



raising business skills to an art form

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He's been called the eighth member of the Group of Seven, but even someone with the prodigious talent of Ottawa landscape painter Gordon Harrison doesn't get by on artistic chops alone. Indeed, Harrison has worked hard to avoid the cliché of the starving artist, or, worse, the cliché of the starving artist who spends his life in both poverty and anonymity, only to have his genius recognized posthumously, when it does him no good.

Earlier this week I sat down with the painter and his manager and life partner, Phil Émond, at the Gordon Harrison gallery on Murray Street in the ByWard Market, to discuss Harrison's growing reputation and, not incidentally, revenue. What I discovered was that while art may be open to interpretation, and beauty in the eye of the beholder, business remains business, whatever the métier.

To wit:

There's no substitute for hard work: For 31 of his 55 years -- until his recent retirement -- Harrison toiled in the planning department at the City of Ottawa, ensuring that developers followed the rules and regulations of the City's Official Plan. In the mid 1990s, he took on a second "job" as he increasingly spent his evenings, weekends and vacations painting. You can call it a labour of love, and it was. But you can also call it labour, an unflinching commitment in time and resources (paint ain't cheap, nor canvasses, nor travel) in service of a new career.

Recognize when you need help: Harrison showed his first paintings at his mother's house. He sold canvasses immediately -- yeah, he's that good. But he also recognized early on that there's a vast gulf between selling the occasional \$300 landscape to a small (albeit appreciative) local audience, and making a living as a professional artist. Seven years ago, he hired Phil Émond to be his manager, to take over the various duties of marketing, promotion, branding, accounting, gallery liaison and public relations. The move paid off immediately: With Harrison free to concentrate on producing art, and Émond in charge of the day-to-day machinery of the business, sales increased eight-fold over the last six years.

Court clients, cultivate relationships: In the seven years pre-manager, Harrison had a mailing list of perhaps 50 clients and prospective clients. Post-manager, that mailing list now includes upwards of 2,500 names. “You have to connect with the right clientele,” says Émond. “Anyone who’s bought a painting. Anyone who’s been to one of the studio shows, or to the gallery. It may take five or six visits before someone purchases a painting, so it’s important to keep prospective clients in the loop, to allow them to establish a relationship with the artist over time.”

Target marketing: Truism No. 1. says that when it comes to landscape painting, people tend to fall in love with scenes with which they’re already familiar, places they’ve lived or visited or otherwise become emotionally attached to. Truism No. 2 holds that the market for fine art is, of necessity, dominated by wealthy people. The intersection of these truisms should, therefore, be a commercial goldmine. So it was with Harrison’s series of paintings on Rockcliffe landmarks; so it likely will be when he tackles the Muskoka region this summer.

Risk-taking: Two years ago Émond convinced Harrison to open his own gallery in the ByWard Market. The reasons were several: They were tired of paying 50-per-cent commissions to other galleries in Ottawa, Toronto and London, Ont.; they were tired of fighting to get paid by occasionally unscrupulous gallery owners; and most importantly, they wanted a place where they could showcase entire collections of Harrison’s paintings year-round, instead of in dribs and drabs at the whim of other gallery owners.

It was not an inconsequential risk. Market rents are high, and for the first time pressure would be put on Harrison to produce enough new work to hang on the walls and cover the additional overhead, including staff. But risk-taking is also an essential part -- in fact, the definition -- of entrepreneurship, without which businesses can’t grow. Again, the move paid off: The money the duo saved on commissions has more than covered the expense of running a boutique gallery, and the additional street-level exposure had been a marketing bonanza.

Branding: Shortly thereafter, Harrison produced a hardcover book of his work to date, selling it at various book stores around town and, most significantly, at the National Gallery of Canada. “A lot of people would leaf through the book after touring the National Gallery, see that my gallery is only a couple blocks away, and come for a visit,” says Harrison. “It’s proven

to be a great marketing tool.” The book, in turn, has been followed by a calendar. “Some people can’t afford to buy a painting, but want something they can give to their friends or family. It’s a great way to get my paintings and name more widely known.”

Weathering the economic storm: Popular wisdom says that when the economy tanks, luxury items are the first things people stop buying. Some artists respond by cutting the prices on their canvasses. Harrison refuses to do this, and for good reason: To some extent art is worth what the artist says it’s worth. Having spent 15 years cultivating a customer base and acclimatizing them to prices of between \$3,000 and \$6,000 for major works, cutting prices would send the wrong message. Instead, Harrison has opted for a different strategy, holding the prices on major works, but painting more, smaller canvasses to capture the lower end of the market.

Setting goals, following through: Last year, Harrison’s work was exhibited for the first time at the prestigious McMichael Gallery in Toronto, where the Group of Seven are not only on permanent display, but are actually buried (all but one). This year, he’ll be participating for the first time at the New York Art Expo, where booth fees and expenses are expected to top \$12,000. “We have to be pretty confident we’re going to sell paintings, and we are,” he says. Next up, Europe, perhaps starting with Switzerland, where there’s plenty of money and plenty of landscape. The point is that Harrison continues to push himself. He believes he has the potential to be one of Canada’s most important painters, and he’s determined to drive toward that goal.

Follow your heart: Of course, it’s not all business, and to suggest otherwise would be grossly misleading. There’s more to art than the mercenary pursuit of money and recognition, and Gordon Harrison would undoubtedly continue to paint, as a hobbyist and for his personal gratification, even if he never sold a canvas in his life. But if you can manage both, if you can be true to yourself, pursue your first love and make a respectable living at it, why not?