

From The Ground Floor Up

Michael Gibson's improbable ascent to higher ground

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By Suzanne Boles

Any preconceived notions you may have about art gallery owners are quickly dispelled after talking with Michael Gibson. At 42, this father of two knows a lot about fine art and business, but it wasn't always that way.

"I wasn't brought up in a family that collects art. It wasn't part of my world. I was a jock. I played football in university and played guitar, but I never studied art."

A surprising admission from a successful art gallery owner who's gaining world renown, but not so surprising once you get to know him. He speaks with candor about how he got into this business and his goal to become a well-known private gallery and promote Canadian artists to an international market. But even as he gets closer to realizing his dreams he doesn't forget how he got there. Each step has been a learning experience. "I've certainly made mistakes. I think you can't be successful without making mistakes."

Born in Calgary, Gibson's family moved to London. After high school he left to attend Bishop's University in Lennoxville, Quebec and received his bachelor of Business Administration in 1981, then attended the French Immersion program at Trois Pistoles that summer.

"That Fall I asked (my family) for an open ticket to Europe. I left that September for about 14 months. That's where I really became interested in art. Europe has so many historical buildings and art. I remember going to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. It was a memorable moment, seeing the original paintings. It was amazing."

He traveled throughout Europe, worked at a ski resort in the French Alps, and spent his free time visiting museums in France. "The entire experience was about learning," says Gibson. "I learned a lot about art and about myself."

When he returned to Canada, in late 1982, the recession had hit. It was difficult to land work but he received the promise of a job from Richardson Greenshields, providing he passed the Canadian Securities course, which he did. Working downtown, Gibson would frequent the Talbot Street area and a guitar store there, during lunch. He met Asher Roth, owner of Roth Art, whose business was located on Talbot Street. Gibson began working part time at the store, mainly a picture framing business then. Roth was looking to get out of the business. He offered it to Gibson.

"I always thought I'd work for myself one day but I was only 26 so it seemed a little early." Still, "I think life's a learning process. I believe opportunities will appear if you put

yourself in a position to receive them," says Gibson who decided to take over the Talbot Street business.

That was 16 years ago. Every moment since has been a learning experience.

The original Talbot Street framing business was later expanded to include sales of original art, pottery and more when he moved to 181 King Street in late 1987. A decade later, Michael Gibson Gallery shuffled to its current location at 157 Carling Street. For a year between, 1986 to be exact, the gallery hung its shingle in the Eaton Square Mall.

But while each of the growth stages have posted challenges, Gibson's biggest challenge came in 1990 when he decided to open a store in the Home and Design Centre on Exeter Road in south London, in addition to his King Street location.

"I thought two times one is two. I'm gonna make twice as much," he laughs. But with the move came a downturn in the economy. From 1991 to 1992, Gibson found himself competing with his framing business suppliers who started going after his accounts. The learning experience kicked in again.

"I certainly learned that bigger is not better" he says. "That's when I really get up to get into original art because there's no middleman. There's just the artist and me. No one can come in and circumvent my sales."

His second major shift in business strategy came shortly after moving the business to Carling Street. "I had so many things going on at the King Street place - with a coffee bar thrown in. I spent a lot of time going after clients and thinking I'll get the client and I'll find out what they want and I'll sell it to them. It really wasn't very effective. So when I moved to Carling, part of my philosophy was I'd build the best gallery anywhere in Canada."

With help from Icorr Properties, owners of 157 Carling Street, and John Nicholson of Malhotra Nicholson Architects, the property was transformed. The result was so impressive that the gallery has recently been selected as a finalist in the Built Environments - Small Projects category of the National Post Design Exchange Awards.

"Moving from King Street to Carling Street was the really big metamorphosis for me, Gibson explains. "I was much more focused on what I was doing with my business.

But while Gibson fine-tuned the operation prior to the move, he did bring along several King Street initiatives including www.gibsongallery.com. Launched when the Internet was still in its infancy (as part of his coffee bar experience Gibson hooked up a computer on King Street and offered patrons the opportunity to surf the Net for a small fee), the website evolved into a valuable marketing tool, and today receives upwards of 2,000 hits a month.

The gallery's virtual presence has been of particular value since Gibson returned from the inaugural Toronto International Art Fair at the Toronto Convention Centre in November. According to Gibson, the show was a sizeable financial risk, but the gamble paid off.

"I had to sign a cheque in August this year and it was a real difficult thing because it was quite a substantial amount of money, about \$15,000."

By no means green to the show world, Gibson has attended numerous art fairs around the world including an annual event held in Chicago. But this was the first time he'd taken part he's signed on as an exhibitor. His goal, something he says he's been working on for a long time, has been name recognition for his business and an international presence. "We're trying to build a national business, so when you say Michael Gibson Gallery in Vancouver, Toronto or Halifax, they'll know who I am. And it's getting pretty close, believe it or not, in the art world."

"I'm in a challenging business. I'm aiming at about 2% of the population. But it's bigger than you think it is when you start dealing outside of London. The real collectors tend to be quite sophisticated and knowledgeable and educated so those I enjoy dealing with them because I can learn from them."

Believing the three most important rules in business are price, quality and service, Gibson personally delivered Toronto orders collected at the show. He also believes that his artists are his most important business asset. Gibson currently represents 20 artists throughout Canada.

"I would find highly motivating if I could take a Canadian artist and make them a success in the States, or Europe, or just outside of Canada," says Gibson. "I know we have the artists that could compete. So it's a matter of getting on a plane and getting to know people. That's why I went to the (Toronto) art fair, because it was an international art fair. There's dealers there from around the world."

Looking into the future, Gibson remarks that he hopes to remain in London but expand his presence, internationally and "build a nice foundation."

"I'd like to have a one room house put up in my business," he chides, "because business is very much about digging a hole and building your basement, getting to the first floor and getting the bricks up."

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