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LEARNING & LIFE

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John Murray's collection includes works called *Koyoto* (far left) and *Waterloo College*. The building at Waterloo College, which is now Wilfrid Laurier University, was called Willison Hall. It was demolished in 1969.

When art chooses you

Laurentians help ex-furniture designer find his calling in retirement years

BY VALERIE HILL
RECORD STAFF

It's difficult to peg artist John Murray, formerly of Waterloo.

He's a jocular 74-year-old who looks like Santa, sports a jaunty Scottish tam and talks about art in a vague, modest way. But near the end of his 60s, art became the former furniture designer's latest career and it's one he's embraced with the dedication of a man decades younger.

The proof of his passion for art lies not in his conversation, but in his watercolours, which range from the abstract to sweeping landscapes, rich in detail and colour.

"In 1998, '99, I started getting serious about it," said Murray, who was raised in Waterloo, but now lives in Mont Tremblant, Que.

Murray took a circuitous route to this point. He had studied art at Ridley College, Waterloo College (now Wilfrid Laurier University) and Queen's University, then worked in advertising at Electrohome's Deilcraft furniture division in Kitchener.

When the company's designer fell ill, Murray was promoted and sent to Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in Toronto to learn furniture design. He soon branched out on his own, designing for both Canadian and American companies.

In the early 1990s, Murray joined the Canadian Executive Service Organization, a volunteer group of business executives who promote economic and social growth in developing nations. His work was concentrated in nine countries where he aided furniture manufacturers with everything from marketing strategies to setting up showrooms. There was little to suggest art would become his next career.

"I had started painting for my own amusement," he said. "I gave them away, then people started giving me commissions."

Murray, his wife Joan and three sons had lived in the Laurentians for many years. "I was amazed at the mountains. It was 40 below (Celsius) in the wind, but still I said 'I loved it.'"

In the 1980s, the couple returned to

Waterloo for a short time, but the draw of the mountains was strong and they were planning their return when, in 1988, Joan died unexpectedly in her sleep.

Murray followed through with their plans anyway and returned to Quebec. Inspired by the Laurentians, he stopped dabbling and began trying to capture the scope of the mountains, the beauty of the snow, the shadows casting shades of grey over miles of slopes.

His technique improved and when a friend suggested he create a collection of paintings for a show at the University of Waterloo, Murray easily slipped into a new career.

"I wasn't painting for the sake of painting," he said. "It had to be something that inspired me."

Last Friday, Murray opened a new show of paintings at Gallery on the Grand in Waterloo, where more than 20 of his watercolours, including scenes in Waterloo Region, are on display.

Gallery co-owner David Burkett said Murray is talented in many areas.

"It's important to have a breadth of work, not just focused on landscapes. He has a terrific use of colour... particularly red."

Burkett discovered Murray already had a following in this region. "Local scenery sells very well here," Burkett said. "They buy something they recognize."

Today he paints and skis several days a week at the base of Mont Tremblant despite suffering from prostate cancer, a skin condition and polymyalgia rheumatica, a debilitating disease causing pain and stiffness. The steroids that ease his pain have added pounds of excess weight.

His nephew, Jeff Murray of Waterloo, calls Murray resilient.

"He's overcome adversity, either economic or health," he said. "He has a rich life, full of friends. He's focused on friendship."

He said pain makes it difficult for Murray even to get to the front door at times, yet "he still slams the ski pole into his hand."

"He's a free spirit."
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MATHEW MCCARTHY, RECORD STAFF



John Murray (above) shows his watercolour *Jane's Pond* at Gallery on the Grand in Waterloo, where he has an exhibition. At left, is Murray's depiction of himself — a portrait of an artist as a not-so-young man.

LOCAL EXHIBITION

John Murray will be a featured artist until March 15 at Gallery on the Grand, 220 King St. N., Waterloo. His paintings range in price from \$300 to \$950.

Older adults embrace joy of learning

BY DON MORGENSON
FOR THE RECORD

Older adults are the fastest growing age group in all developing nations, including Canada.

Among many trends, one is particularly clear: a rapidly increasing number of older adults, freed from the responsibility of full-time employment, are enrolling in educational programs.

And why not? Evidence suggests that even into the eighth decade of life, elders retain 80 per cent of their verbal abilities, spatial orientation and reasoning. They are not necessarily learning new strategies, but "rediscovering" strategies already in their vast repertoire.

The trend includes the enthusiastic acceptance of lifelong learning and embraces a concept



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of education free of age parameters.

The National Advisory Council on Aging in Canada defines it as "learning that occurs from infancy to old age, in settings including the workplace, classroom, community centres and the home. It can be sparked by curiosity, life transitions or situational demands."

The UNESCO Institute for Edu-

cation has long been involved in lifelong learning research, which is now accepted as a right and a necessity.

We all want life to be understandable, but this becomes particularly urgent later in life. And we are not referring to what might be found in a broad data base or a new theoretical paradigm. We are referring to the kind of understanding that has been called wisdom — the process of organizing meaning out of experience.

Erik Erikson pointed to wisdom as the distinctive virtue of the last stage of life — an affirmation of meaning over and above the futility of death; an acceptance of the continuity of generations beyond the individual life cycle.

A few years ago, realizing that

we simply cannot "bank" enough learned experience at one point to suffice for a whole lifetime, some of us took initiatives resulting in the Laurier Association for Lifelong Learning.

From those beginnings, the course offerings, as well as the number of people registering in courses offered through the association, have grown.

While respecting the fine efforts of Elderhostel and Third Age Learning programs, it was thought that a formal connection with a university might broaden course offerings and provide logistical support through Laurier's distance education department.

Having served a wide group of people aged 55 plus, we now know some reasons for their participation.

Asked why they enrol in such courses as Milton's Paradise Lost and other literature courses, music, storytelling, regional geography, ethics and fine arts courses, they say they provide an interest outside the home, they learn more about a special interest while contributing to the community, they meet new people and enjoy an opportunity to socialize.

However, the primary reasons appear to be continued intellectual stimulation, self-improvement and the acquisition of knowledge.

Lifelong learning includes intuitive, self-motivated and self-directed learning, a blend of formal, informal, traditional and non-traditional modes.

Our research and national survey results suggest liberal

arts subjects and the humanities are overwhelming choices of older students. The reason seems obvious: they provide an interpretive framework for us to see how an individual life fits into the larger story of human culture.

Reflecting on their past education, our students feel that what was missing in the early years was a conscientious effort to develop in them a commitment to learning throughout their lives.

It's a commitment to a common wisdom we can all accept. In The Torah, we find: "For as soon as people cease to study, they begin to forget."

The Laurier Association for Lifelong Learning can be contacted at 884-0717, ext. 4628, or e-mail lall@wlu.ca.