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Contact :Jenny Shantz

519-664-2293 x 212

jenny@stjacobs.com

June 11th 2009

NEW ARTS VENUE IN WATERLOO REGION

Gallery Celebrates Centenary of Painter Woldemar Neufeld

This summer the public is invited to visit one of Waterloo Regions newest and most exciting art galleries: The Neufeld Gallery. It is housed in beautifully renovated spaces on the second floor of the old mill in St. Jacobs.

The gallery is now open, and warmly welcomes visitors to their first exhibition: Woldemar Neufeld: Rural and Urban Landscapes 1928-1982. This first exhibition, curated by Laurence Neufeld, a son of the artist, is tentatively scheduled to run for one year. Admission is by donation.

This new gallery, dedicated entirely to work by Woldemar Neufeld (1909-2002), opens during a year of centenary celebrations of Neufelds birth that will include the publication of a collection of Neufelds paintings and blockprints.

Neufeld began his life-long career as a painter in the Waterloo Region in 1924, when he was a 15-year-old immigrant from the Mennonite village of Waldheim in Ukraine. The Russian Revolution had put an end to his familys productive life and his parents welcomed the opportunity to come to Canada. Young Woldemar responded warmly to the rural towns and farming communities of his new world and knew, as he would later reflect, that it would be his mission to paint what he saw.

His work passed through a number of styles, from the coolly abstract to the vividly realistic. Never abandoning oils, he also produced a substantial body of watercolours and block-prints the latter influenced by German Expressionist and Japanese-Canadian print-making approaches.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, he was in contact with leading Canadian artists, from Homer Watson to members of the Group of Seven. In 1931, he helped found the Art Society of Kitchener. In 1932-33, his studies at the Ontario College of Art gave him direct contact with the art scene in Toronto. During the 1930s, he travelled to the prairies and the west coast, where he had a one-man show at the Vancouver Art Gallery. He travelled also to parts of northern Ontario already made famous in landscapes by Tom Thompson and the Group of Seven. He completed some ambitious oils in the north, but there, as elsewhere, he was drawn less to what he identified as the pines of Tom Thompson than the constructed world.

The oils, watercolours, and block-prints in the current exhibition document his view of landscapes imprinted by people who valued hard work and orderly living. With the help of detailed captions, they trace Neufelds journey from Canada to Ohio (1935-44), New York (1945-49), Connecticut (from 1949) and then back to Canada (from 1968). As a professional artist, Neufeld embraced the people and places he encountered, and inscribed their lives and landscapes through his inventive style, line, and colour.

Most of these works come from the collections at Conrad Grebel University College and Wilfrid Laurier University. Conrad Grebel University College holds some seventy-five Neufeld paintings. Wilfrid Laurier, which in 1988 bestowed on Neufeld an honorary Doctor of Letters, holds over 350 of his works. Most of these were transferred by the City

of Waterloo to Laurier in 1993, to be held in trust for the citizens of the region. Others were donated by private collectors.

The new art-history book will be titled Woldemar Neufelds Canada: A Mennonite Artist in the Canadian Landscape 1928-1994. It will be published by WLU Press. It will present Neufelds work in the context of the material and artistic conditions that caught his artists eye as he gave visual utterance to the 20th centurys emerging Canadian visual imaginary. Editors are Laurence Neufeld and Monika McKillen. Hildi Froese Tiessen and Paul Tiessen are authors of the text.

Paul Tiessen will be presenting 45-minute art-tours of the current exhibition in The Neufeld Gallery on Sunday , August 9th and Wednesday August 12th at 2pm. These are free of charge and open to the public.

Paul and Hildi Tiessen will be presenting illustrated lectures on Neufeld to the general public at the Laurier/Waterloo Ideas and Issues noon-hour series at the Kitchener Public Library on November 16th and to members of the Waterloo Historical Society in the evening on November 3rd.

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Paul Tiessen, PhD
Professor, Department of English and Film Studies
Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3C5 Canada

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