

Four shows honour dealer Av Isaacs

Toronto art driving force in 1960s, '70s

JUDY STOFFMAN
ENTERTAINMENT REPORTER

In November, 1995, soon after Prime Minister Chrétien repelled an intruder with a piece of Inuit sculpture, Av Isaacs placed a newspaper ad for his Isaacs/Inuit Gallery. It showed a sharp-edged stone bird, under the heading "Increase your home security!" and "Art is there when you need it — Protecting Canadians since 1950."

This sly satire was directed not only at the man then occupying 24 Sussex Dr. but made fun of the utilitarian bent of Canadians, their general blindness to the sophisticated pleasures of art.

The framed ad hangs in Justina Barnicke Gallery of Hart House at the University of Toronto, part of a quartet to exhibitions at different venues devoted to celebrating the legacy of Avrom Isaacs (né Isaacovitch), the most iconoclastic and influential Canadian art dealer of his generation.

Three of the four exhibitions — at Hart House, the University of Toronto Art Centre and the Textile Gallery — open today. A show of photographs by Michael Lambeth and Tess Taconis documenting shows and gallery parties will open at the AGO on June 1.

Isaacs, now 79, spent a lifetime opening people's eyes to avant-garde as well as ethnographic art and artefacts. Having undergone quadruple bypass heart surgery and two knee replacements, he closed the Isaacs/Inuit gallery on Prince Arthur Ave., his final venture, in May 2001.

The dealer left the city a great deal more hospitable to artists and more visually educated than he found it in 1950, when he opened a framing shop and art-supply store on Hayter St.

That original framing shop became a hangout for fledgling artists from the nearby Ontario College of Art and when his artist friends needed a dealer to display and sell their works, he opened the Greenwich Gallery on Bay St. in 1955.

Six years later, it was renamed the Isaacs Gallery when it moved to Yonge St. north of Bloor — a centre of artistic ferment for the next three decades. In 1970, he created a separate gallery for Inuit art.

This writer recalls visits to the spacious white-walled Isaacs Gallery in the early 1970s, and being given little tours of the current show, my questions cheerfully answered, although it must have been clear to the dealer that this young woman, just out of university did not have a dollar to her name and was not likely to purchase anything.

Isaacs didn't care about making a sale — he just wanted you to love the art.

His artists were the most exciting of the day: Graham Coughtry, Dennis Burton, William Kurulek (whom he discovered in his framing shop), Victor Tink, Les Levine, Joyce Wieland, Michael Snow, Jesse Oonark, Jack Chambers, William Ronald, John Meredith, Gord Rayner, Robert Markie, Greg Curnoe, among many others.

"There were other galleries, and some of them also sold contemporary art," says Dennis Reid, chief curator at the Art Gallery of Ontario, "but they also sold older art, traditional stuff. Isaacs was committed to selling only the art of his time."

"The artists he showed were very young, just starting out and he provided opportunities for them to have their art seen, an alternative venue to the official venues, the public art museums," says Megan Bice, the general curator of the four-part show.

Champion of the art of his time

Isaacs, who initially knew little about art, says his success as a dealer took him by surprise. His art education was provided by his artists, especially Coughtry, with whom he shared an apartment for two years. "This era, it's important that it be broadcast again—the '60s and '70s were an amazing creative period," he says, expressing his pleasure with the retrospective exhibitions.

"Starting with Expo 67, it was an era of dynamic vitality in art, music, poetry, everything was feeding off each other. There was some special element of atmosphere."

Shows recognizing the role of dealers in the art world are as rare as they are interesting, for they encompass social, economic as well as art history.

In Isaacs' case, he played a part in the history of the struggle for free expression.

His gallery was raided by police in 1972 and '74, when he exhibited the disturbing butchershop tableaux of Mark Prent. The case eventually led to a change in the law prohibiting the display of a "disgusting object."

Last fall in Montreal, exhibitions at the Musée d'art contemporain and at Concordia University focused on the Max Stern, who owned the Dominion Gallery for 40 years until his death in '87.

In 1992, after the Isaacs Gallery — by then relocated to John St. — closed its doors, the Art Gallery of Hamilton mounted a survey show titled "Small

Villages: The Isaacs Gallery in Toronto, 1956-91."

But the four Toronto exhibitions, collectively titled "Isaacs Seen," are more ambitious than any of these.

The U.of.T. art centre is showing 30 key works by 24 Isaacs artists having the longest association with the gallery, conveying the experimental spirit Isaacs fostered.

Two giant wood and fibreglass nudes by Victor Tink are covered with burrs; a chair by Les Levine is enveloped in vacuum-formed Uvex. Christiane Pflug locks out her kitchen door for her subject, creating a haunting image. Greg Curnoe stamps a record of what he did each hour of the day on 24 enamelled squares. Michael Snow creates holograms. Walter Redinger forms a large irregular disc out of squashed fibreglass.

Hart House features scores of odd objects and ephemera relating to Isaacs' life and eclectic collecting habits. It includes Christmas tree ornaments created by his artists, Mexican-tin votive objects, a big pair of handmade scissors, a papier maché clock topped by a crow made by Gathie Falk, a carved horse's head from a harness-maker's shop, a candy box Isaacs found in a garbage can and portraits of him by his artists.

"I wanted to have some fun here," says Judi Schwartz, curator of the Justina Barnicke Gallery and the person who first proposed "Isaacs Seen."

The show at the Textile Museum in-

cludes textile art from Isaacs' collection and those he has donated to the museum — a Xosa anklet, belts from Bolivia, Cree wall decoration, an embroidered tunic from Pakistan, an appliquéd Inuit wall hanging.

Isaacs has said that textiles taught him how wide the range of artistic expression can be.

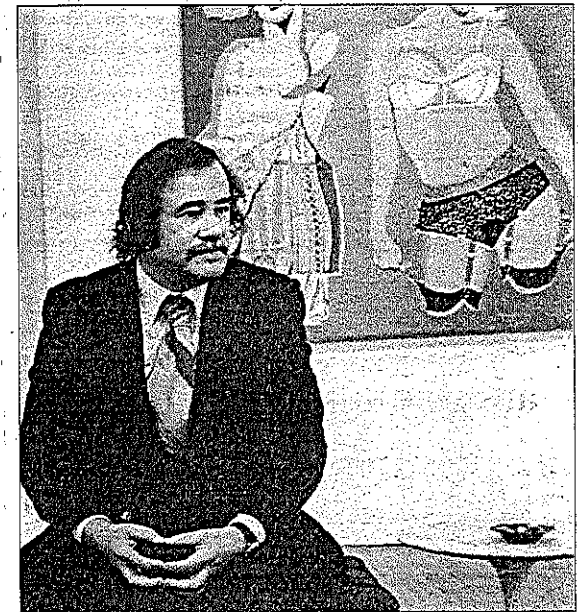
At the time of his retirement four years ago, Isaacs spoke of writing his memoirs and he retained publisher Malcolm Lester to locate a writer to collaborate with him. No one was found to be suitable and the project was abandoned.

Isaacs partner, ex-CBC producer Donna Wignore, has put together a 175-page scrapbook accompanying the exhibitions with essays and reminiscences by many hands, now being printed by Coach House Press.

"It's an entertaining look at Isaacs years," she says, "and it leaves the door wide open for any academic that wants to do a book that's an in-depth assessment."

Just the facts

Show: "Gallery ReView" to Aug. 5 at University of Toronto Art Centre, Tues. to Sat. Admission: \$5
Show: "Regarding Av" to Aug. 18 at Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, Mon. to Sat. Admission: Free
Show: "Closet Collector" to Sept. 25 at Textile Museum, 55 Centre Ave., Daily. Admission: \$10



Av Isaacs sits in front of paintings by Dennis Burton three decades ago.