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By KARINA DAHLIN

THE ART of COLLECTING

A somewhat curious heritage

U of T has a significant art collection, a fact that surprises many. People usually know of the art at Hart House but have no idea where the University collection is. The secret is that it is a collection of collections spread all over. It is a remarkable and somewhat curious heritage, says Professor Kenneth Bartlett, chairman of the U of T Art Committee. "It is not a result of a conscious program but of a series of historical accidents that the University finds itself as a collecting institution, a major repository of art." There are the usual institutional objects, like portraits and busts of past leaders, but most of the pieces have been bequeathed to the University.

Located in a large city, just blocks away from the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Royal Ontario Museum, the 3,000-piece collection does not provide the same cultural focus and has not been given as much prominence as university collections in smaller towns. But it is worthy of attention and has received a fair share of it lately.

Two years ago Elizabeth Legge was appointed the University's first full-time professional art curator. A native of Toronto with a B.A. in English from U of T (Trinity 7T3) and a Ph.D. from the University of London (1986), she worked for two years as a curator of the Winnipeg Art Gallery and assistant professor at the University of Winnipeg. Her first task at U of T was to ensure that the collection was secure and properly cared for. Next came bringing the inventory up to date, a job that sometimes led her to dusty basements and unused closets in the search for forgotten works. She discovered that one was missing. Charles Daubigny's *Maisons au bord de la rivière* was listed in the 1979 inventory and rumoured to be on loan to New College but no one has seen it. Legge continues to search and hopes she will find somebody who knows of the picture's whereabouts.

Following the theft in 1987 of six Group of Seven sketches, Legge proposed that the Faculty Club acquire contemporary landscapes. The decision was not based on financial considerations - the club's art subcommittee thought it was a good opportunity to add some modern works to its collection. The place may never be the same. *View from a Monument* by Tom Hopkins of a chipped and fallen bust bathed in orange light has already attracted puzzled comments. And members will surely react to the title of an oil-pastel-wax-and-varnish work by Allan Harding Mackay. The words are on the piece in large letters: *The Torture of Morality*.

Legge says the new paintings will fit in and create a more interesting environment. "However difficult some people may find contemporary art, it's the art of our time. For better or worse, the University as an institution of higher learning has to be involved with contemporary culture as well as preserving our historical collections."

The Faculty of Applied Science and Engineering houses one of the historical collections. A graduate of the faculty and a keen art collector, J. Edgar McAllister (1870-1959) left about 20 pieces to the faculty, including the missing Daubigny. Dean Gary Heinke would like the bequest reduced by a piece. Eight years ago, Ariadne Abandonne, an 1889 painting of a reclining nude by Henri Fantin-Latour was found in the basement of the Galbraith Building. It had been stored for years and was damaged by water during the 1977 fire at the Sandford Fleming Building. It was repaired and hung in the dean's conference room until Heinke had it removed for security reasons. He was also ribbed by visitors for displaying a female nude and if there is one thing a dean of engineering does not need it is comments about being sexist.

The teasing was not the main reason for his wish to sell. The painting is by far the most valuable piece in the collection - estimates range from \$50,000 to \$250,000. Heinke thought the money would be well spent on projects to attract more and better students and received permission from the trustees of the McAllister estate to sell the work. He also had to ask the University art committee for permission and was turned down. He appealed the decision to the president but without success.

Heinke has accepted the verdict with difficulty. His concern is the long-term health of the institution and he questions the wisdom of holding on to a valuable piece of art when the University's financial resources are decreasing. Although he worries that engineers will be labelled enemies of art, he only wanted to sell one piece. Now he is scrambling to find the money from other sources.

Bartlett speaks for the University with just as much conviction. He compares the sale of art for financial gain to the demolition of Hart House for a supermarket development. "This is a University. We don't engage in fire sales because of difficult financial times. We do not sell our patrimony to realize capital for operating expenses. The University owns an art collection that is in the public domain and we are its public trustees. It is our responsibility to sustain that collection."

Bartlett sees Heinke's request as an isolated incident. Heinke, however, views it as a question of policy. The problem arises, he says, from the University's four-year-old guidelines for "acquisitions, de-accessioning and disposal of works of art" that say a work may be sold for a number of reasons but not for lack of cash. "We have created a monster," says Heinke. "An internally imposed art policy puts me and others in an impossible position."

The reclining nude, meanwhile, is a ward of the Art Gallery of Ontario where she and other University holdings are being looked after until there is enough money to build a quality care gallery. A minimum of \$1.5 million is needed to transform the ground floor of the Laidlaw wing of University College into a facility with proper climate-controlled storage conditions. Bartlett hopes an endowment can be built up to pay for the gallery's operating expenses.

The central gallery will store, conserve and display various pieces and accommodate visiting exhibitions. Individual faculties and departments will continue to house their own collections. Valuable pieces on loan to other galleries can come home, and U of T will be able to accept donations. "We were approached by a major collector with a very important collection asking whether the University would be interested in receiving it," says Bartlett. But because there were several pieces in it that needed museum-standard care the art committee had to pass up the opportunity.

Erindale and Scarborough Colleges are also upgrading their galleries to meet professional standards. Terry Nicholson, curator of the Scarborough collection, says the college has worked hard for the past 10 years to make art a part of its program. An art collection is a good and inexpensive way to draw visitors to the college, he notes.

Not all visitors are welcome, however. In recent years the art world has experienced "an orgy of record prices," says Legge, and thefts have increased dramatically. The University has always tried to include its art in the day-to-day lives of faculty, staff and students. Paintings, prints and sculptures are found in hallways, classrooms and offices for the enjoyment of all. But this only works where there are people with an interest in the collection. Some constituencies like Hart House, University College, Scarborough and Erindale have their own curators; others rely on dedicated volunteers.

In that respect dentistry is a "model faculty," Legge says, and much of the credit goes to Professor Anne Dale who teaches basic science and is an enthusiastic caretaker of dentistry's historical collection. Most of the portraits at dentistry are by "good, solid Canadian painters," says Dale. She and her husband, Jack, who used to be the curator, have saved and restored numerous pieces so the faculty can keep a record of its history. She also cares for the hundreds of instruments, chairs, certificates and memorabilia that belong to the dentistry museum and is constantly on the lookout for additions to the collection. Most importantly, dentistry encourages its graduating classes to contribute to the conservation of art works as their departing gift to the faculty.

An art committee chaired by Professor Joseph Bielawski is in charge of the faculty's impressive contemporary collection that includes the large mural at the Edward Street entrance by Carmen Cereceda, commissioned by the class of 1962 in memory of Alan Black, a fellow student, "for his humanitarianism and his commitment to continuing education."

To some the mural is an eyesore, to others it is bold and fascinating. Everyone agrees it has changed the character of the lobby. And change, as proponents of contemporary art would say, is as good as a rest.

Caption:

The Torture of Morality by Allan Harding Mackay on the left and at right, Developing a Fishing Village as a Honeymoon Resort by Eleanor Bond and Litteratus with Flowers by Will Gorlitz

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