

Arne Roosman big contributor to Toronto art scene

By Jim Eadie

Local award winning artist Arne Roosman has just contributed in a big way to the Bloor Street revitalization project in Toronto with his biggest mural yet that has been installed just in time for the project completion celebration in September. Measuring nearly fifty feet long, the mural is located on Tartu College in the heart of the Bloor Street Cultural Corridor on Bloor Street west directly across from the Bata Shoe Museum. Tartu College houses the Estonian Cultural Heritage Society, The Museum of Estonian Abroad (VEMU), and the Tartu Institute which is devoted to preserving, promoting and explaining Estonian culture and includes a large library and archives.

Roosman is no stranger to Tartu College, as in 1957 he immigrated to Canada from Estonia escaping the upheaval in Europe during and after the Second World War. He was born in 1932 into a large family living in the medieval city of Tallin where his father Axel was a noted lithographer and artist. Learning the trade from his father, Roosman brought those skills with him producing internationally acclaimed works of art, designer of books, stage and murals.

In June 2014 Roosman mounted a show at the Art Gallery of Bancroft entitled "Landscapes and My History," which eventually became a book: "Touch of Arsenic." This work by Roosman came to the attention of staff at Tartu College, who travelled to Bancroft to see the showing. Following the Bancroft exhibition, it was arranged to have the show mounted at Tartu College.

"This year we got the idea of a large mural in order to refresh the look of our college," said Piret Noorhane, chief archivist for VEMU and the Estonian Studies Centre. "We decided to look for someone to do this, and we discovered that Arne was doing murals. We saw photographs of his murals in Bancroft posted online. His style is very youthful, and he has the right feelings for our project." In the location on Bloor Street West, the mural would be surrounded by museums, galleries, cultural centres of all sorts, music, and world class performing arts.

Roosman was invited to a meeting in Toronto in February to discuss the project.

"I had the impression that there would be a competition for this work, or possibly it would be some sort of communal effort," he said. "I looked around, and I seemed to be the only artist at the meeting. I asked them where the other artists were ? and they said: no Arne ? we just want you."

Tears welled up in his eyes as he remembered the great honour and responsibility he felt in that moment.

"We talked about different ideas ? I told them I needed a story to lean on rather than just a piece of artwork."

The group decided to trace the history of The University of Tartu in Estonia from its founding in 1632, to the present day. The university of Tartu is the national university of Estonia, and is the top ranked university in the Baltics.

Roosman worked on the project at his small home in the hamlet of Coe Hill, eventually producing eleven panels that when fastened end to end stretch nearly fifty feet, and is installed at ground level. The original art pieces were digitally copied, and lithographically reproduced to exactly the correct size.

"We are very happy," said Noorhane. "It isn't just about our building. It enhances the whole environment here where we all live and work. We have a drab grey building, and this is just what we wanted. In addition, it is liked by the other institutions that surround us here."

Roosman almost didn't come to Canada in 1957.

"It was sort of an accident," he said. "I had applied to go to the United States. You know that 10 per cent of the population left

Estonia during and after the war. But the US quota was overdrawn.?

Having arranged employment sweeping the floors at an Estonian church in New York City, he was called to the American immigration for a meeting.

?The woman told me that they only have a special quota of one thousand, and I had missed it by four,? he said. ?So I came outside, and looked around, and I saw another old building ? Canadian embassy! So I went inside and presented my case. The only question they asked me: are you a communist? The only thing they were worried about ? you can't be a communist, and you can't have any spots on your chest x-ray.?

At the age of 25, Roosman eventually settled in Toronto, married his wife Liina, started a family, and worked as a lithographer, book designer and artist. In 1988 he took early retirement, and with Liina, settled on the Monck Road near Cardiff after been a regular camper to the area for 20 years. Liina passed away a year ago.

Roosman continues to paint.

?I am the last of the Luddites,? he chuckles. ?I have no TV, or internet, I still love to correspond with friends by letter. I am going to try to live forever ? just like anyone else I guess. But I need to live until at least 90 ? my dog Uku will be 15 by then.? Uku was born on Roosman's 75th birthday.