

Through the High Windows

Reflections on the 55th Anniversary of the Tom Thomson Art Gallery

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"...I know this is paradise

*Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives -
Bonds and gestures pushed to one side
Like an outdated combine harvester;
And everyone young going down the long slide*

To happiness, endlessly...

And immediately

*Rather than words comes the thought of high windows
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.*

(Philip Larkin, High Windows excerpt, 1967)

Considering art within the social and political contexts of the times in which it was created, provides us with a path to deeper understanding of its message and meaning, and exploring the broad artistic, social, and political environs of the years in which the Gallery was founded reveals a period of saturate complexity and transformation.

Completed in 1967, 'High Windows' by poet Philip Larkin was one of the seminal pieces of poetry written during the legendary Summer of Love. It references middle-aged attitudes towards the younger generation and old customs being forsaken for new freedoms.¹ It also expresses a powerful metaphor for the transcendence of the human mind and consciousness towards an unfettered state of worldly abandon that is both infinite and undefined; perhaps an allusion to psychedelic experiences or to the psychological release from past social and religious strictures towards a new uninhibited and dis-habituated philosophical and spiritual way of being.

The Summer of Love was a massive social phenomenon that occurred during the summer of 1967, when more than 100,000 (mostly young) people converged in San Francisco's neighborhood of Haight-Ashbury. These hippies, or flower children, were a diverse group that embraced folk music, hallucinogenic drugs, anti-war campaigns, and free love. Many in this

group were suspicious of the government, rejected consumerism, opposed middle-class values and the Vietnam War, but were broadly concerned with art, spiritual practices, communism, and naturalism.ⁱⁱ

The 1960s was an era of revolutionary change on all fronts, filled with the vehemence of politics and yet a sense of extraordinary optimism. It was the age of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. The Beatles released their famous album, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band and started their Magical Mystery Tour. Bob Dylan had just finished rock and roll's first double-album monument *Blonde on Blonde*, to which the singer and poet famously reflected "(It was) the closest I ever got to the sound I hear in my mind...that thin, that wild mercury sound" – the album, filled with restless imagery, defiance, uncompromising poetry, and hard-driving etherealities – still stands as a powerful artistic evocation of the tumultuous, raw, lusty and love-lost, shackle shattering aesthetic of the times.

*Inside the museums infinity goes up on trial
Voices echo, "This is what salvation must be like after a while"
But Mona Lisa must have had the highway blues
You can tell by the way she smiles*

(Bob Dylan, *Visions of Johanna*)

1967 was also a water-shed year in Canada. It was the centenary of Canadian Confederation and celebrations culminated at Expo 67 World's Fair in Montreal. The National Gallery of Canada undertook an exhibition of 350 works of Canadian art covering 300 years, the largest exhibition of Canadian art ever shown at the time. Simultaneously, *Voice of Fire*, an acrylic on canvas abstract painting made by American artist Barnett Newman was commissioned for the International and Universal Exposition. This work would later be loaned to the National Gallery of Canada in 1987 and then spark a major controversy over its purchase in 1989. In terms of politics, 1967 also saw two prominent federal leaders, Official Opposition Leader John Diefenbaker, and Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, tender their resignations. The year also saw changes in youth culture with the hippies in Toronto's Yorkville Village scene making headlines through ongoing confrontations with police and Toronto City Council.

By all accounts Owen Sound was also in the fray of these times that were a 'changing with a growing post-war population with divergent interests and tastes. Pictures from that time-period reveal bustling streets, burgeoning businesses, packed cafes, and a happening music scene. Styles of fashion and cars reveal a mix of squares and mods, with a balance of conservatism and a beat towards modernism. From out of the shadowy arches of old social archetypes and tropes, there was a large young population emerging with new ideas about gender equality and independence. It was also ten years since Owen Sound's centennial which was not only one of the largest celebrations ever held in the region, but also served to provide a

pivotal moment in which the identity of the city was more formally forged and honoured, a time when people connected to the core of the city's heritage and future aspirations.

Although it could not be known or predicted, in the years following 1967, Canadians began to face the schisms and inequities that had been rendered invisible beneath the surface of thick colonial rhetoric. It set in motion the next 55 years, in which Canada dealt with two secession crises, a confrontation over our economic identity, and a crucial political activation of Indigenous nations. These were, and continue to be, fundamentally decisive struggles within the growth of our country and important to establishing common ground in which to bring people together.ⁱⁱⁱ In terms of art, 1967 in all of its glory, celebration, and upheaval, set the stage for radical re-thinking, curatorial expansion, inclusion of Indigenous practices, and the formation of new organizations across the country.

In 2017, Doug Saunders wrote "Once the bucket of Canadian identities had been kicked over by 1967's spasm of centennial joy, a cascade of new realities, new ideas, new institutions and new ways of living came flooding out. Fifty years later, we are still awash in their novelty. We are the children of 1967, the entirely new people who came out of that container."^{iv}

Indeed, the Tom Thomson Art Gallery was one of those institutions birthed from out of that proverbial container. Although the origins of the Gallery can be traced to a church purchased by the Grey County Historical and Art Society in 1959, and by 1964 the Gallery had collected several works by Thomson and members of the Group of Seven, it wasn't until 1967 that the City of Owen Sound ratified the construction of the Gallery as a Centennial project and officially opened the Gallery.

Born into a changing world, the Gallery was anchored by the passion of the Historical and Art Society which, between 1959 and 1965 stewarded several pivotal donations that would create the footing for what has become a seminal 2600+ collection of historical and contemporary Canadian art.

Twenty-five artworks by Tom Thomson were donated during those formative years by members of his family, establishing the core of the Gallery's Tom Thomson collection. In subsequent years, donations continued to be received from extended family, making the Gallery's collection of Thomson's artworks the fourth largest held at a public gallery in Canada and the only collection to be built solely through the personal connections with Thomson's family.

The Lyceum Club and Women's Art Association of Owen Sound, which had been involved in art education since the group was founded in 1909, was instrumental in helping establish the Gallery in the community and had purchased three oil sketches from the Tom Thomson estate in 1927 which they had displayed in various public buildings over the years until the Gallery was established.

One of the early goals for the art committee of the fledgling gallery was not only to have a collection of Thomson artworks but also to acquire a work by each of the members of the Group of Seven. A.Y. Jackson was an early patron of the Gallery, visiting Owen Sound in 1956 to show his support in establishing a Gallery in Thomson's honour and in 1961 Jackson donated nine paintings by various artists, including one of his own. A community member donated a J.E.H. Macdonald painting from their collection and another person with ties to the region purchased a work from A.J. Casson to give to the Gallery and later Casson himself donated one of his paintings. Yet another community family gave funds to purchase an Arthur Lismer painting to celebrate their family member's 100th birthday, while the community raised funds to buy a Franz Johnston. At that time, the Gallery was also awarded its first art purchase grant from the Ontario Arts Council to obtain a Franklin Carmichael work.

Following this flurry of activity in January 1967, a major bequest from D. I. McLeod came to the Gallery. McLeod, who grew up in Owen Sound and became a financier and art collector in Toronto, left a legacy to the Gallery which included a Tom Thomson, two Jackson paintings, a Macdonald, a Holgate, and several other important historical Canadian works. Cumulatively, these pivotal donations served to anchor the Gallery as an important institution within the growing landscape of Canadian art.

Tom Thomson, the Group of Seven and their contemporaries were just the start, the expanding collection continues to explore the results of their enduring influence on living artists as they make their own comment on the Canadian landscape and Social Justice issue today.

Over the 55 years since 1967, the Gallery has been under the guidance of 10 Directors, each of whom has contributed to the growth and evolution of the Gallery and its collection. Having the opportunity to reflect on the moment of the Gallery's arrival on the scene during a complex time-period in Canadian and North American cultural, political, and social history, and the subsequent years of its commitment to representing the visual arts in Canada, is as much privileged as it is interpretive. We can look at the context of the times and the characteristics and proclivities of each gallery Director, Board, or Committee, to try to understand the nature of our acquisitions, but ultimately, we can truly only look to the art itself to find and understand the motivations and ideations of the times in which the pieces were created. Like archeologists, we are inviting visitors to intimately look and sort through layers of time, precedents, styles, and iconographies; to find patterns of thoughts and themes, deviations that marked changes to culture and artistic practices; to gently, or vivaciously, dig out the raw and essential parts of what comprised our community and national interests over the last five decades. Bringing 55 art works, each representing the year that they were created from 1967 to 2022, into a single exhibition creates an unusual and compelling curation that is both creatively dissonant and cumulatively collaborative. The pieces do not just exist as lone specimens, they speak to each other; they reach out through time towards us - to captivate and corroborate, to conspire and conceive of new and old realities.

It's important to pause at this moment in the Gallery's history, to recognize that we are in the vast space that is between the past and the future; a place from which we have such opportunity to make our mark on this journey, this community journey that is the Tom Thomson Art Gallery. We stand in the wake of many people who came before us - donors, supporters, members, visitors, collaborators, volunteers, artists, staff, committees, boards.

This Gallery isn't a building. It's not a financial sheet. It's not a warehouse of objects. It's not a trivial pursuit of leisure or culture. It's not an accessory on the body of more important civic work.

What this art gallery is, is the people.

The people who in 1959 saw the value of art and ideas, who believed it was important to the health and wellbeing of their community. It is the family of Tom Thomson who gave of his work freely to our city to be shared. It is the over 500 donors who have given art since that time. It's the hundreds of staff and volunteers and board and committee members who have given years of their lives. It's the hundreds of exhibitions we have presented, the thousands of artists we've work with who have brought before us topics that are changing our world. It's also the over one million people who have come through our doors, to find, to share, to know, to see.

Art matters. It matters because it takes on the biggest conversations of our times – whether that's oppression, genocide, racism, sexism, the environment, aging, or the pandemic. The language of art is the landscape of our lives. And it's personal. It's social. It's political. It's human. And most of all, it's essential.

Going down "the long slide," we can witness the powerful expanse of the present hanging in the balance of a past - a kind of metaphysical space; a deeply spiritual point of departure that is "endless." I see this as the meaning of our work, the defining place and role of art galleries – to be a space that exists limitless, within the promise of all possibilities, where the sun comprehends the glass and we are the high windows.

ⁱ Copyright © 2022 Interesting Literature Designed by WPZOOM, A Short Analysis of Philip Larkin's 'High Windows' ([A Short Analysis of Philip Larkin's 'High Windows' – Interesting Literature](#))

ⁱⁱ (Bill Petro, *History of the Summer of Love — 1967: Sex, Drugs, and Rock & Roll*, May 31, 2017, [History of the Summer of Love — 1967: Sex, Drugs, and Rock & Roll | by Bill Petro | History of the Holidays | Medium](#))

ⁱⁱⁱ Doug Saunders (*In 1967, change in Canada could no longer be stopped*, *Globe and Mail January 1, 2017*) [In 1967, the birth of modern Canada - The Globe and Mail](#)

^{iv} Doug Saunders (*In 1967, change in Canada could no longer be stopped*, *Globe and Mail January 1, 2017*) [In 1967, the birth of modern Canada - The Globe and Mail](#)