

THE IMPACT OF ART ON THE  
GUELPH CORRECTIONAL CENTRE

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The Guelph Correctional Centre (G.C.C.), previously known as the Ontario Reformatory, has been a beloved historical site for the past 110 years. This property has been utilized as a correctional centre, a convalescent hospital during the First World War, a community landmark for outdoor recreation, and now with the help of the Yorklands Green Hub (YGH) will become a Sustainable Environment Centre.<sup>1</sup> The history of this property can be traced back to the year 1906 when Sir James Whitney enacted a reform movement within the Ontario prison system, carried out by Provincial Secretary William John Hanna.<sup>2</sup> This resulted in the introduction of the Ontario Reformatory in 1911.<sup>3</sup> Referred to as an industrial farm, this institution was the first to actualize this initiative: to encourage physical labour as a replacement of traditional punishment.<sup>4</sup> Over time, this facility underwent an evolution of ideas reflected in the various practices implemented. This essay will analyze the impact of the shift from the Ontario Reformatory to the G.C.C., specifically concerning the formation of the art program.

### **The Transition to the Guelph Correctional Centre**

The shift in ideologies that transitioned the Ontario Reformatory into the G.C.C. began over a decade before the name was changed. In 1956, Charles Sanderson took on the position of Superintendent.<sup>5</sup> He is the first individual recognized to have sought out new ideas of reform since the harsh discipline instituted after the Second World War.<sup>6</sup> It was only one year after he started at the Reformatory, that Frank Dobias was hired as the Recreational Advisor.<sup>7</sup> Previous to

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Grottenthaler, *The House on the Hill* (Self-published, 2010), 12. ; “About Yorklands Green Hub,” Yorklands Green Hub, December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021 (access), <http://yorklandsgreenhub.ca/whoweare/>.

<sup>2</sup> Diane Doherty, *A Glimpse at the History of the Guelph Correctional Centre: 1911-2002*, (Canada: L. Spark & Associates, 2002), 1 ; Grottenthaler, *The House on the Hill*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Doherty, *A Glimpse at the History*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Grottenthaler, *The House on the Hill*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 13,15.

<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Hamilton, “Graduates Behind Bars,” *Spoke*, February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1983, 5. <https://issuu.com/spokenewspaper/docs/spoke19830221>.

his arrival there was very little focus placed on the recreation department.<sup>8</sup> They went from one gymnasium and a sports field, to reconstructing a WWII hanger from an Air force base to house their new gym facilities.<sup>9</sup> The effort put into this department was largely due to a new schedule implemented for the inmates, which divided their day into three sections to ensure sufficient work or school, leisure time, and sleep.<sup>10</sup> Dobias explains that the goal of prioritizing leisure was to allow inmates access to recreation in order to attempt to prevent them from reverting to their bad habits once they re-entered society.<sup>11</sup>

The next major shift was overseen by the Superintendent to follow Sanderson, Mr. John Lee. Although the authoritarian structure of the Reformatory was largely diminished in 1950, there was still a military presence that remained.<sup>12</sup> This reform involved shifting the titles of staff from military ranks to their specific role's within the facility.<sup>13</sup> A lot of energy was put into organizing these changes and this dedication was a reflection of similar movements that were occurring throughout the province that began around 1972.<sup>14</sup> This was the year that the Ontario Reformatory was renamed the G.C.C. and when they officially shut down their farms.<sup>15</sup> This transition also encouraged additional changes to be made within the recreational department, which involved the hiring of art director Arend Nieuwland in 1975.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Frank Dobias and John Valeriote, Interview by David Alton, *Yorklands Green Hub*, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8a7BcKxVjS8>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Grottenthaler, *The House on the Hill*, 13, 27.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Carol Williams, "Arend Nieuwland & the Prison Arts Program, 1972-2002," *Wellington County History* volume 34, (2021): 66.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

## The Establishment of the Art Program

In 1969, the Prison Arts Foundation was created, an organization that provided inmates across Canada with opportunities for creative expression.<sup>17</sup> The G.C.C. was first given access to this program upon hiring Arend Nieuwland, who at the time was a recent graduate of Fine Arts from the University of Guelph.<sup>18</sup> Due to recent renovations, the art program was provided with multiple areas for use located in the previous recreation building.<sup>19</sup> The minimal access to visual arts in the past meant that attracting attention from inmates was a gradual process, but in time with Nieuwland's development of an "open studio" environment, individuals became drawn into the space.<sup>20</sup> The inmates were provided with an opportunity to participate in the art program every day, which sometimes brought in up to 25 men per class.<sup>21</sup> Nieuwland was very accommodating, he allowed the students choice in the mediums that they could use, some of which included clay, leather, paint, and soapstone.<sup>22</sup>

Along with the guidance of Nieuwland, there were also volunteers who aided in the sessions.<sup>23</sup> Although these instructors were there to provide support, the program was curated in a way that encouraged the inmates to feel empowered to explore their own creativity.<sup>24</sup> As well as within their artwork, the students experienced a sense of freedom in the way that they were treated in the studio. Nieuwland, the volunteers, and students were all spoken to on a first name basis and there was never a guard present, which was proven to build trust and reduce anxiety.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 66, 68.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 68, 70.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 69 ; Arend Nieuwland, Interview by Emma Rutledge (conducted through email), December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

In another section of the institution there was a similar promotion of artistic expression developing in a group called the Native Sons.<sup>26</sup> The long-standing mistreatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada meant a high population of men were entering the G.C.C. from these communities.<sup>27</sup> This group was a place where Indigenous men could support one another and also engage in their cultural practices through both native languages and art.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Impact of Art on Rehabilitation**

It is evident that countless inmates enjoyed participating in the art program at the G.C.C., but what kind of impact did this involvement have on their rehabilitation? Nieuwland believes that their primary objective was to allow freedom of artistic expression in order to restore the inmate's self-esteem, he states that "More important is the inner space of self awareness. A feeling of satisfaction, personal uniqueness, and pride to build self worth which begin to replace perceptions of worthlessness."<sup>29</sup> One example of this positive outcome is viewed in a painting activity that Nieuwland provided for his students.<sup>30</sup> The process was to splatter paint onto a canvas, allow it to dry, and then stretch out the material.<sup>31</sup> The students were told to study the various shapes that appeared and create the image that they developed with their imagination.<sup>32</sup> Nieuwland specifically remembers one inmate who by participating in activities such as this had a noticeable shift in demeanor, gaining a more positive outlook on his creative abilities.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Williams, "Arend Nieuwland", 71.

<sup>27</sup> Grottenthaler, *The House on the Hill*, 24.

<sup>28</sup> Williams, "Arend Nieuwland", 71.

<sup>29</sup> Arend Nieuwland, Interview by Emma Rutledge (conducted through email), December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

The G.C.C. officially closed down in 2002 and with this province-wide reform came the de-funding of the Prison Arts Program.<sup>34</sup> Nieuwland believes that this was likely due to the inability for many to acknowledge how crucial the arts are in education.<sup>35</sup> It is evident when viewing Nieuwland's program that prioritizing visual art has a significant impact on inmate rehabilitation. In the G.C.C. alone there were a handful of inmates known to have continued utilizing the skills they developed; including one who left the institution and started up an illustration business in Toronto, as well as one who developed his own comic books.<sup>36</sup> Studies conducted across the globe reveal that the involvement of the arts in the prison system allow inmates to generate more positive interactions with others, consider additional educational opportunities, and is proven to build self-esteem.<sup>37</sup>



*The images above are of artwork made by G.C.C. inmates and were provided by Arend Nieuwland.<sup>38</sup>*

<sup>34</sup> Williams, "Arend Nieuwland", 73.

<sup>35</sup> Arend Nieuwland, Interview by Emma Rutledge (conducted through email), December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Williams, "Arend Nieuwland", 71.

<sup>37</sup> Lyn Tett, Kirstin Anderson, and Fergus McNeill, "Learning, Rehabilitation and the Arts in Prisons: a Scottish Case Study," *Studies in the Education of Adults*, Volume 44, (2012): 173.

<sup>38</sup> Arend Nieuwland, "Prison Art," PowerPoint presentation.

## The Artspiration Event

Since the closing of this institution there has been a huge effort on the part of the YGH to preserve not only the history of this site but also largely the property itself. Although the main focus has been on the environmental goals for the future of the site, art has still found a place within the current initiatives. This can be viewed in the annual Artspiration fundraising event.<sup>39</sup> Since 2016, the YGH has encouraged local artists to create art each year based on the inspiration they gain from the property.<sup>40</sup> These art pieces are then auctioned off and the money raised goes towards both the artists and the organization.<sup>41</sup> Pat Flood, one of the original planners of this event explains that it is the property's beauty that continues to be a source of inspiration for the artists, and that these individuals are able to create diverse representations of the site.<sup>42</sup> Sharyn Seibert, for example, is an artist that has been heavily involved in Artspiration since the beginning, and often refers to the site as her muse.<sup>43</sup> This was the same scenery that likely inspired the inmates; the same land that at one time was perfectly manicured and had views so beautiful that outside visitors were drawn in.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> "Artspiration: Drawing Inspiration - and Support - from the Land," *The Green Door*, January, 2017, 2.

<http://yorklandsgreenhub.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2017-01-27-Green-Door-7-1-2.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid* ; Pat Flood, and Irene Hanuta. Interview by Emma Rutledge (conducted through Zoom), November 4th, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Yorklands Green Hub, "Artspiration: Drawing Inspiration".

<sup>42</sup> Pat Flood, and Irene Hanuta. Interview by Emma Rutledge (conducted through Zoom), November 4th, 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Sharyn Seibert, *Yorklands Green Hub*, Interview by Pat Flood, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021,

<http://yorklandsgreenhub.ca/artists-series-sharyn-seibert/>.

<sup>44</sup> Frank Dobias and John Valeriote, Interview by David Alton, *Yorklands Green Hub*, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8a7BcKxVjS8>.



*The image on the left is of the Artspiration auction (2021) and on the right is one of this year's paintings.<sup>45</sup>*

### **The Legacy of Art at the G.C.C.**

When observing the history of the G.C.C. it is evident that this institution has successfully retained the progressive ideologies that drove its establishment. Even after it has been abandoned, this property is still being adapted to address current societal needs through the YGH's environmental initiatives. When viewing the history of this iconic site, it is also crucial to consider the role of art. All throughout the evolution of this institution art has been present; whether it was through the constructing of the stone walls, the landscaping of the gardens, the baked goods created in the kitchen, or the highly regarded art program. It is significant in the history of this site, and it is still relevant today. Irene Hanuta, a volunteer at the YGH emphasizes the fact that it is artists and their unique outlook on the world that are often drivers in social

<sup>45</sup> The Yorklands Green Hub, October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

[https://www.facebook.com/pg/yorklandsgreenhub/photos/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/yorklandsgreenhub/photos/?ref=page_internal); Hiu Kwong Cheuk, "Plein Air at Yorklands," September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021. [https://www.facebook.com/pg/yorklandsgreenhub/photos/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/yorklandsgreenhub/photos/?ref=page_internal).



change.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, art will not only be preserved in the landscape and history, but will also continue to be utilized as an effective tool to promote the future ambitions of this site.

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<sup>46</sup> Pat Flood, and Irene Hanuta. Interview by Emma Rutledge (conducted through Zoom), November 4th, 2021.

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