

SHARING ART WITH CANADIANS

The National Gallery of Canada organizes about 30 travelling exhibitions each year for presentation at museums and galleries across Canada. Last year, 32 shows – including *Janet Cardiff: Forty-Part Motet*, *French Drawings from the National Gallery of Canada*, and *Places I Have Been: Christopher Pratt* – travelled to such locales as Whitehorse, Edmonton, and Jonquière.

“Considerable planning, teamwork, and attention to a thousand details make it possible to tour our national fine art collection across the country,” says Daniel Amadei, director of exhibitions and installations. “And, as we are in constant dialogue with museum professionals from institutions of all sizes, we are able to, on a yearly basis, address such issues as on-site security, varying financial resources, and problematic environmental conditions related to ageing buildings.” The Gallery’s On Tour program, as it is called, “is the most extensive of its kind in North America” Amadei adds with enthusiasm.

Curiously, the general public is only vaguely aware of its existence. Karen Colby-Stothart, the Gallery’s chief of exhibitions management, finds this situation perplexing. “People from outside the Gallery often tell me we should do more across Canada,” says Colby-Stothart with a chuckle of disbelief as she points to the massive, multi-year schedule of travelling shows affixed to her office wall. “It’s absolutely jam-packed. It’s hard to imagine how we could possibly do more than we’re doing!”

The Gallery’s program of travelling exhibitions began modestly in 1912 and within a few years became a permanent and integral part of the Gallery’s activities. Today, the On Tour program lies at the very heart of the Gallery’s mandate to share its collection with Canadians. In response to challenges posed by vast geography and small population, and venues struggling with inadequate financial resources, it has become the country’s de facto model for national outreach. “In contrast, the American model is structured quite differently,” says Mayo Graham, the Gallery’s director of national outreach and international relations. “They have a strong network of wealthy art communities that organize local outreach programs *and* major museums with sister facilities to receive their big shows. That sort of scenario simply doesn’t exist here in Canada.”

What does exist is a carefully conceived and implemented outreach program that strikes a balance at making the collections of both the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography (CMCP) and the National Gallery (they were separate until 2000) available to museums and galleries across the country. To keep the program fresh and relevant, about ten new projects are created each year. “Balanced programming is key,” says Colby-Stothart. “We make an effort to put together masterpiece shows, small shows, focus exhibitions, large survey exhibitions, prints and drawings, paintings, Inuit sculpture, and cutting edge avant garde.” However, as Colby-Stothart explains, the travelling shows are not simply “knock-offs” or “scaled-down versions” of the Gallery’s programming. About 50 percent are originally produced for the Gallery’s in-house presentations. Another 50 percent are created exclusively for the On Tour program, their

conception often inspired by such events as the Gallery's purchase of an important new work.

Among the shows in highest demand, according to the Gallery's 2004 survey of client galleries and museums, have been those offered in the Masterworks series, such as *Masterworks of Nineteenth-Century French Realism from the National Gallery of Canada*, the fifth in the series, which travelled last year to Regina's MacKenzie Art Gallery, the Edmonton Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, and to Fredericton's Beaverbrook Art Gallery. (The sixth instalment, *Baroque Masterworks from the National Gallery of Canada*, becomes available for Canadian tour in September.) Such shows significantly enhance the capacity of venues to offer high-calibre programming, thereby attracting larger audiences and increasing their revenues.

Whereas shows conceived and organized by the Gallery account for about 75 percent of On Tour's programming, another 25 percent involve a high degree of collaboration between the Gallery and the venues themselves. For example, the MacKenzie Art Gallery is preparing a retrospective exhibition of the works of Joe Fafard, an artist of their region whose work is widely represented in their collection and in the National Gallery's. The show opens in Regina in September 2007 and, following its presentation in Ottawa, will tour from July 2008. "It makes absolute sense that MacKenzie would want to conceive and organize the content for the show," says Graham, "while we take the lead on organizing the tour." Graham says such partnerships "are becoming more the trend," and that the Gallery's director "continues to spearhead our looking for opportunities to collaborate, for projects that might be on the horizon."

Another such collaboration involves the National Gallery and the Vancouver Art Gallery's (VAG) co-organization of *Emily Carr: New Perspectives*, which opens in Ottawa in June and travels to the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, and Calgary's Glenbow Museum. In this instance, the National Gallery's curator of Canadian art, Charles Hill, and the VAG's senior curator of Historical art, Ian Thom, combined their considerable scholarly expertise on Emily Carr, with input from Johanne Lamoureux, of the University of Montreal, to conceive and develop the content for the show. The National Gallery assumes responsibility for the first presentation in Ottawa and the production of the exhibition catalogue and the Vancouver Art Gallery is coordinating the loans and tour. It is one of three On Tour shows featuring a "return" of the artist's work this summer to his or her region: *Norval Morrisseau – Shaman Artist* begins its tour in Morrisseau's community of Thunder Bay, Ontario. *Christopher Pratt* travels to St. John's, Newfoundland, Pratt's birthplace.

The Gallery's art education research site, CyberMuse, is ideally suited to support the On Tour shows. The site makes available pertinent resources, including artists' biographies, reproduction galleries, and a databank of current video interviews with living artists represented in the NGC/CMCP, which venues can easily access. "Gone are the days of mega shipping of learning materials and setting up displays!" exclaims Louise Filiatrault, the Gallery's

chief of education and public programs. “We’re giving the venues the tools they need to drill deeper into the exhibition. Institutions can take this information and adapt it to their own medium, whether it’s a brochure, a guided tour, or a recording of the featured artist talking about his or her work.”

Likewise, the guest curator program is an important innovation of the travelling exhibitions program. Curators from across the country compete for the opportunity to conceive and develop an exhibition, based on the national collection, to be included in the On Tour program for a two-year period. The 2004 winning proposal, by Marnie Fleming, from Oakville Galleries, is entitled *Is there a there, there?* Featuring works by about 20 artists in a mix of photography, painting, sculpture, video, installation, and ephemeral material drawn from the collections of the Gallery and the CMCP, it is available for tour from April 2007 to September 2009.

David Franklin, the Gallery’s chief curator and deputy director, says the On Tour program creates unique opportunities for the National Gallery’s curatorial staff as well, enabling them to pursue in depth research on discrete aspects of the collection such as the drawings. A series of travelling shows based on the Gallery’s remarkable collection of drawings began as both a Gallery show and a traveling show, he explains. They have since become a favourite of venues across the country. (The most recent of the series, *British Drawings from the National Gallery of Canada*, is currently on tour.)

Franklin says the scale of the catalogue, “you could carry it around,” the size of the show, “about 70 works, not huge,” and “the whole way they were packaged,” was designed to feed the traveling program. “Without the On Tour program, I don’t think we would have done that wonderful series of Drawings catalogues, certainly not in the same way,” he muses. “For me personally, they are probably going to be the things of which I am most proud.”

– Dilys Leman