



Media Centre
Editorials

Cultural evolution: Steeltown becomes Artstown
(783 words)

With the reopening of the revamped Art Gallery of Hamilton featuring the breathtaking pieces of the Tanenbaum collection, Hamilton's burgeoning arts scene gains international importance.

BY JULIE OVENELL-CARTER

No one actually ever came right out and told Pritti Kohli and David Brace that their dream of opening a high-end commercial art gallery in Hamilton was just plain crazy. Still, "you could hear the doubt in their tone of voice when they said things like, 'Well, good luck to ya,'" recalls Kohli, a 33-year-old Hamilton native who opened the Transit Gallery on south Locke St. with her Ancaster-bred husband in 2001.

"Now that we've been around for four years, people are always asking, 'So when are you guys moving to Toronto?' But it's been clear to us from the beginning that we're right where we should be. We saw a gap in what Hamilton had to offer, and we had faith that we could fill it."

Anyone driving over the Skyway Bridge with its notorious view of Steel City's industrial backside could be forgiven for writing Hamilton off as an artistic wasteland. But the reality is quite the opposite: Kohli credits a steady influx of Toronto-transplants and other new residents for helping to fuel a "burgeoning" arts scene. "People arrive with their big-city expectations," she says, "and Hamilton is rising to meet them."

One of those people – Bill Curran, an architect who recently returned to his native Hamilton after many years in the U.S. and Toronto – believes there's never been a better time to explore the city's cultural side. "There has been a great reawakening," he says.

Curran is a fan of the Transit Gallery's opening receptions held the first Friday of each month. Almost 75 people regularly turn up to meet the established and emerging contemporary artists whose work is on exhibit. Transit led a wave of gallery openings; in the past four years, another half-dozen commercial galleries, such as the upscale You Me Gallery on James St., have arrived in Hamilton. Some are shared venues: at Gallery 435 on Barton St., for example, patrons walk through an exhibit to get to a small performance space; likewise, the Blue Angel, near Gore Park, features a gallery and a small stage used for poetry readings and theatrical performances.

Both Kohli and Curran acknowledge a regular "an air of anticipation" for the exhibits at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, the third largest public gallery in Ontario which reopened in 2005. The AGH's opening exhibit featured pieces from the Tanenbaum collection, which Jacques Foucart, one of the Louvre's chief curators, described as "...a foundation for a museum; a museum which, far from replicating what can be seen elsewhere, would provoke great and well-founded curiosity." Observes Kohli: "The expansion they've made to the building, the investment they've made, it says there's a real commitment to the future of the arts in this city. It bodes well for the entire arts community."

Across town at McMaster University is Hamilton's other major public art draw, the McMaster Museum of Art, which Kohli describes as "a hidden gem" for its excellent collection of contemporary European works. The museum houses the Herman Levy collection featuring works by Impressionist and Post-Impressionist masters such as Monet, Pissarro, van Gogh, and Braque.

Beyond the visual arts, Hamilton's cultural scene sparkles with music, theatre, opera, and literary events. "It's not a matter of having to search for ways to pass the time," says Kohli. "It's more like having to choose one event over another." She keeps track of what's on by picking up a copy of The

View magazine, a weekly compendium of arts news and event listings available free at retail and arts venues around town.

Kohli looks forward to Theatre Aquarius productions, and to Staircase Theatre performances – “something different every day of the week: poetry readings, film screenings, comedy reviews.” She drops by 33 Hess for jazz, and Junction Café for the LitLive events held the first Sunday of every month. Most recently she took in a reading by award-winning poet Lorna Crozier.

She recommends the free summertime music concerts at the Royal Botanical Gardens, and at the top of her to-do list, she says, are upcoming performances by the Hamilton Opera and the Hamilton Philharmonic. She’s also looking forward to the many seasonal arts-related festivals including the Festival of Friends – the longest-running folk music festival in North America – in August. Observes Kohli: “It’s all there waiting for you, everything you want in the arts. You just have to start looking for it.”

The woman who “never had a doubt” that Hamilton was ready to support a high-end art gallery isn’t offended when people express surprise that Transit is still in business. “First-time visitors are completely blown away by everything they can experience in this city,” says Kohli. “It feels really good to be part of something that’s growing and thriving.”

Information

Tourism Hamilton: 1-800-263-8590 or www.tourismhamilton.com

Art Gallery of Hamilton: www.artgalleryofhamilton.com

Canadian Tourism Commission: www.travelcanada.ca

Ontario Tourism: 1-800-668-2746 or www.ontariotravel.net

Getting There

By air: Air Canada (1-888-247-2262 or www.aircanada.ca) and WestJet (1-800-538-5696 or www.westjet.com), offer direct flights to the John C. Munro Hamilton International Airport.

By land: Hamilton is easily accessible by car from any direction (Toronto, the Niagara region and Buffalo, as well as the London, Windsor and Detroit areas) via Highway 403 and the Queen Elizabeth Way. Go

Transit (1-888-438-6646 or www.gotransit.ca), Greyhound (1-800-661-8747 or www.greyhound.ca) and Via Rail (1-888-842-7245 or www.viarail.ca) also serve Hamilton.

An award-winning writer, Julie Ovenell-Carter launches her travels from beautiful Bowen Island, B.C. She fell in love with Canada at a very young age while travelling in the back seat of a '64 Ford Falcon.