

With federal dollars in the works, the proposed Mendel move is now a national issue and is viewed with disdain by art lovers and experts across the country in the fields of art and culture. We reprint Vancouver's popular Opus Column (December/09) written by Chris Tyrell. This column has a readership of 60,000 across Canada.

2009 Year-End Wrap Up : December 2009 Opus Column by Chris Tyrell

For this month's column, I am touching briefly on a few topics that I have wanted to mention for a while.

First, a bittersweet initiative in Saskatoon: Many art lovers in Saskatoon are upset that their City is going to close their beloved Mendel Art Gallery (casting off its name and legacy and its historic modernist building in a stunning location on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River) in order to open a new facility. The change in direction happened without public consultation and appears to have been "engineered" by the Mayor and city counselors.

Yes, there is going to be a new and larger facility. But there may also be trouble ahead if Mendel family members seek to withdraw the heart of the Mendel collection—a large body of work that includes thirteen works by the Group of Seven and their contemporaries—as a result of the decisions at City Hall. Worse, the new gallery will, in all likelihood, lose the ongoing financial support that the Mendel/Mitchell family has been providing.

Fred Mendel was a successful entrepreneur and art collector who, in the early 1960s, launched the development of the gallery that now bears his name by donating a large sum of money to the City to build the gallery. The city matched the funds and in October of 1964, the Mendel Art Gallery opened its doors in a building that remains one of the province's finest examples of modernist architecture. The following year, Mr. Mendel donated the Canadian heritage artworks that formed the heart of the institution's permanent collection.

That collection has grown to 5000 items, and in the forty-five years since its opening, the gallery has earned its place in the hearts of Saskatoon's citizens—not only for its collection and exhibitions, but also because of its form and stunning location.

In April of this year, however, the directors of the Mendel Gallery voted unanimously to move from their current site into a new building in a development called River Landing, taking many citizens and its director by surprise. The Mayor and Council, according to Mendel granddaughter Camille Mitchell, stacked the deck by appointing fourteen out of sixteen Mendel directors and by ensuring that Art Knight (who was also on the mayor's special volunteer steering committee charged with finding an attraction to anchor the new development at River Landing) became its board chair. It was the revised board's decision to abandon the site and building beloved by so many, and this is what is upsetting for many art lovers across Canada.

This past July, the Mayor and the city's Councillors incorporated The Art Gallery of Saskatchewan Inc. as a not-for-profit charitable institution with themselves as its board of trustees. And then, in September, the city announced that it had secured national funding to add to its own financial commitment to create a \$58-million fund to build the new Art Gallery of Saskatchewan to house the Mendel staff and collection.

Whereas the City and its council had initially been supportive of a move to considerably expand and renovate the Mendel gallery at its riverside site, they changed direction to inaugurate the new Art Gallery of Saskatchewan and it was how the move was socially engineered that has so many people angry.

What bothers me about this development is the disrespect to the Mendel/Mitchell family and name. At a time when individual philanthropy is more important than ever due to the challenges facing corporations and governments during these harsh economic times, this move discourages individual generosity and public service.

Many institutions the world over began as private collections. From the Medici family to Bill and Melinda Gates, it is individuals who have earned and/or inherited massive fortunes that have collected, protected and donated to society, much of our international cultural artifacts. When governments disrespect these legacies they send bad signals to those who serve us so well.

If you wish to protest the decision to abandon the Mendel name and/or the building, please go to www.savethemendel.org and sign the petition.

About the Author

Chris Tyrell has been involved with the visual arts, visual artists and the arts in general since 1976 when he established Presentation House Gallery of Photography in North Vancouver. He is passionate about the arts and has worked as a consultant for many arts organizations including Emily Carr University, Arts Club Theatre, Vancouver Film Festival and The Roundhouse. He designed, built and managed Presentation House Theatre and he has managed the Waterfront Theatre and Performance Works facilities on Granville Island. He was a founding member of the BC Touring Council and co-founded the Alliance for Arts and Culture in Vancouver. He has taught at Capilano College and the University of Nice. He is bilingual.

Chris is the founding editor of the Visual Arts Newsletter of Opus Framing & Arts Supplies. He established its format and has written every editorial since its inception in 1986. His editorials earned Vancouver Business and the Arts awards for the newsletter. He is the author of Artist Survival Skills: How to Earn a Living.