

artist to collect

Arabella Canadian Art Magazine | By KYLIE SEREBRIN | Fall Harvest Issue, 2013

Finding His Voice

The phenomenal beauty of Canada is the ultimate inspiration behind Gordon Harrison's art and life. One of the country's foremost landscape painters, Gordon creates from a happy place in his heart, where colour, paint and possibility swirl together to celebrate the natural splendour that surrounds him.

Once a little boy lost for words, art has given Gordon a powerful voice through which to communicate his thoughts and passions. "I was born tongue-tied and unable to express myself verbally," he explains. "Only my mother understood me – other people thought I had a disability. So, my journey as an artist began when I realized that the only way to express myself was to draw on paper. I like to think that this early 'disability' was a major influence on my art."

Gordon was born in Montreal, into a family of great entrepreneurs. His great grandfather Harrison founded POM bakery, a Westmount institution which still exists today. His great grandfather Leach sold Leach pianos. Although Gordon worked at the bakery for a short period of time as a boy, and attended many 'dollar concerts' offered by the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, he knew that his own creative spirit belonged to art and the magnificent Canadian landscape – "to the colours of Canada," as he puts it. This recognition later led Gordon to the University of Toronto, where he studied landscape architecture.

Building a reputation

Like many artists, Gordon's first exhibitions were held at his home, and friends, relatives and colleagues were invited to attend. Once he moved into his first 'official' studio in the Ottawa community of New Edinburgh, Gordon's life partner, Phil Emond, began contacting several galleries to represent him. "The first gallery to accept me was the Jack Pine

left & right: **peupliers de piedmont** laurentides, québec oil on canvas 48h 24w

Gallery in Ottawa,” Gordon recalls. “An artist always remembers the first real gallery that exhibited his or her work. I was very excited – not only was my first painting in a gallery, but it was hung between two originals by Tom Thompson and A. Y. Jackson! The gallerist said that my work stood proudly beside them, and I sold that momentous painting.”

The next major milestone in Gordon’s career was his inaugural expo. Phil decided that it was time for them to try the Toronto Art Expo, which they did to great success – despite having little experience under their belts. Critiques of the show judged Gordon’s landscapes to be among the best works presented, instilling immense pride and encouragement in the pair. Exposure from the Toronto Art Expo paved the way for their participation in the New York Art Expo, among others. Subsequently, Gordon’s gallery representation branched out from Ottawa, in order to meet the rising demand for his work. Even more importantly, these shows taught Gordon and Phil the enormous pleasure of meeting the people who bought and collected Gordon’s gallery representation branched out from Ottawa, in order to meet the rising demand for his work. Even more importantly, these shows taught Gordon and Phil the enormous pleasure of meeting the people who bought and collected Gordon’s landscapes and hearing how they connect with and love them.

It’s not surprising, then, that Gordon and Phil decided to open the first Gordon Harrison Landscape Gallery in the Byward Market in 2007. “We wanted a space where people could wander in and see my work whenever they wanted to. At someone else’s gallery, an artist is lucky to have one show a year and to have a few pieces exhibited throughout the year. At the Gordon Harrison Landscape Gallery, I could showcase my work all the time. Opening our very first gallery was the best thing we could have possibly done. It was so wonderful to have people drop by to meet us, to discuss my work and to tell us about works they had purchased previously. My career would not be complete without meeting the people who admire my work. They give me the adrenaline I need to keep going,” says Gordon.

Three years later, The Gordon Harrison Landscape Gallery had outgrown its original location – at least in Phil’s opinion! “Phil had driven by Sussex Drive and seen a ‘For Lease’ sign in a large retail space. I only found out about the move when he brought out an expensive bottle of champagne and made a toast at a dinner party,” Gordon recalls. “I was shocked and scared, but today I realize it was the best move we ever made. It was certainly a huge step, but the bigger location has allowed us the opportunity to offer other Canadian landscape artists a site at which to exhibit their works, as well.”

The new gallery’s grand opening was an overwhelming success: the space was packed, people were waiting outside to get in and paintings flew off the walls!

After 14 years at his original studio in New Edinburgh, Gordon was ready for yet another move – this time, to a new studio. In June he and Phil purchased his mother’s house (located just a few blocks from his previous workspace), which they have since completely renovated into Gordon’s studio sanctuary. Poetically, this new studio occupies the same space where Gordon held his very first shows in the early 1990s.

Since that time, Gordon Harrison, his studio and his gallery have become celebrated Ottawa treasures. Years ago, the City of Ottawa invited Gordon and his annual garden exhibit of landscapes to be part of Doors Open Ottawa. Gordon is also an elected member of the Society of Canadian Artists and L’Académie des Beaux-Arts du Québec.

A Laurentian Love Affair

Though Gordon has built his spectacular gallery and studio in Ottawa, there is a part of his soul that has always called the Laurentian Mountains home. “I was practically raised in the Laurentian forest, spending much of my 60 years at my family’s retreat on Lac-des-Îles in the municipality of Entrelacs in the Laurentians,” he notes. The Harrison family’s love affair with this region began when Gordon’s great grandfather Leach visited the lake in 1902, where he was so impressed by its landscapes and beauty that he traded a piano for 10 acres of land.

“The Laurentians have provided me with so much inspiration over the years,” Gordon muses. “I remember as a young boy admiring the tall hemlock trees on my parents’ property. As a youth, I loved trees and was obsessed with having all species around me. I recall travelling by boat to the different islands on the lake and delicately placing into my small craft the transplanted trees I had found. As I slowly motored home and anticipated the new environment for my treasures, I was so pleased with myself. This boyhood excitement and passion for nature has never left me.”

Today, Gordon and Phil own their own piece of land on the lake, surrounded by 100-year-old white pines, where they have built a stunning property known as the Pine Point Lakehouse. “I absolutely love it there, encompassed by tranquility,

beautiful sunrises and sunsets, majestic mountains and the miraculous colours of the four seasons,” he states. Pine Point is now run as a Bed & Breakfast, as well as Gordon’s Laurentian painting studio and year-round home away-from-home. “I think my great grandfather would be proud to know that we have continued the tradition he started over a century ago, five generations later,” Gordon mentions with a smile.

Inspired by Canada

The Canadian landscape is, and has always been, what inspires Gordon. He enjoys the immense variety it offers – the small fishing communities of the east coast, Charlevoix, the shimmering waters of Muskoka, Georgian Bay and Lake Superior, the prairies and the majestic Rocky Mountains “Painting the Canadian landscape means searching high and low for the perfect subject matter. This is enjoyable, but it often requires travelling long distances,” Gordon notes. His journeys have taken him across the nation – from the rocky shorelines of Newfoundland to the sweeping valleys of British Columbia.

Gordon is strongly motivated by the colours of nature. He says, “Colour plays an extremely important role in my art, and I often introduce colour combinations that one might not necessarily see with the eye but which, when combined, look real and make sense for the viewer. I freely and fluidly change my colour palette to suit the season or the mood I wish to create, and every season I offer a different collection that is evocative of its character and ambiance.”

Something as simple as stumbling upon a magnificent mature birch forest in Killarney Provincial Park is often enough to strike awe in Gordon and spur him on to create an entire collection of woodland landscapes. The majority of his subject matter inspiration comes from his own backyard, however – from his seasonal trips across Gatineau Park and the Laurentians. During these hikes, he takes countless photographs that will be creatively interpreted and translated onto canvases.

How photographs become paintings

Upon returning from a ‘field trip’ with hundreds of photographs, Gordon narrows the bunch down to a select few. The next day, he can hardly wait to get up in the morning to prepare the canvas and colour palette he’s dreamt of all night. He begins with a detailed pencil sketch of an image on a white canvas, which he subsequently goes over with India ink. If you

look closely at Gordon’s paintings, you’ll see that he leaves part of the black ink outline exposed. “I like the effect that the blackness creates in small areas on the canvas. It creates a 3-dimensional look,” he explains.

Before applying any paint to the canvas, Gordon premixes all of his colours. Only by doing so is he able to visualize his painting at its completion and avoid interruptions to his concentration during the painting process. Working directly on an unglazed white canvas is also important to him, since he finds it keeps his colours pure, strong and clean. For Gordon, the immediacy of coloured oil paint on a white canvas is paramount – over painting muddles his colours. The secret is applying his paint with minimal blending and applying it in areas so that the viewer’s eye has resting spots along its visual journey.

Gordon works in oil paint, using mainly brushes, with some palette knife work. “I like to focus on the brushwork, but sometimes for larger paintings I find myself placing the paint on the canvas with a palette knife and then continuing forward with brushwork,” he points out. Because he is not a ‘blender,’ Gordon’s brushstrokes are very visible and bold – a signature of his personal style.

There is no doubt that our great historical Canadian landscape painters, such as the Group of Seven, have had a strong influence on Gordon’s work. In fact, galleries and art critics often describe his work as what the evolution of the Group of Seven might look like – if they were still painting today. Gordon feels that this description is a true analysis of his style. He points out that if viewers look carefully at his paintings, however, they will find the significant influence of another great artist: Jean-René Richard. “You will see his broad, vivid brush strokes reinterpreted in my style,” says Gordon. “I have some of Jean-René Richard’s works and I admire them every day.”

Giving Back to the Art Community

Gordon receives enormous fulfillment from coaching others and giving back to the artistic community that has nurtured him. Thus, over the past 6 years, teaching has become an important mission for him. Gordon now hosts one-on-one master classes out of his Ottawa and Laurentians studios, in which he guides his student through his process – such that the student leaves with a finished painting at the day’s end. Gordon also offers weekly group classes for 10 weeks, four times each year. “I love to share my techniques with people from all over,” he states. “I’ve coached amateur painters, experienced painters and school students – from the elementary to college levels. I believe it is very important to give back to the community and help others pursue their talents.”

To this end, Gordon and Phil founded The Art Inspiration Program in 2009. This entails choosing a school and taking its students through Gordon's artistic journey. "I believe it's very important to expose children to art at a young age – particularly as schools continue to experience budget cutbacks for their art curricula. The Art Inspiration Program is an emotional adventure. I give so much of myself when I do it, but the return from the children is so great that I simply must repeat the experience," he explains. Gordon talks to the kids about his experience as an artist, to let them know that it's possible for them to become artists, too. But his main message is for them to always make time for art – whether as a hobby or professionally – throughout their busy lives ahead. Gordon then assists each child in reproducing one of his paintings, after which an art auction is held to raise money for the community. "There is nothing more flattering than when a young person I've coached demonstrates that I have inspired him or her. They become my children," he asserts. Gordon recalls a particularly touching story of an 8-year-old boy, Henri, who asked his parents for a one-on-one coaching session with Gordon for his birthday. "Henri showed up at Pine Point with a white painting shirt, so delighted! We spent the day painting a lovely waterfall together. To this day, his framed painting hangs proudly in his home. I still see him at the lake and he always smiles, remembering the special day we spent together painting," describes Gordon.

For adults wise enough to take time out of their hectic lives to replenish their creative and spiritual reserves, Phil and Gordon developed the Pine Point Lakehouse Art Retreat. Over the course of a week, groups of 5 or more are invited to stay at the lake house in the Laurentians and paint together. They offer additional activities, such as a scavenger hunt, cooking lessons from a Cordon Bleu chef, outdoor yoga and their famous murder mystery dinner party. By the end of the week, participants feel very connected because they share one passion – art – and when the time comes to depart, Phil and Gordon often meet with happy tears. "I love that we are able to unite people with a desire to create art, and that this binds them. It feels wonderful to know that many of our guests will stay in touch with each other," he notes.

Nourishing his own creative spirit

When Gordon is not in one of his studios, at the gallery, in a painting supply store or travelling to acquire new photographs of prospective subject matter, one will find him either on the lake or at the table. "My kayak on Lac-des-Îles is where I go to escape from the world and get in touch with my love of nature. I love the call of the loons and search out their nest where I am sure to see them closely," Gordon shares. He also truly loves to eat – especially Phil's cooking up at the Laurentians. "My father used to make blueberry pancakes from our blueberry bushes at the lake, and today Phil continues the tradition by making them for me and our guests," he reveals.

Gordon credits Phil with filling his life with many such warm memories, love and encouragement. "If it weren't for Phil, who works tirelessly to inspire me and promote my work, my dreams would not have come true. We are a great combination and I hope that all artists have the opportunity to find a Phil out there," he says. In his view, it's vitally important for artists to stay connected with others who share and encourage their passion. "Artistic aptitude is a gift some are fortunate to possess, but I believe those people who motivate us to cultivate our talents are also a great gift. A shared love of art and the reward of seeing my art come to fruition gives Phil and me the motivation to continue each day. Art, love and life are inextricably linked – they are all about making a difference in the world."