

# Extending Muskoka's rich saga through hinterglas art

Artist Bonnie Bews is on a new trajectory, writes Muskoka In Perspective columnist

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MUSKOKA — Two weeks from now, on July 18, artist Bonnie Bews will open the doors of her rustic Muskoka Falls studio-gallery to display a series of captivating glass-panel drawings depicting individuals and events that shaped who Muskokans are today.

Two years ago she “knew next to nothing” about these seminal events and larger-than-life characters. To confess knowing “next to nothing” about Muskoka’s past doesn’t mean Bews is a stranger in these parts. She’s been active year-round since her teens, with her parents’ trailer camp at Torrance, her studio-gallery Hinterglas Castle at Walker’s Point, as a respected book illustrator, fully engaged in Muskoka’s artistic and gardening communities. As a vital Muskokan, Bews is on the A-team.

But when renovating the old Muskoka Falls Livery Stable into a studio-gallery at her McBride Lane home, she found cached in its walls late 1800s Bracebridge newspapers. An advertisement for a then new model iron stove, identical to an old one she’d known as a girl, sparked a connection. Suddenly, the past spoke as present, a link to her own life’s experience.

The long-hidden papers also carried news reports that, just as suddenly, were no longer old or out-of-date, but keys to events as real as an iron stove. From yesteryear’s newspapers on her lap, a magic purple flame ignited to fuel Bews’ overpowering urge to unlock the meanings of those ancestral lives, discover their adventures, portray their accomplishments.

To those who see past, present and future as one, who are interested in what went before because they care about what’s coming next and who’ve learned past performance is the best predictor of future behaviour, many paths are open: making movies, writing books, collecting photographs, mounting plays, recording interviews, casting statues, delivering talks, creating websites, making models, preparing documentaries, hosting exhibits, opening museums, broadcasting heritage vignettes, carving replicas, conducting tours, erecting plaques, and painting.

Painting! But painting what, exactly? “I want to show people that Muskoka means more than being on a dock,” Bews said. “There’s a lot of history here. I asked what I, as a person who’s not been historically minded, would find interesting. And what could I show others, who don’t know or care much about history either, that would engage them?”

Seeking answers in the libraries she haunted, books she devoured and images she sought out was a visual person’s inductive, rather than scholar’s deductive, approach to history. Find what’s impactful. A picture’s worth a thousand words. Show me!

On a movie studio’s cutting-room floor lie miles of footage that lacked production value onscreen. Only 24 scenes made Bews’ final cut, which is why Muskoka Etched in Glass has very high production values.

Being “hinterglas” charcoal drawings on glass adds even greater potency to her two dozen images. Bews already possessed a distinctive artistic technique when, backpacking through Germany, she was spotted sketching by renowned Bavarian glass painter Rudolf Schmid. She accepted an apprenticeship in his studio, learned a particular method he’d pioneered applying graphite and watercolour to achieve her translucent “reverse glass” paintings.

Bonnie Bews is on a new trajectory, generating energy by uniquely reimagining Muskoka. She’s investing with fresh awareness transformative Muskoka episodes (two are the advent of the steamship era, and Gravenhurst’s Second World War prisoner camp) and seminal characters (two are the strong, wise Chief Muskquaki, and defiant Rene Caisse, with her top-secret cancer treatment).

In Germany, she admired Schmid’s immense wall panels and knew she’d do something similar, one day. Voilà: Muskoka’s Historic Wall in downtown Muskoka Falls, 5 McBride Lane, Bracebridge. Celebration launch is July 18; visit [www.bonniebews.com](http://www.bonniebews.com).

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