

Art historian extraordinaire

By Robert Amos, Times Colonist July 21, 2012



Art historian Kerry Mason, with an Emily Carr piece at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, got her start as a university instructor in 2001 - teaching an Emily Carr course at the University of Victoria.

Photograph by: Adrian Lam , timescolonist.com (July 2012)

Though she hasn't lost a bit of her youthful enthusiasm, Kerry Mason has been an educator, promoter and general explainer of the art history of this province for a long time. We first met in July 1977, when the provincial government's Emily Carr Gallery opened under her directorship.

Mason says that then-minister Grace McCarthy's office called her "out of the blue" and asked her to put together "a tiny, perfect gallery." It was in Carr's father's former dry-goods shop on Wharf Street, in a building owned by the province. For the next 11 years, she presented art from the Provincial Archives' collection of Carr's work and met people who shared her passion. Mason regaled me with tales of the day Flora Hamilton Burns brought in Carr's "Adam and Eve" hooked rug, and the time a Mr. Smith from the Okanagan decided to remedy the lack of Klee Wyck pottery on show by donating 30 pieces of his own.

Mason was born in Edmonton but came to Victoria as a child. Her father was a doctor and her mother, a ballet teacher, was devoted to the arts. She told me of her days at Victoria High School: "Miss Thomas, my lovely librarian, came by and slapped down a copy of the Book of Small," she recalled, "and said 'you'll really enjoy this.' That was the beginning of my connection with Emily Carr."

Also at high school, Tom Mayne was her "irrepressible history teacher. I really credit him with so much in my life," she said. "He was a great friend, a great mentor and a really great teacher." When I recalled that Mayne was one of the sparkplugs of the Community Arts Council, Mason noted that under his influence, she was later on the board of the CAC for 10 years.

She was proud to be a student in Martin Segger's first class at the University of Victoria, and it was the legendary Alan Gowans who set her on her path. "We just dropped to our knees in front of him," she said. "We were in awe of his lectures - three hours every Monday night, from 7 till 10. It was just saturation and he was so, so knowledgeable about everything." After two years at UVic, she took off for three years in Europe to see the art first hand.

Ever a glutton for learning, she eventually took a master's degree in art history. She soon came to realize that, though she knew a lot about Emily Carr, she didn't know enough about First Nations art. To her good fortune, in 1995, she was hired by Victoria's Alcheringa Gallery. In six years there, she met the top artists and curated, researched and interpreted their art. During that time, she also set up the Black Tusk Gallery in Whistler.

It's quite a story. A lawyer in Chicago contacted her and explained that he would like to have a gallery in Whistler. "We'll open a bank account in your name, and you can rent a space, find the artists, hire a staff and put on the shows." Naming a date three months away, he said, "We want to open it on New Year's Day."

Mason was "a kid in a candy store. I had a bottomless bank account and I could play. He just wanted a toy. The irony is," she concluded, "that it made money for this lawyer. It was a success." After two years, she left the staff to run it. "It's still ticking over in Whistler," she told me.

Since then, she has predominantly dedicated herself to teaching. In 2001, she told her friend Betsy Tumasonis, a professor and painter, "I find it absolutely unbelievable that a person can get a degree in history in art and never have had Emily Carr's name mentioned." To which Tumasonis replied: "Do you want to teach a course in Emily Carr?"

Apparently, people wanted to know about Carr, for Mason's course filled immediately and she has been teaching variations on the theme ever since. In addition to her work as a sessional instructor at UVic, she teaches at the Victoria College of Art, Western State College in Colorado, and is in demand as a lecturer in Xalapa, Mexico, and across Canada.

She has also followed Carr's footsteps, travelling in 1981 to up-coast villages to research a story for Beautiful British Columbia Magazine. Subsequently, in 2005, she headed a 12-day travel study expedition for 26 people, taking them by bus and boat up the Skeena River and around Haida Gwaii. This thrilling trip was repeated in 2011. Next year, she'll be leading many of the same students (of all ages) to New Mexico to visit the sites relevant to Georgia O'Keeffe.

And through this time, Mason has been busy as a consultant. "Helping estates, doing authentication, explaining to people what they have - I'm after the stories again," she laughs. She writes catalogue entries for auction houses and appraises art. "The phone never stops, the emails never stop," she says. "There are endless projects out there."

Her life path demonstrates that, with personality, intelligence and a bit of luck, art can provide a very satisfying career.

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