

Art is an essential tool for community building, says Roosman



By Nate Smelle

One cannot paint an authentic impression of the arts community in Bancroft without dipping his or her brush into the many colours of Arne Roosman. Born in Tallinn, Estonia just prior to World War Two, the artist, lithographer, illustrator and designer of books has resided in Bancroft since moving to the area with his wife Leena in 1988. While enjoying a pint on the patio at his home on the York River, Bancroft This Week caught up with the artist to learn more about what ignites his passion for creativity.

When creating art, Roosman prefers to work from his memory rather than a photograph. This approach allows him to express himself through his art in a more heartfelt and imaginative way than if he simply copied another image.

‘Through technology we are excluding our natural brain to a great extent,’ said Roosman.

‘We are relying more and more on the mechanics that we invent to help us, but they are not helping us.’

Prominently displayed throughout the community, Roosman's art has become an alluring presence for art lovers in the Bancroft area. Last year, his work achieved even greater visibility with the unveiling of a large mural he painted depicting scenes from the town's history. Hung proudly on the side of the building at 23 Bridge Street, next to the York River, Roosman's mural flamboyantly welcomes visitors and residents alike as they enter Bancroft's Theatre District.

When it comes to community building, he believes art should take on a much greater role than it currently does. There is no limit to the opportunities a community creates for itself when it embraces the arts as a stepping stone rather than a stumbling block.

‘The focus of art in a community brings in all kinds of different activities that go with it, because art is not an isolated endeavour,’ Roosman said.

‘The artist buys paints and things, he eats and he meets people who look at and maybe buy his product. Art is good for the economy.’

Living in Bancroft has many advantages as an artist, he said. In the silence of the forests surrounding the town he finds both peace and energy to fuel his creativity. With an endless source of inspiration all around him, this closeness to nature is one of the things he values most as a resident of the community. Recalling one especially close encounter with a pair of wolves in the backyard of his

previous residence on Monck Road, Roosman said that it is through such experiences that he has come to appreciate the area's wildness as an asset for artists.

?We [author, Lorraine Brown and Roosman] had spent the night going over the design for the book on The Story of Canadian Whisky that we were working on and both Leena and Lorraine had gone to bed when I noticed two huskies in the backyard,? he said.

?My dog was looking out the window with me and I thought it was strange, because he was calm. Usually he would be barking like crazy if he saw another dog in our yard. He knew better than me though...these were not dogs they were wolves. The next morning when Lorraine learned of what I saw she could not believe that she missed our visitors. We are very lucky to live in such a place where we can experience such wild things.?

With every piece of art Roosman creates he tells another story. Whether it is understood as he intended it to be or not is of little concern to the artist. For him, the most important part of every story is telling it. To be an artist one needs to do more than just paint pretty pictures, they must be a fearlessly outspoken storyteller... a creative ambassador of sorts for the community they call home.

?When you express yourself in a free way in a free society you also leave yourself very vulnerable; and the antagonists are also free then to attack you,? Roosman said.

?Some of them even think they should shoot you like they did in France. We should never be afraid to speak our minds. Sometimes I wish I were as bold and brave as an artist like Dave Maris. It is really good for the community to have people who are brave and who don't hold back for the sake of social nicety or embarrassment.?

By stirring up controversy artists can encourage people to look at themselves and their communities in a new way. As a community develops a more thorough understanding of its own strengths and weaknesses it acquires greater potential to transform itself into a happier and healthier place to live. In this way art enables us to move forward by helping us discover how to move beyond our differences. A community's ability to improve the quality of life of its members is therefore dependent upon how well these individuals can work together towards a common goal.

?Compromise is the glue that keeps life together; without compromise life can really be hell. We have to understand that we are not the only the one entity and that there is something that ties us together that we should cherish. It's something that we should look for, and maintain.?

At 84-years-young Roosman shows no sign of slowing down his creative output. On Sept. 19 and Sept. 20 he will be exhibiting work as a guest artist along with stone sculptor Al Hasselfeldt as part of the Apsley Studio Tour. In October his work will also adorn the walls of the Wildewood gallery in Maynooth. His art is also on display at the Estonian House gallery in Toronto.