



Historical Background of the Pelham Art Festival

The Pelham Art Festival began with a dream and with action. In 1985, a group known as the Friends of the Fonthill Library, came up with the idea of holding a backyard art show and sale to raise funds in support of the local library. Pelham Art Club member Lois Schonewille, and her husband, offered their comfortable backyard as the venue for the first show. Thus, a small beginning was made in June 1985. In June of 1986, on a sunny Sunday afternoon from 1 to 5 p.m., visitors enjoyed a fabulous backyard art show with art work hung on easels and on the fence surrounding the pool, and this was considered the first show. Most of the artists were from the Niagara area including members of the Pelham Art Club, the Welland Art Club and the Port Colborne Art Club.

The success of the initial backyard art shows spurred The Friends of the Library on to raise funds for the new library that was still in early planning stages. In 1986 Dorothy Higgins, who was a member of the Friends of the Fonthill Library and of the Pelham Art Club, now known as Pelham Art Association, suggested that a more ambitious venture be embarked upon, suggesting that the Friends of the Fonthill Library in association with the Pelham Art Club could hold a larger art show in the Pelham Arena to help raise funds for the proposed new library. For the first show in the arena, which initially had the title of Artmart Niagara, Barbara Simpson was named convener of the show. Marilyn Casson, who was also a member of both groups, agreed to recruit artists for the show, ably assisted by Sylvia Blackmore and Dorothy Higgins. Margaret Rosinski took on the job of gathering properties and Barbara Culliford agreed to look after the food and beverages. In addition to the local artists, commercial art galleries were invited to set up their wares in the arena. The arena was dotted with beige and brown art easels, supplied by the local art clubs and private individuals. For the first few years, Gordon Stephenson contacted Rice Road Nursery who provided many plants for the transformation of the arena into a partial green belt.

For the first arena show in 1987, thanks to Barbara and Vern Simpson, there was an exceptionally effective drawing card in that Vern arranged to have one of his company's helicopters provide rides over the area including a flight over Niagara Falls. People from far and wide followed the helicopter to its landing pad near the arena. Needless to say, that once on the arena site, they were invited to view the show going on inside. The money raised by the helicopter rides augmented the funds raised through Artmart Niagara.

In 1987, after years of community discussion, the Pelham Town Council voted to build a new library building in order to expand the Town's office facilities. They needed to take over the space occupied by the existing library, which was housed in lower level of the same building as the Council offices.

The Pelham Art Festival Committee was formally established in conjunction with the first large arena show in 1987. Despite little "glitches" that cropped up from time to time, the learning opportunities provided by each successive year led to ongoing growth. None of the people involved in the show would have imagined that this Annual Festival would continue to grow for more than three decades and counting! The seed of an idea planted around a backyard swimming pool had begun to grow with vigour.

The second year brought several changes in organization. The date was moved to Mother's Day weekend and the name of the event was changed to the Pelham Art Festival, a name that has gained respect in the art world, putting Pelham on the map of art festivals in Ontario. Thanks to Hugh Molson (Chief Librarian) a Province of Ontario grant was secured to help in the building of proper art display boards for the show. Barbara and Vern Simpson were instrumental in getting a group of craftsmen to build the boards at a price which allowed all that was needed to be built. These boards have survived to benefit the show ever since due to the diligent care volunteers have taken to maintain, repair and paint the boards over the years.

Changes in responsibilities were implemented as well. Barbara Simpson stepped down from chairing the event to devote more time to properties. Over the years, Margaret Rosinski and Friends of Maple Acres took on the responsibility for the food and beverages, followed by Els Swart, and later by Sandee Matthews with the Friends of Maple Acre who continued to serve freshly prepared foods. In keeping with the nature of the show they named the food service facility "The Salvador Deli" with apologies to Mr. Dali's memory. Presently the food is catered by Churchill Natural Meats and Nature's Corner Bakery and Cafe. Barbara (Culliford) Lanneval, who was on the Library Board and a member of the Friends of Fonthill Library, took on the role of chairing the committee for the Pelham Art Festival and that of Show Convener for the next twenty years from 1988 to 2008. In 2008 Heidi TeBrake, formerly of the Pelham Art Association, took on the role of Chair and Convener of the show. Over the years, music has been an important part of the show. Marilyn Casson's son, Jim Casson, who is well connected to the music world, continues to arrange professional live music for the show.

For many years, one or more artists donated original art for a fundraising raffle, often setting the theme for the show. Over the years, Vermeer's Garden Centre, J&J Florists, Willowbrook Nurseries, Gilbert's Flowers and other local greenhouses, businesses and volunteers have provided ambiance with plants, lighting, colour, and surprising features for a tradition that has continued every Mother's Day weekend. In the "Old Arena", tables and chairs filled the west end of the arena turning it into a food court dining area where art lovers could mingle, have a glass of wine and refreshments, listen to music, and recharge as they wandered through and enjoyed the aisles of original art by over 65 artists from near and far. Now in the new Meridian Centre, the tradition continues with a new floor plan and a bright fresh new look. As of 2019, the number of participating artists has grown to 81 artists in 88 booths! The Pelham Art Festival organization has matured over the years and is regularly rejuvenated by the input of energetic new volunteers who are warmly welcomed. The Festival continues to grow and develop.

Artists continue to be important to the annual Festival. Two artists, Beverly Sneath and Anne Reimer have participated in every show for the past 33 years! In 2019, given the extra space now available, 81 talented artists rent booths to sell their original fine art. Every year artists who are new to the Festival are juried to join artists who have previously exhibited in this show. As a result, a revolving cross section of talented work is on display for art lovers to admire and to purchase.

The 33rd year, 2019, provides a new beginning in the newly built Meridian Community Centre. Artists, volunteers, contributors and sponsors together have helped the Pelham Art Festival to contribute about \$435,000 to enhance the services provided by the two libraries in Pelham. Over \$30,000 has been provided for scholarships. An annual scholarship, currently valued at \$1000.00 per year, is given to a deserving Pelham student of E. L. Crossley Secondary School who plans to proceed to a post secondary program to study Fine Art. Since 2016, the Committee has been pleased to provide a similar scholarship to a Pelham student of Notre Dame College School and as of 2017, \$1000.00 per year has also been donated to a Pelham student of the Art and Design Program at Niagara College. In addition, the Pelham Art Festival supports programs that promote art and culture in schools and in the community for groups that provide exceptional art or cultural contribution to youth or for those who make a successful application.

In honour of the 25th year the Festival Committee made an extra donation of \$25,000 to the building fund for the proposed new Maple Acre Branch of the Pelham Library in addition to \$10,000 contributed annually towards special library programs or projects! In 2016, the 30th year of the Festival, the new Maple Acre Library became a reality.

Beautiful new works of art, energetic creative artists, live music, good food and a friendly ambience keep people coming back to enjoy the show year after year. Changes in venue from the backyard, to the Pelham Arena and now to the Meridian Community Centre show exciting continued growth. Talented Artists, ambitious advertising and regular committee brainstorming keep the show vibrant as one of the longest running spring art shows in the Province! In 2019, we celebrate thirty-three years of history and look to the future as we welcome everyone to the Meridian Community Centre to see another special Pelham Art Festival!