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Why we do what we do

By Kim Skene, Program Manager, Tom Thomson Art Gallery



Art Therapist Kirsten Camartin and Exhibitions Coordinator Robert Alton prepare the display *Fostering Personhood through Creative Expression*.

As a staff member at the Tom Thomson Art Gallery, I am often asked “So, what’s new at the TOM?” Well, there’s always something going on at the TOM, and it’s always new and exciting. But right now, as the TOM team begins to gather information for upcoming granting and funding deadlines, sometimes the bigger and more important questions become HOW and WHY ? And while all manner of agencies have their own directives and criteria, these simple questions become increasingly fundamental to what we do here at the TOM – as do the answers.

So, WHAT do we do at the TOM? Well, we have a pretty clear mandate about that, as is echoed in our mission statement: “Inspired by the legacy of iconic Canadian artist Tom Thomson, the TOM connects people to art and generates creative energy that sustains, enriches, empowers and inspires”. And from this very space, you know that this includes innovative exhibitions featuring world-renowned and local artists alike, enlightening educational programmes and engaging events. We develop great community partnerships, enhance the local economy and offer great volunteer opportunities.

Ideally, looking at wondrous art, watching a witty play or listening to a beautiful symphony should never require a quantitative explanation – and sometimes it doesn’t. It is truly exhilarating and inspiring to have our senses and minds challenged by the creative process; the generous donations that come into arts organizations can attest to that. We have a community rich in generous and engaged patronage.

But often, institutions require measurable outcomes to justify their existence, and to some extent, to procure funding. So, just HOW do we measure WHAT we do? We gauge impact by attendance numbers. We calculate successes with financial reports. We measure influence with website hits or likes on Facebook. How many artists do we exhibit? How many art classes do we offer? How many local businesses did we support last year? Our annual budget reflects our import. Our administrative structure and governing body reflects our commitment to what we do. These are all quantifiable, recordable, chartable. Such statistics argue our viability and to some extent our accountability.

Most arts organizations work hard at gathering and keeping such statistical information. It makes us saleable to sponsors, reputable to partners and establishes our credibility within our communities. We

disseminate our records to secure our artistic integrity and to prove our worthiness to receive monies. It is indeed useful information. We accompany such data with full, written strategies for our projects, the socio-economic portent of this work for our community, along with analyses of our audience and projections of our attendance. Sometimes it seems a cold and empirical means to such a beautiful end.

So, WHY do we do what we do?

Slightly less tangible but no less important are the many studies that have repeatedly found that the impact of artistic endeavours goes far beyond the statistical information cited above. The arts inspire and sustain us. Kids exposed to painting, singing, dancing and drama are better students, better critical thinkers and have superior problem solving skills. The arts enrich us. People who go to galleries, to the theatre, and attend concerts are healthier and happier (**Connections between Cultural Activities and Health, Volunteering, Satisfaction with Life, and Other Social Indicators in 2010**, Report by Hill Strategies Research Inc, Arts Health Network Canada). The arts make us all better versions of ourselves and improve our quality of life. The Royal Conservatory in Toronto is conducting a "...research project, *Exploring the Impact of Artful Engagement with Older Adults* that looks at exploring how involvement with the professional arts is meaningful to participants from both a cognitive and psychosocial perspective". And the arts empower us. We have had several projects here at the TOM - *Where are the Children, Finding Home, , Growing Up Gay in Bruce and Grey, Fostering Personhood through Creative Expression* - that have all aimed at giving voice to members of our community who could all too easily have become marginalized.

Sometimes, significance need not be measured, and sometimes success does not have a number. And sometimes, the answer to WHY is simply - BECAUSE. Because patrons return again and again to stand for slow, slow minutes in front of the same magnificent Thomson painting. Because kids smile when they paint. Because people argue in coffee shops about the merits (or the lack thereof) of the latest movie offering. Because people really do have strong opinions about where Tom Thomson is buried. Because red is awesome. Because we have gifted regional artists whose work needs to be exhibited. Because people come from all over the world to see our collection. Because everyone should have access to art and galleries like the TOM – because there is always something new and exciting going on.