

STEWART TURCOTTE
Portrait of Dr. Luigi Rossi
acrylic on canvas, 2018
18 × 14 in, 45.7 × 35.6 cm

LIKE FAMILY: THE COLLECTION OF DR. LUIGI ROSSI

DR. LUIGI ROSSI was born in 1956 in Smithers, a small town in northwestern British Columbia, where his parents Alba and Carmine had earlier immigrated to from Italy. With minimal education, money or knowledge of the English language, they left their family and what they had known as home, hoping to discover a place of opportunity and to create a rewarding life for themselves and the family they envisioned. To succeed, let alone survive, his parents knew they would have to work extremely hard.

Their work ethic was not lost on their son Luigi. From a very young age, whether academically or athletically, he had a simple outlook on life: if anything was worth doing, the only way to do it was to the best of one's ability. He was always exceptional and excelled in whatever he did, while he remained incredibly humble in doing so. After completing high school, he enrolled at the University of British Columbia, where he completed his bachelor of science in 1977 and subsequently obtained his doctor of medicine degree in 1981. He continued his education at the Foothills Hospital in Calgary and in 1986 graduated as a specialist in radiology with a licence to practise in Canada as well as the United States. He then moved to Grande Prairie, Alberta, located over 700 kilometres northwest of Calgary, and practised for 30 years at the regional hospital there as well as his clinic, until his passing in 2017.

Dr. Rossi's collection of art had a modest beginning and can be traced back to 1982, though his interest had started much earlier. His passion continued to grow and even though Grande Prairie was far removed from major art centres, Dr. Rossi combined his love for traveling with that of art; he visited countless public and private galleries in North America and established relationships with many art dealers as well as the artists themselves.[1]

Collectors are not all cut from the same cloth and beauty is said to be in the eyes of the individual beholder. Collectors can have different perspectives or interests but share one meaningful characteristic—a deep passion for living with art, as one would envision being part of a family. This is not something that can be taught or copied from others: it is a lifelong journey of education and emotions.

A typical trajectory of collecting might be to start unassumingly, with emerging local artists, before taking the "plunge" and perhaps later, with a sense of history, acquiring work by precursors. In this way interests can shift and change over time. However, Dr. Rossi's focus from the outset was Indigenous artists who were working in Western Canada, at a time when these artists had yet to be foregrounded in gallery exhibitions and critical writing in art magazines was sparse.[2]

Dr. Rossi acquired in depth works by artists who had been associated with the formative Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. (given the name the "Indian Group of Seven" by a Winnipeg art critic): Jackson Beardy, Eddy Cobiness, Norval Morrisseau, Daphne Odjig, Carl Ray, Joseph Sanchez and Alex Janvier, with whom he established a long friendship.[3] Dr. Rossi's interests continued to broaden and he acquired works by established artists Jack Bush, Rita Letendre, Gershon Iskowitz and Jack Shadbolt, and also landscape painters such as Robert Genn and Ted Harrison. Dr. Rossi's collection was truly breathtaking, with many works rivaling what you would expect to discover in a museum. In turn he acquired intimate and thought-provoking works.

A hallmark of a committed collector is not needing to justify their choices but rather to satisfy their own love and passion for the art. Dr. Rossi did not follow fashion and market trends; he essentially established his own. There was no hint of architectural or design magazine staging in his Kelowna condo; an Iskowitz and a Shadbolt hung next to an Odjig, a Janvier next to a Letendre and a Bush, to underscore what the works shared. The walls and hallways disappeared in this intensive hanging: one frequent visitor "counted" over 100 works. Far from being claustrophobic, there was a sense of space and liveliness, a conversation of spirit on the walls that was enlivened by daylight pouring in from windows facing west over the city of Kelowna and Okanagan Lake.



The Rossi Collection: A Circle of Friends, exhibition of the Kelowna Art Gallery, 2018 – 2019
Photo: Kyle L. Poirier
Courtesy of the Kelowna Art Gallery

I toured Dr. Rossi's condo with Janvier in the summer of 2018 (my second time that year and a year after Dr. Rossi's passing). We sat, talked, moved from room to room. Janvier offered comments on his own works that he had not seen for many years, but also those of other artists. It could well have been a conversation with Dr. Rossi. Living with art makes for a living collection and made so by the fine art of knowing, a discerning eye.

We thank Ihor Holubizky and the family of Dr. Rossi for contributing to the above text. Holubizky is one of the authors of *The Rossi Collection: A Circle of Friends* exhibition catalogue, published by the Kelowna Art Gallery.

1. The Art Gallery of Grande Prairie was established in 1975. Its current location opened in 2012.

2. An early and formative exhibition was *Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers*, at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1984.

3. While Inuit prints from the Kinngait (Cape Dorset), Qamani'tuaq (Baker Lake) and Ulukhaktok (Holman Island) workshops were widely available and promoted from the 1960s on, the short-lived PNIAI (active from 1973 to 1975) offered a model for younger First Nations artists at a time when such cultural consciousness initiatives were rare.

Dr. Rossi's life of collecting culminated with *The Rossi Collection: A Circle of Friends*, the 2018 exhibition mounted at the Kelowna Art Gallery. His collection was like a family to him, and on his behalf, members of his family were extremely proud to share these works with the public. Beyond its beauty and depth, the collection continues to resonate today as Canada advances on its path of truth and reconciliation. By foregrounding Indigenous voices and providing opportunity for artists who were once overlooked by mainstream institutions, Rossi's legacy affirms the role of private collectors in shaping cultural awareness and dialogue. His vision continues to live on not only in the artwork he cherished but also in the conversations they bring forth—conversations about history, identity, and the responsibility we all share in building a more inclusive and reconciled future.