

Paying tribute to a historic program

Though Mount Allison's applied arts program – which taught practical application in woodcarving, silversmithing, pottery, weaving and leatherwork – is largely unknown, it stands as one of the earliest of its kind in the country and played an important role in the school's history. An exhibition about the program, displaying its creations, recently opened at the Owens Art Gallery in Sackville. By Victoria Dekker

It was 1956 and a semi-enthusiastic Patricia McClelland was studying to become a secretary.

Diction and typing weren't exactly her strong suits, but it seemed the logical path for the Mount Allison student, whose friends were all preparing to become nurses or teachers. Career options were limited for young women at the time, says McClelland, now 77.

"Unless you were showing real talent as a painter, art just wasn't considered. Crafts certainly weren't considered as a career path at all."

One afternoon near the end of her first year of study, she wandered into an event at the Owens Art Gallery. In an instant, she says, everything changed. "I just got carried away. I thought it was the most magical thing in the world," she says, describing the bustling atmosphere of the applied arts program open house, where students were weaving intricate garments behind giant looms on the balcony overlooking the gallery.

Breathlessly, she says, "I was just enchanted."

After pleading her case to her father – who took some convincing – McClelland transferred to applied arts. In 1960, she graduated from the ambitious program that pioneered the path of professional fine craft in Canada before being phased out almost 55 years ago.

Today, researchers, gallery staff and students at the Sackville liberal arts university have been preparing to pay tribute to the historic program in a spring/summer exhibition at the Owens, dubbed *All Things Useful and Artistic: Applied Arts at Mount Allison University 1906 – 1960*.

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The program's roots date back to 1906 with the gradual expansion of the art department curriculum to offer students a distinct split between the study of practical craft and fine art. The first applied arts students graduated in 1912. By the 1920s, basketry, interior design, weaving, batik, embroidery and toy-making were part of the course load and the work and studio space at the Owens expanded to accommodate an ever-growing group of students.

"It was an effort to produce work that was useful, but within the esthetic thinking of the time about producing work that was also beautiful," said Owens Art Gallery director Gemey Kelly.

Over the years, the program was developed to offer students extensive study in craft. Though the courses were separate, fine arts and applied arts students shared teachers,

equipment and workspace until the mid-1940s. Revered painter Alex Colville, a Mount A professor, taught students in both programs, and said, "My idea of an ideal school has always been the sort of Bauhaus, where students come and study design, and some of them later a painter – some are this and some are that."

McClelland studied design under Colville. He and the rest of the applied arts faculty were adamant about excellence in technique and cautioned the students to take time and care with their pieces, she says.

"We didn't really appreciate the significance at the time," she said, describing leather and wood-carving pieces she designed under Colville's instruction. "We thought he was wonderful, but we had no idea we were in the presence of greatness. ... Neatness really counted to him. Nothing could be sloppy. Everything had to be well done. That was the theme of the whole program with every craft we did: the excellence of technique."

The pieces in the exhibit – delicately beaded garments, mahogany chests, supple leather stools and sterling silver jewelry – reflect the philosophy. Close to 50 pieces are on display, reflecting the various periods and changes in design styles through the eras.

"The range is nice, because we have very early work and work from 1960," exhibition curator and Owens Gallery fine art conservator Jane Tisdale says. "You can really see how things change."

Applied arts, whose students were mostly women, offered grads a new range of post-university career paths. Some went on to be professional artists, while many others pursued careers in occupational therapy. McClelland made a lifelong career as a weaving and silversmithing instructor at the Nova Scotia Handcraft Centre and NSCAD.

Mount Allison has a rich history of providing new opportunities for women. Students of both genders were offered courses in scientific and literary disciplines through the mid-1800s. Mount Allison graduated the first woman in the British Empire, Grace Annie Lockhart, who was awarded a bachelor of science and English literature degree in 1875. In 1882, Mount Allison grad Harriet Starr Stewart became the first woman in Canada to receive a bachelor of arts degree.

Women skilled in fine craft became an invaluable resource to the war effort in Canada as injured soldiers of the First World War began to return home. Mount Allison was regarded as the place to go for a paramount education in the field, which served as the foundation for careers in occupational therapy. These "war aides" taught crafts at the soldiers' bedsides, which, over time,



Catch All Things Useful and Artistic at the Owens Art Gallery (65 York St., Sackville) until Sept. 20. Call 506-364-2574 or visit mta.ca/owens for details.

by the Sheila Hugh Mackay Foundation Fellowship, is expected to launch in August.

"It's going to be a great opportunity to show the tiny details that are easy to overlook in a larger space," Thornton says.

The online element is a valuable vehicle for the exhibit, as many applied arts grads are scattered across the country or otherwise unable to make it to Sackville to see it in person, Kelly explains.

McClelland, who was set to deliver a speech at last night's opening, says she's proud of having been a part of the class. Though the tablecloth, stools and jewelry she's displaying are relatively simple things, they're a symbol of her place in history. Craft has tremendous value in the cultural landscape, she says.

"There's great satisfaction in the creation of something. ... It's a deep, deep personal connection you have with what you create with your hands."

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was considered essential to their physical and mental rehabilitation.

"They would determine which medium or activity would benefit (soldiers) the most, depending on their injuries," Tisdale explains. "Some of them were psychological, so maybe weaving was a very soothing occupation. For the soldiers who were shocked or depressed, they would work on an activity that would calm them."

During and after the First and Second World Wars, many Mount Allison applied arts grads went on to take specialized training courses for war aides at the University of Toronto and McGill University, including the applied arts program's first grad, Margaret Harris.

It was an innovative form of therapy for the time, which evolved over the decades with advances in medicine and the study of anatomy. Injuries determined which skill to practise, so aides with a diverse skill set were in high demand.

"The program empowered women to choose careers along this line," Kelly says. More than two years of planning has gone into the exhibit, which opened at the Owens on Friday night. It's been a major undertaking, Kelly says, adding that facilities management staff built custom platforms and display cases for every piece. The collection will remain on display as the gallery's focal exhibition.

While a few pieces have been included in exhibits over the years, the exhibit marks the first time the applied arts program has been honoured collectively. Finally, grads and faculty of the historic program are getting their due, Kelly says. "This work wasn't valued. It wasn't seen to be important enough to be put into the collection of the day," Kelly says. "It's building on important research on a history and narrative of that history that we've undertaken for some time."

The program was phased out in 1960. More attention and resources were put on fine arts, professional craft schools were opening across the country, and the value of making utilitarian objects diminished.

Though the work was

beautiful, it wasn't considered "high art," in the era it was produced, Kelly says. McClelland echoes the sentiments and quips that she and her classmates were considered the "poor cousins of the fine arts program."

"With that new art history approach that we all take, we look back on the values and ideologies that formed that thinking and we're now revisiting that," Kelly says.

A research team located many former grads and their families in preparation for the show. They conducted interviews and collected pieces created in the program, many of which haven't been shown publicly since they were made. In fact, many were still in active use in the grads' homes before they were lent for the exhibition.

"You got the sense of how important those years were to the women," curatorial assistant Rachel Thornton says, recalling the in-person graduate interviews.

Even if grads didn't enter the workforce after completing their studies, they impressed the value of the arts upon their children, she continues. Thornton, a 2015 fine arts grad, is compiling data for a website based on the show, dubbed *Applied Arts Online*.

Thornton's work catalogues the exhibit's behind-the-scenes elements, including artist interviews, research and the meticulous preparation of pieces for display. She'll continue her work through the summer and collect stories and reactions to the exhibit as it's viewed. The website, funded

1. Carolyn (Manzer) McMullen, applied arts class of 1960. Leather-tooling templates, tools, materials and hand-carved leather belt. Collection of the artist. PHOTO: ROGER SMITH. 2. Hand-woven textiles displayed on a hand-carved dresser. PHOTO: OWENS ART GALLERY. 3. Patricia McClelland's graduation photo from 1960. SUBMITTED PHOTO. 4. Ceramic works by Max Roulston. Collection of Aaron Roulston. PHOTO: OWENS ART GALLERY. 5. Max Roulston, c. 1940. PHOTO: COLLECTION OF AARON ROULSTON, MAX ROULSTON'S PAPERS. 6. Textiles and leaf-shaped candy dishes waiting to be installed. PHOTO: OWENS ART GALLERY. 7. Copper, silver, leather and wooden boxes. PHOTO: OWENS ART GALLERY. 8. Mary Erminie Thomson. Painted china. Collection of Phyllis Steeves. PHOTO: OWENS ART GALLERY. 9. Students sketching statuary in the Owens main gallery, 1920s. Erminie Thomson, applied arts graduate in 1926, is seated in the doorway. PHOTO: MOUNT ALLISON UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, PHYLLIS H. WOODS FONDS, B544/2. 10. Fine and applied arts instructor Christian McKel demonstrates pottery to students in 1937 in the basement of the Owens. PHOTO: MOUNT ALLISON UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, PICTURE COLLECTION, 2007.07/943. 11. Installation view of three-legged "milking" stools. PHOTO: OWENS ART GALLERY. 12. Gay Barrett, applied arts student, creates a piece of jewelry at the Owens, 1953. COLLECTION OF AARON ROULSTON, MAX ROULSTON'S PAPERS. 13. A chest and various examples of weaving installed in the gallery. PHOTO: OWENS ART GALLERY. 14. Installation view. PHOTO: OWENS ART GALLERY. 15. Mount Allison University applied arts students Nancy Stephenson, from left, Vera Cummings, Cathy Logan, Ruth Briggs, Gay Barrett and Joan Crowell in 1953. PHOTO: MOUNT ALLISON UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, PICTURE COLLECTION, 2000.37.4/18001. 16. Jewelry being arranged for the exhibition. PHOTO: OWENS ART GALLERY. 17. Wood-carving tools with hand-carved box. PHOTO: OWENS ART GALLERY. 18. Jane Tisdale (exhibition curator) and Kealin Lamb (curatorial intern) with an assortment of woven baskets. PHOTO: OWENS ART GALLERY. 19. Ceramic vase by Max Roulston. Collection of Aaron Roulston. PHOTO: OWENS ART GALLERY.



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