

# Impact Story:

## Art Gallery of Swift Current

by  
**CARLE STEEL**



Saskatchewan  
Arts Alliance



"Through boom and bust, the gallery reflects the area back to itself, giving form and meaning to the importance of their way of life."

*In this final month of Canada 150, SAA showcases the Art Gallery of Swift Current as seen by writer Carle Steel last Canada Day.*

Beyond enhancing quality of life, and bringing economic benefits to the region, the Art Gallery of Swift Current helps local people learn to celebrate their way of life. At the 2017 Canada Day opening of the Art Gallery of Swift Current, Director and Curator Kim Houghtaling guided the crowd through the artists' works - each a small slice of Canada 150.

Among the paintings, sculptures and multimedia art pieces, Bill Philpotts' paintings portray life on the farms and pastures of his hometown of Central Butte. Houghtaling jokes that when Philpott was beginning his career,

his neighbours didn't think their landscapes and lives were worthy of celebration through art. "Why don't you paint something good?" they asked.

Over his two decades at the gallery, Houghtaling has been working to change that thinking. He describes a courtship with the city that expanded the reach of the gallery. Its original incarnation as a National Exhibition Centre – with touring exhibits promoting both arts and science – soon became a community-focused art museum bringing Swift Current's culture to the world.

Houghtaling deliberately seeks opportunities to insert the gallery in everyday life, making the space available to all. That constant connection between the bricks

and mortar of the gallery, and its activities outside of the building, communicate a clear message that art belongs to everyone, even those who might not initially feel comfortable in those surroundings. Along the way, the art Gallery of Swift Current has been a catalyst for culture across the city and beyond: the Lyric Theatre, Blenders Music, Coffeehouse events and the Kite Festival.

Through boom and bust, the gallery reflects the area back to itself, giving form and meaning to the importance of their way of life. It is an essential public service, reflecting the community to both residents and visitors and supporting the artists who come from the area.



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Houghtaling says the gallery also provides an education in visual literacy. “There is a process of learning it. Learning to read visual art is good for appreciating that part of our culture, but what also comes with that is when you become more visually informed, observing life in all its aspects becomes a greater experience.”

Artists take what we have here and celebrate it. “Take a place that’s all about droughts and wind erosion and bad farming and instead celebrate our fantastic sky. The wind is not your enemy. It’s your plaything. You just go out and fly kites.”

The arts serve to raise spirits and the belief in the potential of where we live. “Belief in potential is why people invest. That’s why

people spend money. That’s why people commit to something long term.”

Houghtaling says there is also an economic lesson to be learned here that goes well beyond the arts and culture’s obvious benefits to tourism. “When the community and the province is challenged financially and demoralized a little by a loss of resources that they thought they had – in the case of a bust for example – that’s when you should turn up the culture engine, really invest in the arts and heritage and remind everybody how wonderful this place is.”

For more information, go to [artgalleryofswiftcurrent.org](http://artgalleryofswiftcurrent.org).

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*Carle Steel is a writer, journalist, and arts administrator. I have worked for many years in the arts in the areas of publishing, writing, film, arts funding, and arts service organizations.*