

The Burlington Arts Centre

‘Life is short and art is long. (Seneca)

By: Barbara Ramsay Orr

The first thing that strikes you about the Burlington Art Centre is its energy. Even on a quiet Tuesday afternoon, there are visitors in the main gallery, artists working in the studios, art classes in session and meetings being held.

This is a living arts centre, and it’s an ideal place to visit, not just once but repeatedly, to appreciate the talented artists whose works are featured here.

And maybe, if you get inspired, you’ll sign up for a class or join one of the seven guilds who call the BAC home.

Contemporary Canadian Ceramics

The fame of the BAC is often tied to its collection of Contemporary Canadian Ceramics, the largest such collection in the world. In the Brock Lobby in the main entrance hall, you will see parts of this collection – take particular note of “King Cow” by Patrick Amiot and Bridgette Laurent, a “combo of Hollywood absurdity and folk art”. It was one of the earliest ceramic pieces acquired by the centre and one that engages everyone who passes by, especially young ones. It is full of surprises – the longer you look at it, the more things you notice. The church and the cow, of course, but there’s also a priest, and a policeman, birds on a telephone wire, a couple of airplanes and a farmer with his milk pail.

“Spring Pantry” by Victor Cicansky is another early piece that continues to grab attention. The festering squashes, sprouting potatoes and leaking preserves never fail to provoke discussion.

And just inside the main door is Ann Robert’s “Floating Woman”, a magical and sensual sculpture of woman and fish. It is an important piece that was a special purchase by the gallery and paid for by fundraising.

Other pieces of the collection are displayed throughout the centre, in passageways and corners.

We are very lucky to be able to enjoy this world-class collection.

The Guilds

Another element that makes the BAC very special is the collection of dedicated studios for the seven guilds that make their working home here. Not many art centres have working artists who are regulars at the gallery, but the BAC has attracted dedicated artists who join the guilds and utilize the space, as well as share their knowledge by teaching classes in the centre.

The seven guilds which have fully equipped studios in the centre include Fine Arts, Handweavers and Spinners, Hooking Craft, Photography, Potters, Fibre Arts, and Sculptors and Woodcarvers.

The guilds inform others about their craft, and share their skills. Typically, anyone who is interested in a particular area will begin as an amateur and progress, sometimes to the serious amateur or professional level, and perhaps will then choose to join a guild.

“You don’t have to be an expert to join one of the guilds,” explains Sandra Baker, Director of Development & Marketing for the Centre. “The guild members are bonded by their love and passion for that particular art form.”

Each guild has an annual juried exhibition and there are ongoing rotating displays of guild work throughout the centre. When I visited, the potters’ guild had a juried exhibition in the small F.R. Perry gallery, and I was pleased to be able to enjoy a close and leisurely appreciation of each piece in the show. At other times, the fine arts will be displayed, or photography or textile art.

Exhibitions: Alight: Chris Bacon Selected Works

The large AIC Gallery displays rotating exhibits that usually remain for about six to eight weeks. The gallery features senior level artists, though not necessarily local ones. The artist featured this Fall is a local, Chris Bacon, whose magical bird paintings are photographically realistic yet also interpretive. There are 60 paintings in this exhibition, representing thirty years of work. Each one is a product of high craftsmanship and sensitive observation.

In company with this exhibition is an interactive family activity booklet, ideally one that can be used as a guide and discussion starter by visitors. If perhaps parents or grandparents bring children to Chris Bacon’s show, they can explore different ideas and themes in the paintings. The booklet is designed to help young viewers to connect with the work and with the environment. How does a wing work? How does the artist observe the birds?

“The booklet helps to guide the appreciation of the paintings as well as underline the importance of protecting our environment” says Baker. “There are lots of activities, like word jumbles and puzzles, that can be used in the gallery or taken home. It has proven very popular – the booklets are flying out the door!”

‘Alight’ will be in the AIC Gallery until November 9th. The artist will give a tour and talk on October 31st at 1:30 pm.

Art Etc

Whenever I need a one-of-a-kind gift for a special person, I head for Art Etc., the gift shop in the Burlington Art Centre. There are whimsical plates, decorative bowls and wall hangings, silver and semi-precious jewellery, hand painted scarves, and comical teapots. If you need an inspiring or just beautiful note card, you will find one here. There are pieces of woodworking and of iron, and there are elegantly turned pots. From a piece of art glass by Robert Held to jewellery by Lisa Ridout or an inukshuk by a Cape Dorset carver – everything in the shop is hand crafted by a Canadian artist.

You will also find the art rental department here, with over 400 carefully selected pieces available for rent. It gives you a chance to try out a work in your home space to be sure it is the right piece, but you must be a BAC member to use the art rental service. Monthly rental fees range from \$18.00 - \$100.00 and artwork may be kept for up to three months. If you decide to purchase the piece, the rental fee is deducted from the price. All works

come framed and ready to hang. It's a great way to test-drive a piece of art before you invest in a purchase.

Shoreline Café

After you've spent some time absorbing the exhibitions, stop in to the Shoreline Café, a casual space to enjoy a cup of tea and dessert. Light lunches are also available.

Restful Spaces

The Burlington Art Centre is a place for lingering, and almost any time you visit you will find someone enjoying the bright warmth of the Conservatory. It is an oasis in winter, and there are sculptural pieces placed along the walks as well as comfortable places to read, contemplate or just absorb the positive energy of the plants and sun.

There is also a pleasant courtyard that serves as a venue for different installations every summer. Many people take advantage of the opportunity to appreciate the intersection of nature and the art.

Exterior Pleasures

The bright orange metal sculpture on the lawn in front of the Burlington Art Centre has been controversial from the first day it appeared, but, as Sandra Baker notes, everyone certainly noticed it. Now it has become almost a familiar friend to locals. On the Nelson Avenue side, there is another interesting [sculptural piece](#) by sculptor Greg Payce, called Alumina. Look carefully – Payce is more interested in the negative space, and the perceptive viewer will find another form between the forms.

Behind the centre is a green space with a circular garden and benches, so visitors can enjoy some quiet time.

Nearby Attractions

After your visit to the [Burlington Art Centre](#), a few steps outside will bring you to the waterfront, where you can enjoy a pleasant walk along the breakwall, or children can play in the Dofasco Waterjet Plaza (in season). Discovery Landing is a contemporary style building that overlooks the lake. Here you'll find one of the area's best restaurants, Spencer's on the Waterfront, great for a relaxing drink on the patio while taking in the views of the lake and the Skyway Bridge. If you are in the mood for a hamburger or a simple ice cream, there's the more casual Bite Cafe downstairs. Beyond Discovery Landing is the Rotary reflecting pool that is perfect for sailing model boats. In winter it becomes a popular skating rink.

Also within easy reach is the Joseph Brant Museum, a replica of the 1800 home of Joseph Brant, one of the original founders of Burlington.

Upcoming Events:

The Art Centre is a busy place and never more so than in the Fall.

From November 6th until January 23rd, the [Maker's Choice 4 Exhibit](#) happens. This is a continuing series in which members of the Waterloo Potters Guild chose a selection of work from the permanent Collection of Canadian Ceramics at the BAC and write their

personal maker's evaluation of their choices. The opening reception will be on November 7th from 2-4 pm.

The Wearable Art Sale on November 13th, 10 am to 4 pm, gives visitors the opportunity to purchase hand-crafted creations, jewellery, clothing, scarves, purses, accessories, hats and more.

Shopapalooza, November 17th at 5 pm, is a fun night of food and fashion, the proceeds of which support programs at the Burlington Art Centre. Local merchants showcase flowers, jewellery, and fashion, and there is a fashion show as well as food from different area restaurants.

The Soup Bowl & Christmas Sale is perhaps one of the Centre's most popular events and it has become a tradition for many visitors. Each day at noon from November 25th to 28th, as well as 6:00 pm on Friday, you can choose your own artist-created original bowl, and choose a great soup to put in it from a choice supplied by local restaurants. Add a roll, salad and dessert, and you have a really satisfying meal. Best part is, you get to keep the bowl!

At the same time as the Soup Bowl, the Centre rolls out its annual Christmas Sale, where original works of art, pottery, photography, sculpture and wood carving are for sale. The quality of the pieces is exceptional, and you can find a Christmas gift at this sale that will be a unique collectible.

Entrance to the Burlington Art Centre is free of charge and it is 99% accessible.

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