

# Toronto's loss is D.C.'s gain



**MARTIN KNELMAN**

**W**ashington, D.C., offers a staggering array of great museums, and on a recent trip I gorged on eight of them within a few days. Among the most stunning was the Joseph M. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, part of the Smithsonian Institution in a prime location on the Mall.

Hirshhorn, who died in 1981, was a flamboyant figure in the tradition of America's classic robber barons, an immigrant who struck it rich and used some of the loot to assemble a fabulous art collection.

But when I discussed this with my friend Gail Dexter Lord, the internationally respected museum consultant, she reminded me that Hirshhorn made his fortune in Canada, that he lived in Toronto for 20 years where he was known as a Bay Street tycoon, and — most distressingly — that Canada had missed a wonderful opportunity to keep this dazzling collection on our side of the border.

Indeed, back in 1969, long before she and her husband founded their firm, Lord Cultural Resources, Gail Dexter (as she was then known) documented the whole sad story of Canada's lost opportunity in the pages of the *Star*, where at that time she was the art critic.

Hirshhorn was lured from Wall Street to Ontario in 1933 by the whiff of gold. He made millions from a uranium strike near Blind River, Ont. And he was as adventurous a risk-taker in his art dealings as he was in his business dealings. What was exciting about his art collection was that he concentrated on mostly living 20th century artists, including a number of Canadians along with many of the biggest names in the New York art world of the 1950s and 1960s. The man had a taste for the shock of the new.

For years, many of the paintings in his collection hung in his Toronto office on King Street.

Hirshhorn had a dream of creating an entire town, which would include his own palatial residence and an art gallery, near Blind River — but was foiled by obstacles from the local community and the Ontario government.

In the mid-1960s, when Hirshhorn let it be known he was interested in donating his entire art collection, he received offers from Israel and England as well as New York and Washington. Incredibly, Canada let this opportunity go by. The U.S. government quickly made the right offer, and spent millions commissioning an unforgettably modern building that reflects the spirit of the art within its walls.

That intriguing tidbit of cross-border cultural history offers a striking insight into Toronto's status, or the lack of it, as a major art centre. Yes, during the past decade, we've had impressive reinventions of our two major museums, the Royal Ontario Museum and the Art Gallery of Ontario. And both have been somewhat reinvented by star architects — Daniel Libeskind and Frank Gehry, respectively.

True, the AGO transformation was triggered by the gift of a fabulously wealthy man with a passion for collecting art, the late Ken Thomson. But even after the arts building spree of the city's so-called cultural renaissance over the past decade, we don't have anything comparable to the Hirshhorn museum — a stunning and iconic building in an unbeatable location dedicated to the art assembled by one voracious collector.

Moreover, Toronto conspicuously lacks a large museum dedicated to modern art. We could never aspire to compete with New York, London or Paris in that respect. But if our cultural leaders and governments had been more prescient, more aggressive and less conservative, perhaps we would not lag embarrassingly far behind Chicago, Montreal and Los Angeles when it comes to showcasing art of the past 50 or 60 years for the public.

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