

'Spirit of art' led curator to ROM

Contributed by Emily Mathieu
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Training program gives First Nations gallery owner chance to learn from top-tier museum

The shadowy halls and vaulted galleries of the Royal Ontario Museum offer visitors the opportunity to come face-to-face with cultures and traditions celebrated around the world. For First Nations curator Louise Thomas it offered a chance to connect with her husband's spirit.

Thomas founded and manages a gallery dedicated to her late husband Roy Thomas in Thunder Bay. The gallery opened in 2005, one year after his death.

"After my husband died, I thought, I need to do something with my life and what I know, all I know, is art. I thought why couldn't I put that to use for our community," said Thomas.

Finding ways to improve operations in Thunder Bay was why Thomas spent three days shadowing ROM employees through Project Beyshick. In its fourth year the project gives First Nations students, entrepreneurs, professionals and community leaders a chance to broaden their business experience by partnering them with executives in a variety of fields.

The project is "my way to say thank you to Canada," said co-founder Aditya Jha, a Toronto entrepreneur who started the project because he felt First Nations people were living in deplorable conditions in his favourite country. This year there were 10 participants and about 60 in the past four years. Jha will be awarding a \$15,000 scholarship to the participant who produces the best business plan following their experience.

For Thomas the ROM holds a personal connection. Some of her husband's body of work, done in the "woodland" style, is held in the ROM. "That spirit of art is here from my husband," said Thomas, who chose the ROM to gain insight on how to run a gallery. "I didn't realize the magnitude, the number of people that are here helping this museum do what it is doing."

This is the first year the ROM has participated. "We should always be putting ourselves into new environments, to see what we can see and be provoked by new ideas," said William Thorsell, director and chief executive officer.

Thomas was surprised that Thorsell checks out the entire museum before the doors open. "To be honest I didn't expect that from you, I thought maybe somebody from the gallery would go and do that," she said. Thorsell responded, "I like to do that, of course that is the bane of lots of people here because I will notice a scratch."

Thomas was also impressed with the storage methods and presentation of ROM collections.

Protecting artwork from damage is one of the lessons her husband imparted. He often said, "Lovely you have to take care of that work. It takes care of you so you have to take care of it," she said. That lesson is one she always keeps in mind.

Native art is undergoing a bit of an evolution, said Francisco Alvarez, managing director of the museum's Institute for Contemporary Culture. Alvarez spent yesterday morning with Thomas, walking in various galleries and putting the finishing touches on an upcoming exhibition.

"Certain artists are very concerned with their native identity and that is what their work is expressing," said Alvarez.

A growing group is engaged in a wider contemporary art scene and are more interested in the formal aspects of painting and sculpture, he said. "So it's really interesting seeing the diversity in the artwork that is being produced."

Thomas plans to bring back her newfound knowledge to the young artists producing work for her gallery. "When you are surrounded by the spirit of art. By colour, by all the artists I represent, it's an exciting place to be. And the spirit of Roy and the spirit of that art, that is where I want to be."