

# History of the GAC Collection

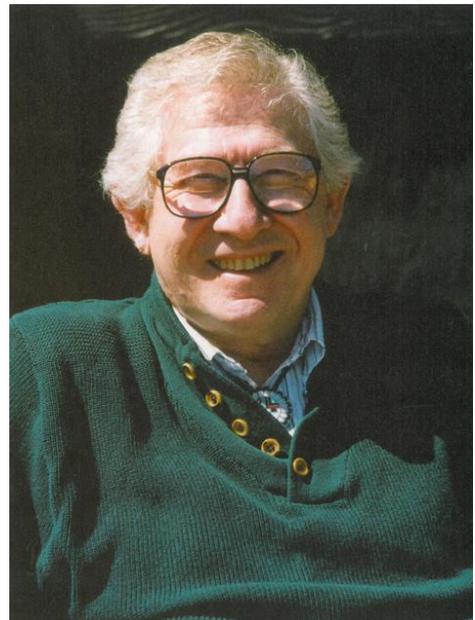
Written by Heather Fullerton, September 2008

The story of the Georgina Arts Centre & Gallery Private Collection is a heart-warming tale of a generous man with an important legacy to pass on to future Canadians – but on his own terms. Mr. Bruce Smith had a gift to give and he was determined to give it to a place where it would count the most. Would it be happily accepted by one of the highest ranked museums or galleries in the country or would it be bestowed upon a small arts center in a low-income town where it was a struggle to bring the arts to the community every day and barely had enough to keep the doors open? Luckily for the GAC, Mr. Smith had a vision of keeping this collection alive and his vision eventually included our little gallery.

I began working at the Georgina Arts Centre & Gallery (GAC) in March 2004. My background consisted of retail management and art instruction for the last seventeen years and I was as green as could be in the curatorial and gallery management field. But the Board of Directors saw something in me and, with their help and encouragement we pushed through the maze of running the Georgina Arts Center & Gallery.

A few months after starting, Nena Marsden (a good friend I had met when we were on the museum Board of Directors together) gave me a telephone number to call along with the name Bruce Smith on a scrap of paper, but when I asked what it was about, she wouldn't tell me. "Just call it" she said – so I did. The man's voice on the other end let me know that Mr. Smith had just had surgery and wasn't available but that he would likely get back to me in a month or so. Fair enough, I had done my part and called.

I got on with the business of running the GAC and the extreme challenges entailed. One day, a few months later, an elderly gentleman walked in to the office and introduced himself as Bruce Smith, Nena's friend that I had called months previous. He took off his hat, sat down and settled himself in a computer chair and we chatted amiably for an hour or two. He was particularly intrigued when I excused myself for ten minutes to perform my "Kids Candy Question of the Day" duties. This project came about because we were experiencing terrible problems with some of the school children who would run into the GAC and wreak havoc every day after school. After trying to control the situation with little success, I decided to reward them for good behaviour – but how to squeeze that out of them? It slowly developed into a wonderful experience whereby the children learned to respect and enjoy the gallery. When they enter, they are given a sort of "hidden treasure" question such as "How many birds can you count in all of the paintings put together?" or "What medium is used for the painting with the tree?" or "What is the name of your favorite painting in the gallery?" and then they are sent up into the Main Gallery to find the answer. When they return to answer the question, and if they have behaved with respect for the gallery, (no running, no shouting, no pushing, etc.) they receive a wrapped candy as reward and go happily on their way without ever realizing that they are actually going through an important learning process that will stay with them forever.



But I digress.

So Mr. Smith came almost every Friday for his weekly visit with me to enjoy a cup of tea together. At that time I actually had the time to enjoy sitting with him and discussing ideas and issues surrounding the GAC – not like nowadays! We became friends and I truly looked forward to our time spent together. He told me he was an artist and that he and his wife, Dolores, came up to their family cottage in Georgina every weekend. He seemed to know a staggering amount of information regarding the arts in Toronto, but I was still a green beginner and didn't know the right questions to ask – we had a very comfortable friendship and he was slowly teaching me, although I had no idea at the time.

A few months and many visits later, Mr. Smith (I could never call him Bruce) was sitting in my office and I was ranting on about a meeting that I had just attended down in the city. It was at the Art Gallery of Ontario and all the “big” gallery directors from across southern Ontario were in attendance. The basis of the meeting was to gather galleries together for a project celebrating the “85<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1<sup>st</sup> Exhibition of the Group of Seven”. The AGO was willing to lend out their Group of Seven paintings for no charge but galleries were required to have proper security, climatic controls, storage and preservation vaults, etc – none of which the GAC was fortunate enough to have at this point. While I was in this meeting, we were all asked to stand one by one and tell where we were from and a bit about our gallery. I was about tenth in line and, by the time it came around to my turn, I was stunned. The people in that room were all from the very top museums and galleries – The McMichael, The National Gallery, The AGO, The Varley, The Hamilton Gallery, etc. They had it all and how could I ever participate in this project without the necessary requirements? I figured now was a good time to grovel. I got up and blurted out “Hello, I am Heather Fullerton from the Georgina Arts Centre & Gallery in Sutton Ontario and I am honoured just to be breathing the air that you all are expelling!” Dead silence. I went on to say that we did not own any Group of Seven paintings to exhibit, that our climatic controls consisted of two old window air-conditioners that decided themselves whether or not to work on any given day, and that our security system consisted of a bing-bong on the door, but I truly wanted to participate any way I could. I offered children’s workshops based on the Group of Seven’s art, seminars, and creative ways to get around the fact that we could not be allowed to have an original shown in our building – but please let us participate! This was met with a resounding round of clapping!

Immediately after the meeting, John Ryerson from Markham’s Varley Gallery, came up to me, introduced himself, and right then became my mentor and friend. One of the things he said was to “never belittle yourself to others” – good advice but not within my personal abilities. At this point I was simply whining and upset that I couldn’t play in the big sandbox with the “grown up” galleries. There had to be a way.....somehow....but how?

“What am I going to do Mr. Smith?” I wailed in my office the next week. “They won’t let us have any of their Group of Seven paintings and we don’t have any of our own. How will I ever be able to be part of this project?” He looked at me with his all knowing smile and said “Well my dear, I may be able to help you with that.” – and the story began.

He asked if I would be able to come to his cottage, along with Laurence Ritchie (Chairman of my Board of Directors), and he would explain how he thought he might be able to help. Laurence and I set off to Roach’s Point the next day and searched for Mr. Smith’s little summer cottage. We found it and were standing knocking on the door but there was no answer. While we were waiting (Mr. Smith was sure to answer any second), I commented to Laurence about the magnificent homes far across the perfectly manicured lawns and gardens. I’d never been this close to such stately homes before and they had my eyes popping with awe. After a few minutes we were ready to give up knocking and go home but then we heard someone calling my name from a distance. I focused in on the voice and realized that it was coming from Mr. Smith who was yelling and waving to get our attention – he was standing in the front door of the mansion! It turned out that the mansion was their family “cottage” and the small building that we had been hammering on was Mr. Smith’s studio.....small for a cottage but very spacious for a studio.



Well, this changed the entire picture! We rushed to meet Mr. Smith and he warmly invited us into their cottage where we met Dolores for the first time and he showed us his wonderful lakefront home. There were no coloured walls and no wallpaper. Everything was painted white and their glorious works of extraordinary art hung salon style – who needs wallpaper? After we calmed down, we went to see his studio where he was finishing off a large painting of a sunflower farm. We relaxed in some big comfy chairs and he explained his intentions.

Many years ago, Mr. Smith's family had sold the family transportation business to CP Rail – it was the largest transaction on Bay Street until that time. This allowed Mr. Smith to have the time and means to follow his dream of being a painter and he then enrolled in classes at the Ontario College of Art (OCA). He also connected with the art community and became a student at a private studio at 719 Young Street (near Bloor) - his painting teacher was the owner, Albert Chiarandini. Albert, a small-in-stature but fiery man of Italian decent, had also been working in the construction industry to support his family but was a gifted artist. Mr. Smith recognized Albert's ability and became not only his student, but also his patron and Mr. Smith's collection of Albert Chiarandini's art began to grow along with a special friendship.



In previous years, when he was much younger, Albert Chiarandini had exhibited and painted with members of the Group of Seven but he would rail at the galleries of the day for taking such a large commission from the artists – how could they survive and still produce art if the galleries took it all? This led to a kind of “black balling” by the galleries and Albert was shunned but he struggled on until Bruce Smith came into his studio one day and set a new course of events in motion. Bruce could learn from a master and yet help him at the same time by purchasing his masterpieces.

Eventually, Mr. Smith owned the second largest collection of Albert Chiarandini's works, only surpassed by the Chiarandini family, and now he had to make a decision – what to do with all of these valuable paintings? What Mr. Smith had not said to me until later was that he knew he had a terminal illness and he wanted to donate his much loved collection to an organization that would cherish the works but also use them to create a living memorial to

Albert. Someone who would keep the paintings alive and never let them sit forgotten in storage - someone who needed them as much as the paintings needed a home. After spending all those afternoons having tea in my office and observing our beliefs and practices in motion, he had decided that the GAC was the place.

I was stunned. First of all I had absolutely no idea whatsoever that Mr. Smith was wealthy. For months he had been just a good friend who had a cottage up here and we shared ideas and dreams of a future for the Arts Centre. Now he was about to give us paintings by Albert Chiarandini who actually had exhibited with the Group of Seven. Mr. Smith was right! This would certainly make a difference in the GAC being accepted by the Group of Seven “project”, in fact, we would suddenly become the place that everyone wanted to see. The project was a huge success for the GAC and it allowed us to leap into the realms of the “big” galleries as a future force to be recognized.

Over the following year, the GAC Private Collection climbed to over 150 paintings with works by both Albert Chiarandini and Bruce Smith – all donated by Mr. Smith. After his passing on December 18<sup>th</sup> of 2005, friends of Mr. Smith asked to have a memorial created for him and donated the funds to do so. The GAC opened the *Bruce Smith Gallery* in 2006, which houses the Private Collection on a permanent basis and allows the public to view these magnificent works.

On December 18<sup>th</sup> 2007, two years to the day of Mr. Smith's passing, Albert Chiarandini died in his ninety-third year. During those two years, we came to know Albert and the Chiarandini family as warm and wonderful people. Albert himself asked me to marry him many times! Of course, he asked most of the ladies that question, but I was honoured all the same. Both he and Mr. Smith had an endearing sense of humour and the ever present twinkle in their eye.



Today, both Joan and Pat Tadier serve on our Board of Directors. As Albert's daughter, Joan grew up watching her father create masterpieces and now she is one of the “keepers” of the GAC's Private Collection. Her brother, Dr. Rudy Chiarandini, and his wife Sandra live farther away but continue to support the GAC. Recently, Dr. and Mrs. Chiarandini donated a

significant sum to start the GAC Building Fund, which will eventually house the new reserve room to properly protect these works of art.

Bruce Smith's family also continue to be involved and support the Georgina Arts Centre both financially as well as with their personal time. Lorne Smith stops in to help us update our computers on a regular basis and Dolores and her children, and grandchildren, attend our Private Collection opening receptions.

It is always a very special time when we remember Bruce Smith and Albert Chiarandini. Over the months of perfecting the "Kid's Candy Question of the Day" I eventually began to include the question "Name the two painters in the GAC's Private Collection!" and the children all call out "Bruce Smith and Albert Chiarandini" in unison.

Before he died, Mr. Smith could no longer make the trip to my office but he would call – always around 3:45pm – just in time for the children to arrive. I could hear the smile in his voice when he heard the children over the phone and he knew that he had made the right decision.

