

Art Gallery of Hamilton -- chronology

1886: Hamilton Art School founded. This privately sponsored school provided instruction in fine and applied arts and counted Group of Seven members J.E.H. MacDonald and A.J. Casson among its graduates. Faculty and graduates alike begin lobbying for a permanent art gallery in the city from as early as the late nineteenth century. Other organizations who worked towards building a gallery included the Canadian Club (founded 1893), the city's Women's Art Association (founded 1894) and the Art Students' League of Hamilton (founded 1895).

1906: William Blair Bruce, Hamilton-born artist, dies in Sweden. His widow and family, including his father, William Bruce, decide to present Hamilton with a substantial collection of his paintings, and approach City Hall with this offer as early as July 1910. Reluctant to accept at first, City Council recommended acceptance of the donation in principal on February 12, 1912. (In the meantime, Bank of Commerce president Byron E. Walker had approached the Bruce family about donating the collection instead to either the Art Gallery of Toronto – now the Art Gallery of Ontario – or the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa.) The Bruce Memorial Collection consists of 29 paintings, including his masterpiece *The Phantom Hunter*.

January 31, 1914: Art Gallery of Hamilton is incorporated. First board members include Alexander M. Cunningham (photographer) as Chair and John Sloan Gordon (instructor, Hamilton Art School) as secretary. Art Gallery of Hamilton takes up residence on the second floor in vacated Public Library building at 22 Main Street West. The Health Department takes over the main floor in 1920, when the building is renamed the Public Health Building. Art Gallery remains at this address for 39 years, until 1953. During the contravening years, many proposals for a purpose-built gallery were put forward, unsuccessfully, despite the fact that the Gallery was housed in "a substandard building, above all ... a fire trap and not properly insurable." (Ross Fox and Grace Inglis, *The Art Gallery of Hamilton: Seventy-Five Years (1914 – 1989)*). State of the building affects Gallery's ability to attract exhibitions and donations. For example, in 1928, W.A. Wood wills part of his art collection to the City provided that the latter builds a fireproof gallery within a year; the provisions are not met and the bequest is lost.

June 30, 1914: Grand opening takes place at the Public Library building marking the formal acquisition of the Bruce donation.

February 1947: City Council allocates \$8,500 for the AGH, including the salary of a curator and \$4,000 for the conservation of the collection.

November 12, 1947: Thomas Reid MacDonald becomes the first full-time curator/director of the Art Gallery of Hamilton.

November 1948: T.R. MacDonald inaugurates first Annual Winter Exhibition. T. Eaton Co. of Hamilton sponsors prizes; winners are Henry Smith's *Market Day, Hamilton*, for watercolour and Paraskeva Clark's *Road Builders* for oil painting. This annual exhibition becomes a much-awaited event as well as a way to acquire new works for the Gallery's permanent collection; winners (and subsequent additions to the collection) include A.J. Casson's *First Snow*(1952) and the work about which Hamilton Spectator critic Mary Mason wrote, "There are undoubtedly some very fine paintings out at the Art Gallery of Hamilton in this year's Winter Show, but the winner of the purchase prize is not, alas, one of them" (February 1, 1957). The work was none other than Alex Colville's *Horse and Train*.

December 12, 1953: The new purpose-built Gallery, at Forsyth Avenue and Main Street in west Hamilton, is opened by the Right Honourable Vincent Massey, Governor General of Canada. Building architects Husband, Robertson and Wallace design a one-storey gallery with exhibition space totaling 10,000 square feet. (Incidentally, the current Gallery is growing from 29,000 square feet to 36,500 square feet of new and refurbished Gallery exhibition space post-renovation.) Humorous aside: on April 13, 1953, the cornerstone to the new building is laid with great ceremony ... and promptly stolen. The 250 pound stone is later recovered in an Ancaster creek bed and re-installed.

1960: Eleven paintings stolen from Gallery.

1965: McMaster University unveils plans to expropriate RBG lands on which Gallery is built, halting plans to expand on present site. Plans for a Civic Square in downtown Hamilton – including an art gallery, theatre, convention centre, trade centre and new library – are also unveiled. In this same year, the works stolen in 1960 are recovered following an anonymous tip to police.

1973: T.R. MacDonald retires, having developed one of the most highly regarded collections in the country. Glen E. Cumming succeeds him as director of the Gallery.

October 1, 1977: Lieutenant-Governor Pauline McGibbon opens new Art Gallery of Hamilton, designed by architect Trevor Garwood-Jones.

1989: Robert Swain, formerly of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, becomes third director of the AGH.

April 1991: Financial crisis causes Gallery to lay off 6 of 27 staff members and close an additional 2-1/2 days a week.

January 1992: Ted Pietrzak, formerly of the Burlington Cultural Centre, becomes the new director.

February 1997: Once again, financial situation causes Gallery to lay off staff member.

December 1997: Ted Pietrzak resigns and AGH head of administration Robert Ridge becomes acting director.

October 1998: Louise Dompierre becomes the new executive director of the AGH.

January 1999: Hamilton born and raised architect Bruce Kuwabara and his firm KPMB win a design competition to renovate the building. Plans include encasing the leaking building in a golden steel envelope and creating a glass-enclosed front entrance on King Street.

2001: *Jade, The Ultimate Treasure of Ancient China* comes to the AGH during the summer. The exhibition attracts over 27,000 visitors, topping attendance at its stops at venues in Victoria and Vancouver.

2003: The Gallery announces a gift of international significance: the Joey and Toby Tanenbaum Collection of Nineteenth-Century European Art, over 200 works described by Louvre Department of Paintings curator Jacques Foucart as a collection that would “because of its diversity and originality, act as a foundation for a museum; a museum which, far from replicating what can be seen elsewhere, would provoke great and well-founded curiosity.”

October 2003: The Gallery begins its \$18 million recladding and revitalization project, funded by the Canada-Ontario Infrastructure Program (through the Governments of Canada and Ontario), the City of Hamilton, Dofasco, and the generous support of corporations, foundations and individuals.

April 2004: Gallery opens *Future Cities*, its off-site (and award-winning) exhibition project featuring works by local, national and international artists.

December 2004: Gallery, along with David Rokeby, represents Canada at the Sao Paulo Biennial in Brazil.

May 2005: The Gallery re-opens to the public with the banner exhibition *Heaven and Earth Unveiled: European Treasures from the Tanenbaum Collection*.

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