

## REPORT ON THE BU ART PROJECT: ACTION RESEARCH TO RAISE THE PROFILE OF THE BISHOP'S UNIVERSITY ART COLLECTION

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**B**ishop's University (BU) is a small Canadian university with a long history of art collecting. Major portraits such as the one of Principal Doolittle—the first recorded artwork in the collection—were commissioned as far back as 1848 (BU Collection, 1998). Or perhaps the sitters themselves donated the portraits as a sort of vanity memento?

Several years ago finding answers to these kinds of questions about the art collection seemed inordinately difficult. For example enquiries with various arts organizations at BU regarding a modernist-style artwork hanging in a busy corridor, apparently signed by Canadian artist David Milne (1993–1953), were unproductive. Other artworks hung about the campus by noted portrait painters such as Robert Harris (1849–1919) catalyzed a quest by the author of the current paper for information about the evident yet elusive art collection. Finally, staff at the University's John Bassett Memorial Library were able to confirm the existence of the Bishops' University Art Collection (BUArt) but there was a surprising dearth of further information as Canadian university art collections are often documented online these days (UVAC, 2012). This resulted in a major research project, initiated by the author, called the BUArt Project.

### **The Collection**

The BUArt Collection consists of more than 440 works of fine art, plus an additional 110 high quality reproductions. Some of the artefacts are stored in a climate controlled archival vault in the basement of the Library but most are exhibited. Indeed the research data indicate that artworks are located in 16 different buildings and over 100 rooms across the Bishop's University campus.

The motivation for this ambitious exhibition mission is revealed in a memorandum written by BU Principal Christopher Nicoll in 1985 to the then fledgling Art Collection Committee:

I firmly believe that the function of the University's art collection is to provide an ambiance which educates as many students as possible, continuously, by its visible presence (Nicoll, 1985).

From a cultural perspective many of the artworks represent not only the history of the University, but also the early settlement of Anglophones in the region, such as hand-tinted etchings by itinerant British traveller William Henry Bartlett and local artist William Hunter Junior, who recorded their impressions of the Eastern Townships in the mid- to late-1800s. Later these romantic images—all summer views—were published in Britain to attract colonial settlers. Other significant works in this genre include engravings done by surveyor Joseph Bouchette who painted non-existent roads into his drawings to increase the area's appeal to potential settlers early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and prints by Jane Anne Cooke of Drummondville and George Bompas of Bury, who both recorded living and working conditions in and around local communities in the latter part of the century (Milot, 1978).

Nearly 40% of the BUArt Collection artworks proper are historical prints or paintings, many of them representing subjects or events influential upon Anglophone settlement of the region. Another significant part of the collection, approximately 15%, consists of portraits of dignitaries of the University. Many of these major works were done by notable creators, ranging from artist and art educator William Raphael's portrait of Dr. Francis Wayland Campbell who helped establish a medical school at the original Bishop's College in 1871, up to contemporary portrait specialist Christan Nicholson's painting of Janyne Hodder, the first woman Principal of the University in the mid 1990s.

In recent years BUArt has become more diverse with cultural artefacts representing Anglophone, Francophone and Allophone creators. Typical of cash-strapped cultural organizations in contemporary times, most acquisitions are via donation, often from the artists or their estates.

While the historic Anglophone part of the collection continues to build, the research determined that valuable bequests are being lost, apparently due to a lack of knowledge—or confidence—that BU is set up to manage significant cultural artefacts. Yet the cultural significance of BUArt—the question of whether it deserves respect or conservation at all—was answered by Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) Conservator Irene Karsten, who inspected the artworks on campus and reported:

... the reality [is] that some of the Art Collection is of sufficient value to justify a higher standard of care. Just as it provides good care for its archives and special library collections, the University could consider

providing proper museum facilities for higher value art (Karsten, 2011, p. 15).

Thus a primary aim of the BUArt Project related to shifting the popular perspective of the collection from that of a fusty collection of “big head” portraits—a common view encountered not only during the research interviews but also in conversations in the broader local community—to a valuable cultural resource with the capacity to sustain the rich Anglophone cultural heritage of the Eastern Townships of Quebec.

### **Methodology**

The BUArt Project was a three-year undertaking with dual goals, the first related to cultural conservation, and the second to meet research requirements for the degree of Master of Education in Art (Niwa, 2012).

Using a primary research methodology of action research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009), the author conducted an initial series of guided interviews of concerned BU community stakeholders that established priorities of accessibility, conservation and collection management. These were addressed by subsequent research actions initiated by the author, with the support of students, faculty, staff and managers, and outside experts. The outcomes were the result of ongoing reflexive deliberation involving the cooperation of many people participating in the research. Successful outcomes from the perspective of cultural conservation are summarized below.

**Conservation.** The knowledge base available to the University Librarian, who is responsible for managing the conservation of the collection artefacts, grew significantly during the BUArt Project due to research actions culminating in a Facilities Inspection of the artworks by a professional Conservator whose report is an invaluable reference for future allocation of scarce conservation resources (Karsten, 2011). Strategic meetings with BU staff who care for the collection improved morale and confidence, and clarified some outdated collection procedures.

Other significant outcomes included new primary source research produced by undergraduate students. For example, several Physics students studied potential damage to portraits in the University Senate Chambers from ultraviolet light (Blais & Calvert, 2011). These kinds of new student research reports help integrate the art collection into regular BU classes as a valuable learning resource.

**Accessibility** to the collection as a cultural resource was improved due to production of a new, permanent digital record of the artefacts by a team of undergraduate students, led by the author, using a project-

based experiential learning approach. Furthermore the visibility of the process of shooting images of the artworks at 27 different portable photography stations around campus generated a new awareness that helped raise the BUArt profile. Other research actions and informed dialogue about access to the new images resulted in development of a new University Art Collection webpage (2012), as well as a new online art loan request form for faculty to facilitate display and rotation of artworks across campus, in accordance with the collection's mission statement (Sheeran, 2011).

**Collection management.** Educative actions involving people responsible for managing the artworks resulted in a commitment to upgrade the collections management systems for greater transparency, efficiency and accountability. Outcomes include a new, digitally-based collections management database with a web-search function, rendering the collection artefacts digitally available to researchers and the public online.

**Legitimacy.** The significant outcomes mentioned above depended upon enhancing the perceived legitimacy of the BUArt Collection, which prior to the action research was popularly in doubt. This was determined by the frequent refrain of "I don't know anything about the Art Collection," a recursive response. The methodology of institutional ethnography developed by Canadian Dorothy Smith (2005) was used to determine how the work of caring for the collection was getting "stuck" due to historic textually-based practises that were no longer effective. A series of recommendations to bring collection care procedures up-to-date were made to improve efficacy.

Other critical research actions helped explicate the inherent cultural value of artworks in BU campus life to raise the collection's profile. Two examples include the separation of a sub-collection of high-quality reproductions into a *BU ArtBank* in order to distinguish them from the *BUArt Collection* "proper" of original fine art, as well highlighting visual arts student works in the John Bassett Memorial Library by identifying them with a distinctive wall label.

Recommendations to create an *identity* for the art collection through branding and the creation of a volunteer Friends of BUArt organization involving the local community were additional outcomes.

## Conclusion

The BUArt Project served many purposes. The research generated practical advice and resources for non-specialist administrators pledged to protect the artworks. Protocols were established for digitization procedures and digital publishing of the artefacts online, critical steps in

improving accessibility. Recommendations were made to modernize collection management, ranging from basic conservation procedures to collection governance to integration of BUArt and the visual arts in general with campus life. Research outcomes include increased recognition of the artists and their artworks. Finally, the research protocols are potentially transferrable to other small Canadian cultural institutions facing similar challenges in conserving their own cultural heritage.

The overall positive response to the BUArt Project is a promising indicator that the University and local communities do value this precious cultural resource. But the question remains: who will *champion* BUArt (personal communication, McBride, D. 2010)? A long-term favourable outcome would be that ideas generated throughout the research dialogue continue to broaden awareness of BUArt and above all that the digital exhibition of the artworks contribute to the vitality of the collection as an accessible historic resource for Anglophone history in the Eastern Townships of Quebec.

**Louine Niwa** directed the BU Art Project in 2010-2011 in partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Education in Art at Bishop's University in Sherbrooke, Quebec (2012).

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