

## Zeljko Kujundzic and the Early Years of the Kootenay School of the Arts

Nelson has long been deemed the “Best Little Arts Town in Canada”. This reputation has been earned over the last 55 years and counting through the dedication and vision of countless artists and community members. The central force in Nelson’s evolution from primarily a resource industry town to an arts and culture hub was the creation of what is best known as the Kootenay School of the Arts (KSA). The program is now called Studio Arts at Selkirk College. This exhibition outlines the winding and at times rocky road that is the history of KSA, and surveys the artistic achievements of one of its early pioneers, Zeljko Kujundzic.

The first iterations of an arts school in Nelson was the Nelson School of Fine Arts in 1958, which offered two-week courses in the summer in music, drama, ballet and visual arts. Then in 1960, Kujundzic, a fifth generation artist from former Yugoslavia, was hired as principal to direct the new 3 year diploma program offered by the school. In 1961 the school was renamed the Kootenay School of Art. Over next 4 years, Kujundzic would impart his rigorous European “studio method” of instruction that emphasizes the use of local materials such as clay, mineral pigments and metals, and aims to train multi-disciplined artists. Often teacher and student would work together on commissioned projects, much like the Renaissance model of apprenticeship. Kujundzic also emphasized the study of literature and philosophy to enrich cultural depth. The school began to attract a diverse cross section of students, from hippies and homemakers to young artists from across Canada and abroad, drawn in part by Kujundzic’s reputation, as well as the breadth of the courses offered.

During this time unemployment in BC was high, and there was a move by the provincial government to establish Vocational Institutions with one-year technical skills programs. In 1964 KSA became a program within the new vocational school in Rosemont (now Selkirk College’s Silverking campus). Kujundzic resigned on philosophical grounds, and moved to Kelowna, where he created the Arts Centre and the Okanagan Summer Arts Festival.

Although a relatively short time, Kujundzic’s principalship marked the beginnings not only of KSA, but also of Nelson’s re-invention as the “Best Little Arts Town” in Canada.

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