

**Ontario Society of Artists: 125 Years.** ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO. 23 October 1997 - 4 January 1998.

The Ontario Society of Artists (OSA) was formed in 1872, the same year as the Public (now National) Archives of Canada, to encourage artistic development and production in the province and to provide the opportunity for an annual exhibition for its members. Originally known as the Toronto Society of Arts, its membership was open to professional artists from Ontario and from across the country and was one of the first professional artists groups in Canada, in addition to the Art Association of Montreal.

In March of 1877, the Ontario legislature passed “an Act for the encouragement of agriculture, horticulture, arts, and manufactures...” which provided for the incorporation of the OSA and for an annual grant of \$500.00. The “encouragement” to the artists by the OSA consisted of annual exhibitions and the establishment of an art library, a picture gallery, and an art school, now the Ontario College of Art. The first exhibition was in 1873 and the current exhibition is the 124th, as they have been repeated annually. The activities and needs of the OSA led to the incorporation of the Toronto Art Museum in 1900, which became the Art Gallery of Toronto in 1911 after the bequest of “the Grange” by Goldwin Smith and the creation of additional exhibition space. It became the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1966.

It was most appropriate that the exhibition celebrating the 125th anniversary of the OSA be held in the institution which owes its creation to the Society. Advertised in the AGO Members' Journal, this exhibition was listed as an “intervention on the Canadian wing with special labels...a video and an illustrated brochure.” My curiosity was piqued by the word “intervention,” as I have never seen one before. It was exactly what it claimed to be: an intervention on the part of a team from the curatorial department, headed by Dennis Reid from the AGO and Ernestine Tahedl, James MacDougall, and Andrea Marcus from the OSA, adding a second layer of interpretation and thus more context to the works which make up the permanent collection display in the Canadian wing. In an unobtrusive and quiet way, the intervention was a re-interpretation of the Canadian collection without any change to the permanent display. A large textual banner and small red identifying tags flagging the works of OSA members were the only indication of something different. The other part of the “intervention,” a video entitled “OSA: 125” was located in the hallway by the elevator, a problematic spot because of distracting traffic and noise.

The video is an excellent short piece on the history of the OSA and its links to the AGO, the Ontario College of Art, and to the national art scene. A co-production of the AGO and the OSA, it tells a lively story using archival photographs from the Archives of Ontario and the archives of the OSA and the AGO, with the addition of interviews with artists such as Doris McCarthy and

Fred Taylor. Following the thread of the intervention, that is, following the red tags, revealed the make-up of the membership of the OSA, which at its inception was considered to be the founding society for all artists in Canada, not just for the province. At this time, most of the well-known and highly respected artists such as Paul Peel, Lucius O'Brien, and the entire Group of Seven were members. The brochure added information by indicating the percentage of works in each gallery done by OSA members. For instance, in the Salon, installed in the floor-to-ceiling style of the 1880s, sixty per cent of the paintings are by OSA members, which increased to a full one hundred per cent in the Turn of the Century room. However, by the 1950s, the figure had dropped to twenty per cent. Obviously the OSA fulfilled an important function at its outset and it was common practice to join, but this must have changed by the 1950s since so few artists chose to become members. Doris McCarthy gave one reason for this in her interview: the advent of abstraction was divisive in the Society.

An analysis of the membership leads the viewer to ask questions such as "who was not a member and why not?" A brief look around at the works lacking red tags showed that artists such as Carl Schaefer, Pegi Nicol Macleod, Eric Aldwinckle, and Jock Macdonald were not members. What were the other affiliations or political dramas which affected the membership? More analysis and information on the constituency of the OSA was needed in the display.

The brochure broached the history of the relationship between the OSA and the AGO, two institutions which have little interaction now. The shift from having been very closely associated to becoming quite separate was attributed to the establishment of a network of commercial galleries that offered artists new exhibiting and sales opportunities, which would also account for the lack of need to join the OSA.

Despite all this, the "intervention" pays homage to the OSA, clearly indicating how much the AGO is indebted to the Society for the wealth of its collections and for its existence. While not as splendid as a full-blown celebratory exhibition would have been, the format of the show reveals that something interesting and original can be done without a great deal of expenditure. It was a clever way to add extra context and a new layer of meaning to a permanent collection.

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