

Ruth Wilton: Art, Cuban Style by Heather Stevenson

Lines that Catch – true stories of Nova Scotia

In 2003, when Lunenburg County residents Ruth Wilton and her husband Laird hosted a Cuban supervisor with Canadian World Youth, they didn't realize a bigger commitment would follow.

The supervisor was in Canada with nine Cuban students who were paired with their Canadian counterparts. Nova Scotia residents took on the responsibility of hosting these pairs who spent three and a half months in their homes while working on community-based projects with organizations such as Big Brothers and local daycare centers. The Canadian students helped the Cubans navigate the Canadian system. The pairs then travelled to Cuba where roles were reversed.

While the supervisor was in Canada, Ruth, who is involved in the local art community, went to France for an art show along with other Maritime artists. He was intrigued and, on returning to Cuba, told his wife about Ruth's art trip.

His wife worked for the Department of Culture, at the community level.

"It's something like our Recreation Department," says Ruth, "but the courses they offer are free. An art student might teach art; a music student might teach music."

The government of Cuba is eager to promote Cuban culture. The blockade means Cubans are less influenced by the United States, making the promotion of their own culture easier.

The Wiltons visited the couple while on a trip to Cuba in 2004 and met with the Department of Culture representatives to discuss bringing a Canadian art show to Cuba like the one Ruth attended in France.

Art show in a suitcase

Nine Lunenburg County watercolour artists participated. Each took four pieces of artwork which they dismantled and placed in their carry-on luggage. Frames were removed, paintings rolled up and labeled. The "art show in a suitcase" was a hit and the Cubans wanted more.

During the first week of the exhibit, the group (officially known as the Pinar del Rio/ Nova Scotia Culture Exchange) stayed at a special non-tourist inn (ICAP) for visitors who are guests of the government.

Afterwards, the group dispersed as they went sightseeing with various Cubans. To stay overnight in a Cuban home requires special visas.

Suspicious luggage

Leaving Cuba and returning through a Havana airport, Ruth became separated from her group. Waiting for a flight, she knew she would meet up with them again. Meanwhile, her check-in luggage was being held up in customs. The metal frames, rolled up in brown paper, had the appearance of dynamite when x-rayed. A friend found her munching on a sandwich and hurried her off to customs where she unlocked her luggage and unwrapped the mystery of the brown paper tubes.

The art group was asked if they could provide a watercolour workshop, but this meant the Canadian artists would have to purchase and bring enough supplies for twenty-five students. NSCUBA (Nova Scotia Cuba Association) works to form connections between Cuba and Canada and is part of a larger organization called the Canadian Network on Cuba. The Nova Scotia branch donated \$500 to help with the project.

In 2006, the watercolour workshop was given in a Cuban art gallery with Jude Caborn as the lead teacher. Instructors found the Cuban students friendly and appreciative, but there were glitches. ICAP was full and other lodging arrangements had to be made on the spot.

Cuban art & artists to Lunenburg & Halifax

With the workshop over, Ruth said it would be an excellent idea to bring Cuban artwork to Canada. Ruth and Jude, with the help of other NSCUBA members, raised enough money to pay for Cuban artists to accompany the display by having various fundraisers – Cuban art calendars, a Cuban roast pork dinner, yard sale, and selling Jude’s miniature watercolours. Ruth donated her Air Miles which meant a third Cuban could come as a translator.

Not only was a lot of time spent raising money, much legwork had to be done to find venues for the art. The Lunenburg Art Gallery was eager to have a group show.

It was also decided some exposure in Halifax would be conducive to reaching a broader audience. Pier 21 was willing to put on a show of Cuban art provided Cuban immigrants were involved. Pier 21’s mandate encompasses immigration to Canada. Ruth’s group not only had to find Cuban Canadians, and they weren’t numerous in the Maritimes, but they had to design a cultural event.

Since The Honourable Mayann Francis’ father came from Cuba, Ruth wanted her to be the guest speaker. When the lieutenant governor said, “Yes,” the art group was extremely pleased. She even brought four artifacts made by relatives in Santiago de Cuba.

Sixty pieces of art by sixteen or seventeen Cuban artists were sent. Half went to the Lunenburg Art Gallery, where they could be sold, and half went to Pier 21 for exhibit only. To bring the art into Canada, each piece had to be photographed and certain sizes specified. The woman at Canada Border Services, with whom Ruth’s group dealt, was very helpful.

Many of the Cuban paintings brought into Canada, gave insights into the landscape and people of that island.

Ruth, Laird, and Jude took the three Cubans, who came with the art, into their homes for seven weeks. During that time, they sold seven paintings and left some abstracts, which they created here, since only the unsold paintings brought into Canada could be returned to Cuba. These abstracts were displayed during July at Wildwood Café, Bridgewater.

Ruth continues to fundraise for art, musical exchanges, and hurricane relief efforts through NSCUBA. In July, she and other members of NSCUBA organized a yard sale to raise funds for their various projects.

In a new phase of the art exchange called, “Similar yet Different,” children’s art is included, with help from Lunenburg and Halifax County elementary students as well as high school students in Halifax. This exhibit will continue to be displayed in galleries, schools, churches, and community halls in Nova Scotia.

As for Ruth, she’s taking a break from such ambitious art exchanges.

“Overall the whole thing was worth doing,” she says, “but it was a lot of work.”

Her connection with Cuban friends and the artists of Pinar del Rio will continue.

“These relationships are very close to our hearts,” she says.

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