** PHOTO: ADAM HODNETT **12. Kathleen Gallant, a multimedia painter-sculptor, works live during the 40th anniversary celebration at the Restigouche Gallery on Jan. 30.** PHOTO: ADAM HODNETT **13. A pastel work by Denyse Bouchard, as part of her exhibit, Moments.** PHOTO: ADAM HODNETT **14. A painting of legendary guide Richard Adams in the Athol House Museum at the Restigouche Gallery in Campbellton.** PHOTO: ADAM HODNETT **15. A painting depicting a marriage between Quebec and New Brunswick families, at the Athol House Museum. The ceremony was held on a boat, in between both provinces.** PHOTO: ADAM HODNETT **16. More than 100 people attended the 40th anniversary celebration at the Restigouche Gallery.** PHOTO: ADAM HODNETT