

CHAPTER 14 TURNED ONTO THE ARTS

People may be inspired by sudden jolts to involve themselves permanently in the arts, just as such jolts can turn them toward social causes. Art itself seems to be particularly inspiring, in that I have collected four art-related examples in my reading. The first examples involve painting, first classical and then modern.

Lord Beaverbrook's daughter, **Janet Aitken Kidd** (b 1908), was born in Canada but grew up in England where her father became a Member of Parliament. She was taught by governesses, at private schools, and briefly at the University of London, but she had little exposure to the arts. Her life changed when she was 19 years old on a tour of Europe and visited the Prado art gallery in Madrid, Spain (Kidd, 1987, 85). She went with a friend, who noticed her reaction as she entered the very first room: her footsteps slowed, her words faded in mid-sentence, her jaw sagged, here eyes bulged.

"It was a moment that changed my whole life," Kidd wrote. **"Titian...Murillo; each masterpiece a world in itself. Goya... Velazquez... El Greco; shape, light, shade, colour and movement. No words could express the excitement I felt."**

She returned to the Prado every day during her stay in Madrid. The pictures lit a spark in her which lasted and increased in intensity all her life, for she herself became an artist. She always remembered, "through failure and some small success, and in a way gained strength from, those few moments of blinding revelation I experienced..."

The pictures, and her enthusiasm for them, affected her father who visited the gallery with her one day. He seemed unimpressed at the time, she noticed, but later he established an art gallery in Fredericton, New Brunswick, which he filled with the best art he could find. This gallery enchants many thousands of visitors every year.

By contrast, it was modern art that jolted **Douglas Cardinal** (b 1934), the world-famous architect of the Canadian Museum of Civilization. When he attended the School of Architecture at the University of British Columbia in 1952, a whole world opened up to him (Boddy, 1989, 15-16). He had grown up on the prairies, one of eight children born to a nurse and a forest warden and trapper guide who later became a mink rancher and then a motel owner. During his first year at university, Cardinal attended a lecture given by the artist Lawren Harris. He was amazed at the paintings that Harris showed in his slide presentation: "bold, unaccommodating visions of the Canadian landscape seen through the geometric lens of modernism". Harris' work seemed alive and vital compared to that of the European Modern Movement he was exposed to in his architectural studio training. For the first time **he saw art "created out of a physical setting and a northern sensibility that was similar to his own, and an aesthetically progressive artist who chose to be tied to place"**. Much of his later work reflects the influences exerted on him that day by the paintings of this leader of the Group of Seven.

Brooke Astor was not an artist herself, but passionate about art which, together with

her wealth, had made her a long-time member of the trustees of New York Metropolitan Museum of Art (Hoving, 1993, 87, 277). As a trustee she was required to help decide what treasures should be purchased for the museum; she was also expected to give large sums of money to projects that especially appealed to her. This was not hard to do because she controlled the Astor Foundation which funded many worthy projects over the years. These included charities such as a series of adventure playgrounds in the Lower East Side of New York and in other small urban parks.

In the early 1970s, a top professor from Princeton was hired to be consultative chairman of Oriental Art at the museum. Wen Fong was a brilliant and aggressive man who immediately began to attract donors for this department. Soon he arranged a luncheon for the Museum director, Tom Hoving, and Brooke Astor. Brooke's attention was sidetracked often during the meal as she waved gaily to friends at nearby tables.

When Hoving finally said sternly, "Brooke, it's time for business. Why don't you drop all these extraneous social projects your foundation is funding and throw all your money at the Met?" Brooke laughed heartily at this. **But at that moment, according to the director, "Brooke Astor's far-reaching financial support of the Oriental Department was born."** Over the years she gave the museum tens of millions of Astor Foundation money as well as triggering gifts of at least this much from friends and acquaintances. She was fond of saying "There's something profoundly satisfying in giving money to a great institution, because you can be certain good money isn't going down the drain."

Jill Oakes, a young school teacher from Manitoba, received her jolt while on an arctic survival course (Noble, 1995). She was intrigued by the marvellous structure and design of Inuit boots, kamik, which were presented by the course instructor. **In jest, he asked if she could make him a new pair to replace those he was wearing out.**

This question changed her life. She became obsessed with the Inuit women's art of producing kamik. She resigned from teaching and enrolled in university to earn a masters and a doctoral degree doing research in the construction of Inuit clothing, especially boots. She learned from the Inuit women living in the arctic whom she visited year after year for 13 seasons. Now she teaches native studies at the University of Manitoba. Eventually she published a book, *Inuit Boots*, supported in part by Toronto's Bata Shoe Museum which had a display of arctic footwear.

Diane Solway became a dance aficionado and critic because of her first contact with Rudolph Nureyev (Kelly, 1995). She was used to ballet-- as a young child in New York she had loved watching this dance form-- but it was when she was nine, and saw Nureyev dancing in *Romeo and Juliet*, that she was completely jolted.

She said, "I'd never seen male dancing like that before. It was spellbinding. And from that day on I became obsessed with Nureyev." She reflected, "Seeing him dance set a direction for my life and I suppose that ability, really, to elevate and inspire in a lasting way is what art is all about." She followed his career closely over the next nearly 30 years, and was able through a personal contact to attend his funeral in 1993 in

Paris.

In part as a tribute to this remarkable dancer, Solway wrote a book about Nureyev (1994) which involved travelling around the world to interview his friends and colleagues living in London, Paris, Moscow, St Petersburg and Toronto. She remarks, "I suppose that in writing his biography I'm coming full circle in that I'm now exploring the forces that shaped him and led him to become the most celebrated dancer of our day."

A chance to see Nureyev dance when she was a child changed Solway's life forever.

Glenn Gould, the world-famous Canadian musician, was also inspired when young by a Big Jolt. It wasn't a jolt that turned him to music at an early age; he was already musically enthralled when he was an infant, learning to play the piano soon after he learned to walk. However, he studied at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, learning there pieces by the old masters. When he was 14, he was a concert soloist with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, playing standard concert pieces. At that time he hated music by anyone more recent than Wagner, and he hated much of Wagner's music as well (Friedrich, 1989, 39). His jolt came a year later when he heard a record of Paul Hindemith's piece "Matthias the Painter" with Hindemith himself conducting. **He "flipped completely. This suddenly was the recreation of a certain kind of Baroque temperament that appealed to me tremendously, and I, as a 15-year-old, came alive to contemporary music."** He came alive not only to Hindemith, but "to Schoenberg, Webern, Prokofiev, even to Krenek, Casella, and Anhalt". He became famous later on for championing such non-standard piano fare during his performances all over the world and in his many recordings.

On a more muted note, the theatre changed **Vladimir Bondarenko's** life too, not because of an actor or actress he admired, and not a professional play that brought him fame, either; rather, it was a high school production that showed him his future when he was an Ontario student in 1965 (Jalsevac, 1996). Bondarenko was by his own admission a rebellious teen and a trouble-maker. "I was on the road to nowhere," he said. "I was a greaser, for lack of a better word. I just hung out and did nothing" although he did play pool and play in a rock band. He was mainly interested in cars and "chicks." He also stuttered.

Despite these apparently negative attributes, his English teacher Mike Wagner asked Bondarenko to try out for the lead role of Conrad Birdie in *Bye Bye Birdie*, the school musical. When he did so, reluctantly, he found that his stutter when on stage disappeared. He won the role and the musical was a success. He said recently, **"If it wasn't for Birdie, I probably would have dropped out. When I heard the applause, I knew I had found what I wanted to do** and that was to sing and act. It was like an acceptance."

From then on, Bondarenko's confidence soared. He never missed a day of school and went on to become himself a teacher so that he could inspire students as he had been inspired by Wagner. However, his heart remained on the stage. Eventually he became a professional actor, and now is also an award-winning documentary film

maker. The theatre has given him an artistic life he could look back on with pride.

We have seen earlier the importance that books played in the life of Andrew Carnegie. He was so thrilled to have been given access to them when he was a young lad that when he grew rich, he gave libraries to many cities and towns in North America. The impact that such libraries could have is shown in the life of award-winning writer **Laura Goodman Salverson** (1890-1970).

Salverson was born in Winnipeg to desperately poor Icelandic immigrants (Salverson, 1939, 297,354). She grew up there and in Duluth. She was too sickly to go to school until she was ten, when she first learned to speak English. She loved the English language immediately, so that one of the happiest days of her life was when a friend told her about the local library in Duluth where she could borrow books free. She writes, "the moment I opened the door to see before me row on row of books on the unpainted shelves that lined the walls, all to be had for the mere asking, such a flood of emotion filled me that I could only stand there rooted in wonder, my legs like jelly, and the heart in my breast beating like mad." While leafing through a book on Julius Caesar she was "suddenly overborne by the meaning and majesty of books, conscious, for the first time, of the truth of papa's statement that **to be a maker of books was the greatest destiny.... And then, in a blinding flash of terrifying impertinence, the wild thought leaped to my mind.** 'I too, will write a book, to stand on the shelves of a place like this-- and I will write it in English, for that is the greatest language in the whole world!'"

As Salverson grew older, she retained her ambition: "Ever since that day in the ugly old library, my dream had never wavered. I wanted to write." She read as often as she could in spare time from her various jobs, and later wrote poems and stories. In time, she won a prize for a short story which launched her career. She would publish a number of books, two of which would win Governor-General Awards, the highest literary honour in Canada.

When **Eva Le Gallienne** (1899-1991) was seven, she was already sophisticated for her age (Sheehy, 1996, 6). She had lived in London, Copenhagen and Paris, and could speak, read and write English, Danish and French. One afternoon in the early winter, her mother took her to see Sarah Bernhardt acting in the Sarah Bernhardt Theatre in Paris, one of the most beautiful theatres in the world; owned and managed by Bernhardt, it had gold lettering "S.B. Quand-Même" emblazoned on the red velvet stage curtain. The 62-year-old Bernhardt was playing the part of the young Prince Charming in the play *The Sleeping Beauty*. Le Gallienne sat in the first row of the first balcony.

When Bernhardt made her first entrance into the hall of a sumptuous castle, le Gallienne recalled her voice as "high, clear, vibrant, electric, unforgettable." The prince was dressed in a classic doublet and hose with his arms full of great sprays of lilac which he laid at the feet of an old woman at a spinning wheel whom he called his grandmother. She remembered that the prince seemed "more radiantly alive than anyone I'd ever seen; as though he lived more intensely, more joyously, more richly than other people." She was intoxicated with the performance. When it was over, she

didn't want to go home. Sheehy writes in her biography of Le Gallienne that "**Sarah Bernhardt had opened a door and beckoned Eva into a place filled with beauty and endless possibility**, a place ruled by the imagination, where a woman, even an old woman, could become whatever she wished."

From that day on, Le Gallienne knew that she, too, wanted to become a great actress. When she was 15, she moved to New York where she began to create a name for herself in supporting roles. By the time she was 23, she was one of the most famous actresses in America. A few years later she launched the Civic Repertory Theatre in which she served as artistic director, general manager and leading player of classical plays; this would become the forerunner of the off-Broadway and regional theatre movement. Unfortunately, her continuing artistic success was undermined through no fault of her own when she returned for a well-deserved rest to Europe in 1931. She was seriously injured in a gas explosion from which she never completely recovered. The Civic Repertory Theatre soon closed, and for the next 60 years although her acting career never regained its original heights, in addition to character roles she branched out into such areas as translating and directing plays by Ibsen and Chekov. Her biographer notes that she spent most of her life "making a difference. Star, pioneer, legend, major force, great figure of the twentieth century, a national treasure...."

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