

## Remembering the Mildred Erb Gallery

The Mildred Erb Gallery had a specific smell of mustiness, an accumulation of dust and artifacts. Some six or so rowing sculls and the Ladybird speedboat almost reached into the gallery space and the ceiling was very low. Lighting—are you kidding me?—no luxury like that. Yes, for sure there were some track lights, and our exhibition committee used them to the best of our abilities. But hey, it was a space to exhibit art in a town, which 20 years ago had just this one room in the basement of 402 Anderson Street as the public art gallery space.

We exhibited art and craft and exhibitions that changed every four to six weeks or so. We wrote curatorial statements and we were ambitious, wanting to make the best with what we had in a space that was squeezed between two rooms with a staircase coming right into it and measuring less than 200 square feet. The Mildred Erb Gallery gave artists an opportunity to exhibit and connect, and that was of utmost importance to building the artistic community in Nelson. We had tons of fun with the exhibitions and over several years many artists exhibited there such as Bridget Corkery (cerra-colla), David Eustace (“Frozen Book” and video), Jane Merks and Peter Bartl (typographic art and design), Art Joyce (masks and poetry), and painters Miroslav Gabriel, John Cooper, Boujke Elzinga, Peter Velisek, Alf Crossley, and Lx Forde, to name a few.

I recall that we paid a very, very small honorarium to the artists. Money was tight and there were no big grants from the Columbia Basin Trust/Columbia Kootenay Cultural Alliance yet. Shawn Lamb, the director of the Nelson and District Museum, Archives, Art Gallery and Historical Society (MAAG) was excellent in stretching every dollar to its max.

And yes, we always had food at the openings, and a speech and artist’s talk. We squeezed the food table between the rowing sculls and the artifacts and all leftovers went home with whoever was in need of food (there was always someone who needed it). Anne DeGrace was working for the Express newspaper back then and she would always review the exhibitions.

Building the arts community and introducing audiences to art was important if we wanted Nelson City Councillors and the City administration to consider the arts as an essential part of community health, not unlike recreation and hockey. It took several years and a lot of effort for the arts sector to eventually become the fourth pillar in City planning documents. A few years, two referenda and an Economic Impact Study on the Arts in Nelson later the City offered the former City Hall, now Touchstones Museum of Art and History, to the arts to build a combined art gallery, archives and museum facility. The arts community also worked towards the establishment of the City’s Cultural Development Committee, a round table of arts administrators and artists that works to ensure that the arts are integral to life in Nelson.

**Stephanie Fischer, 2018**