

The New Winnipeg Art Gallery

Virgil Hammock

Number 65, Winter 1971–1972

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/57948ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

La Société La Vie des Arts

ISSN

0042-5435 (print)

1923-3183 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Hammock, V. (1971). The New Winnipeg Art Gallery. *Vie des arts*, (65), 65–66.



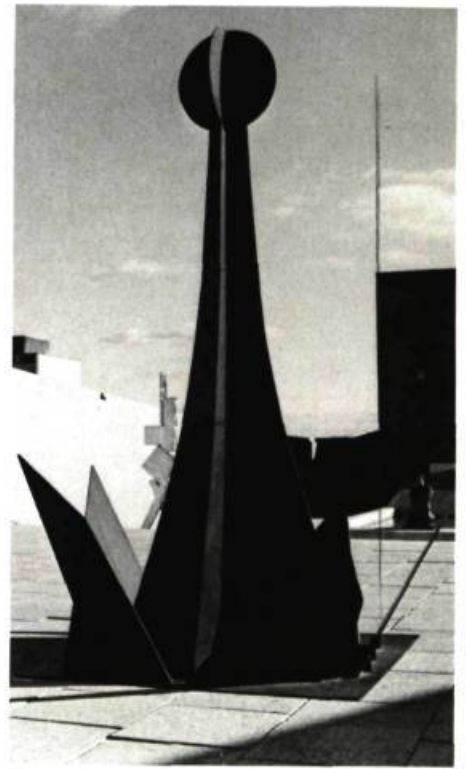
Musée de Winnipeg
Virgil Hammock
E. P. Mayer, W.A.G.

THE NEW WINNIPEG ART GALLERY

By the time this article is published the Winnipeg Art Gallery's tumultuous three-day opening celebration of its new building will have past into history. The event which went from the 24th to the 26th of last September was likened by Director Dr. Ferdinand Eckhardt to a Ukranian wedding feast, three days and three nights of uninterrupted, and I might add well deserved, festivities. The description is an apt one as Winnipeg is a cosmopolitan city that is itself a cross section of Canada's many peoples; Ukranian, French, English, Italian, Indian, Metis, Chinese and others, all of whom have made this prairie city's cultural life particularly exciting.

What is amazing is that a city the size of Winnipeg could build a four and a half million dollar gallery at this time at all. While the gallery was a centennial project so were the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, the Centennial Concert Hall and the Manitoba Theatre Centre. All of these multi-million dollar projects were planned and built in a very short period of time. Quite a record for a province that can't number itself among the richest in the country. This is especially impressive when you realize that the new Walker Art Center, also opened this year, built to serve the much larger population of Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn., was, like the new Winnipeg Gallery, a four and a half million dollar structure.

The opening celebrations are over, but the building remains as one of the best equipped and modern galleries in North America. Designed by the brilliant Macao born, University of Manitoba architect Gustavo de Rosa whose design won out over 106 others in an open national competition, the unique triangular building makes maximum use of the odd shaped lot chosen for the building on the corner of Memorial Blvd. and Portage Ave. in downtown Winnipeg. The resulting physical space within the de Rosa building is the most exciting concept of all and according to Dr. Eckhardt, one that will make many new demands upon both him and his staff, forcing them to rethink just what the function of their new gallery should be. While the building on the outside seems monolithic and somewhat forbidding, at least to the eyes of the man on the street, not to mention the press who made many rude remarks about the building's appearance during its construction, I for one find the building quite handsome in its simplicity. After all it is a building to house art not, as in so many other art galleries, to be in competition with it. Once inside, however, all fears of claustrophobia disappear. There are eight large open galleries, a vast central entrance and staircase lit at the top by an enormous skylight. There is an indoor pool on the second level that can either be flooded with water or drained and used as a sunken sculpture court.



Alexandre CALDER
Sans Titre
Prêt de Perls Gallery, New-York.

In addition there is another sculpture court on the roof that is overlooked by an enclosed restaurant. On the lower levels there is a 350 seat auditorium, children's classrooms, a library, storage and conservation facilities. All loading and unloading is done within the climate controlled building on docks that lead directly on what must be the largest freight elevator in an art gallery anywhere, a valuable feature considering Manitoba winters. This ensures the safe delivery of the largest art item on any level from the basement to the roof.

One could, with justification, call the new gallery a personal triumph for Dr. Eckhardt who is in his eighteenth year of service to Winnipeg as its gallery director. He never gave up his dream of giving his adopted city a gallery that would match its dynamism. He has done so in spades. The old and grim gallery quarters in the civic auditorium had barely six thousand square feet total space. The new building has one hundred twenty thousand square feet of which over half is exhibition space. At the beginning of his tenure Dr. Eckhardt had a staff of two. At the time of the move it had increased to some twenty-odd including three bright young curators and he estimates that when the new building is in full operation it will need a minimum staff of at least thirty-eight. The move will mean, of course, an immediate jump of somewhere around two hundred and fifty per cent in the gallery's operating



budget, but Dr. Eckhardt expresses confidence in his present council to get the job done. Moves from small quarters to large by art galleries are always fraught with difficulty. Winnipeg it seems has learned from the problems and mistakes of others and they are not only prepared to support the construction of a new building but a programme to match as well.

While many galleries in Canada and the United States are questioning the value of both permanent collections and collecting, Dr. Eckhardt maintains that this is still an important function of a gallery, stating flatly that you cannot be a museum or art gallery without a collection. Of course among the many positive features of a good collection, besides the obvious ones of direct support of artists by buying their work and providing a storehouse of the nation's visual treasures as well as making sure that they stay in this country, is that it puts the gallery in a better borrowing position as it is able to lend as well. This lending power in the past has enabled the Winnipeg Art Gallery to originate as many exhibitions as were brought into the gallery as touring or circulating exhibitions — a record that Dr. Eckhardt hopes to maintain and improve in the new building. The new gallery will allow the permanent collection to be used to its best advantage. Not only is there exhibition space for the collection, there is proper storage space. The conservation areas were separate

in the old gallery and are now united. Also there is additional space for scholars to use the collection.

Winnipeg is the only art gallery in the West with a full-time conservationist much less one with proper facilities. The collection, which numbers in the thousands, is particularly strong in its Canadian content, Group of Seven, David Milne, one of the best collections of Eskimo sculpture anywhere and, of course, over nine hundred items by Winnipeg artist L.L. FitzGerald. In a more contemporary vein the gallery has been buying from the Winnipeg Show since its inception. I have a feeling that this collection will be of value long after events and documentations of artists 'doing their thing' that is so much in vogue in some galleries, is long forgotten.

Dr. Eckhardt readily admits to being a conservative, but one, he insists, who is open to new ideas. This he has proven by his choice of the three young new curators that he has picked to staff the new building. European trained Canadian Dr. Philip Fry who is Curator of Contemporary Art; Dr. Fry's French born wife Jacqueline, who is a Phd in her own right, is Curator of Non-European Art; and Miss Pat Glover who is Curator of Art before 1945. All three have strong views of their own, some of which are in disagreement with Dr. Eckhardt, but his willingness to bring young and different ideas into his staff only goes to prove the strength of this gallery that refuses to be classified.

Any gallery is, of course, as good as the people who work there. A good programme can be run in a poor building or no building at all. Winnipeg has proved its ability in the past, despite a lack of proper facilities, to mount major exhibitions. The new gallery building should go a long way in making Winnipeg an even more exciting place to live.

Virgil G. HAMMOCK