



CANADIAN ARTISTS REPRESENTATION /
LE FRONT DES ARTISTES CANADIENS

ADVISORY NOTE

ARTIST GROUPS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT FOR ARTISTS

By Marnie Badham for CARFAC SASK © November 2000

A need has been identified for informal discussion and support groups for visual artists. Communities of artists exist at many levels... they may be geographical, social, studio, media, task related or have many other focuses. The need for artist salons is regarded as critically important to the development and continued growth of Saskatchewan Artists in all areas of the province (rural and urban) and at all levels of development. These groups would provide support and interaction at a basic human level. For most of human history, people have done this, banded together in small social units. One person's ideas can develop and inspire another's and another's. The original idea, with the group's input, can become a very large and elaborate mechanism for community development.

The salons of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and of the modern eras were also the focus of intellectual activity. This is where the most intelligent of artists, writers, philosophers, and political leaders would gather. They would read poetry, discuss world events and current research, and meet with influential patrons. This was the art of conversation, where individuals would come together for stimulation and discussion.

We need to come together to share the things that we think and care about. Many artists feel isolated no matter where they live or at what level of success they have reached. Geography, politics, education, economics, genre, and artist competition are just some of the factors leading to this isolation.

The creative spirit is fragile and needs support and stimulation. Artist salons promote the health of their members, their purpose is for collective learning, growing and nurturing.



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THE BENEFITS

- *Personal Support* - sharing and information, exchange of ideas, valuable critique, listening, people and something in common, sensitivity, friendship, and social interaction.
- *Empowerment* - the power in numbers, advocacy, social change, pooling of knowledge, participating in community events, group brainstorming, and community development.
- *Education* - sharing of techniques and theory, mentoring, or developing a communal library.
- *Financial* - communal studio space, bulk ordering of artist materials, or the sharing and purchase of tools/equipment.
- *Opportunities* - group exhibitions, marketing and promotion of each other's work or collectively, artist collaborations, and sharing of opportunities for exhibition, sale, commission, or employment.

GETTING STARTED

Invite a few other artists living in your area and/or post an initial meeting date and location. Include an idea of how the group will work and list a contact phone number if artists have any initial questions. The first meeting should be located in an accessible, comfortable space. Is there a community centre, a gallery, or a coffee shop where your group can meet for no charge? You will need to facilitate or lead the group the first evening.

Start out by having each artist take a few minutes to talk about her/himself. Keep it simple and brief: their name, a description of their work, recent successes, why they make art, what their expectations are... Pass around a piece of paper to collect names and phone numbers. What is the best day and time for the group to meet? A weeknight for 2 hours is a good place to start. Where would they like to meet? The group could rotate through the members' studios, homes or workspaces. You could also meet in a community space where you can show slides of each other's work.

Make a list of everyone's ideas. Set up a schedule of dates and locations, be sure to always start on time. Name the group, give yourselves an identity. Establish membership fees, if you feel you need, them or start a coffee fund. Once you have heard the expectations of the individuals, you will find the purpose of the group. Artist groups exist in many forms. Here are a few examples:

THE CRITIQUE GROUP

This artist group is an opportunity for individuals to see new work from their peers and receive valuable feedback about their own art. This group should start fairly small, maybe 3 to 10 artists. Once the groups grows (and it will) you may have to split in two to accommodate everyone.

You should work together to create salon rules or guidelines. Discuss what types of feedback each artist is looking for. Be inclusive, value everyone's opinion, be sensitive to the artist who is sharing their work, speak solely about the work (don't make it personal), embrace diversity,

and honour confidentiality. Set time limits for the artist to talk (15 minutes) and for the discussion after (5 minutes per member). A good rule is that everyone must speak and never make the artist feel they have to defend their work. During critiques, start with support before you offer any critical advice. Never compare the work of two members in your group. These rules may seem rigid, but once you get started, it will be obvious how important these guidelines can be.

You may want to periodically bring in a guest artist or new participant who has expertise in a certain area or a curator who can share an alternative point of view. This group is likely to branch into the many other forms of artist groups to be mentioned below.

THE WORKING GROUP

The main objective of the “working group” is to actually produce work. Although some artists prefer working alone, many of us enjoy the group dynamic and are motivated and inspired by fellow artists. These relationships can happen in a group studio situation, class situation, or an organized meeting of artists.

The Artist Retreat is an excellent way to accomplish the goal of production in a group setting. To organize a retreat, you will have to find a location and time where a group of artists can meet with out being disturbed. To provide an atmosphere where an artist can ignore the day to day tasks and responsibilities of everyday life is to provide the environment that supports creativity. Some communities will organize retreats that last from one day to two or three weeks. You can have the meeting/ production space be in your regular meeting or workshop space or a location out of town. A decent size group may start with 5 artists and can grow to possible 20 artists. Make sure the venue can manage the size of your group.

THE SUPPORT/DISCUSSION GROUP

The main purpose of this group is to combat isolation, for creative stimulation and to exchange ideas. The artists involved in the Support/Discussion Group need to sensitive to each other’s feelings and respect each other’s views. There are a few ways to set up the salon. It will often start with a core group who meet at the local coffee shop or pub. The group will change and take shape after a few meetings. Be open to new directions and new members, this keeps the group exciting and healthy.

Like the Critique Group, you will want to set up a schedule and guidelines for the members to follow. Because the group will be diverse, you could alternate between the members as to who will lead the meeting. Discussion topics could include a local art exhibition, an artist’s work, a political issue, a theoretical article, or any number of interesting subjects. The presenter/facilitator could start by sharing a short prepared talk on the subject of their choice. When they are done, the group can respond with discussion. A good rule: everyone must speak once before participants may speak a second time. To follow First Nations tradition, conversation can be kept flowing by the passing of a talking stick. It will entitle the one ho holds it to speak without interruption.

THE PROJECT GROUP

This group is often comprised of active and non-active artists and activists who meet for community events. The group will come together to answer calls for submission for any number of activities, depending on the members' interests. This group will make collaborative work, public art; support advocacy causes, and will like to have fun together. This group will also do well at fund-raising and promoting their projects. Some projects could be:

- I. *A Film Night*: rent or borrow a public space and screen films or videos that are of interest to the art community, charge a small admission to fund-raise for the group or cover the basic costs of the evening.
- II. *Street theatre*: an impromptu forum for social or art advocacy, a great way to gain visibility in your community.
- III. *Art Forums or Presentations*: bring in visiting artists to lecture or invite community artists to be part of a panel discussion about a hot topic in your community. Check out when other groups, galleries, organizations, or educational institutions are bringing in artists. You can share costs by doubling up.
- IV. *Art Newsletters or a (maga)Zine*: you can include editorials, educational articles, current event listings, classified ads for trading or selling equipment and materials. Some rural groups have actually developed a regular system of mailing letters to create a discussion circuit to combat the great distances to travel to meet like other regular salon groups. Electronic salons are now becoming popular through email and Chat rooms on the World Wide Web.
- V. *Art show and sale*: an opportunity to sell and show some new work and add a line to your exhibition list on your resume. It is good practice to work as part of a group to mount a show before trying to mount a solo show.
- VI. *Slide Soiree*: borrow a slide projector and artists bring up to 20 slides each. This is a great ice breaker to work into a more formal Critique Group meeting situation in the future.
- VII. *Open Model Session*: the group can hire a model and share the cost. Put up a poster or take out an ad in the newspaper looking for models. Always meet and interview the model before you hire them. Start with 10 second gesture drawings to warm people up and then move into a half-hour pose. Two hours is a good amount of time for the sessions with a model.
- VIII. *Paint Murals*: give something back to the community while creating your own audience for your work. It's a great way to work collaboratively and try out new skills.

THE STUDIO COOPERATIVE

Because many artists battle financially to support their art making, having a private studio is often difficult. Many artists are also interested in seeing other artists' work and being part of a community atmosphere. This group requires a little more organizing than other types of artist groups. The artists involved must be committed financially and have time to help in the planning stages and in providing administrative support. Ultimately, a studio cooperative is a space and community where all artists equally contribute and equally benefit. Artists will share space, equipment, and funds. An organized group studio will set rules surrounding the use of

space, equipment, group funds and activities. Some Studio Cooperatives may also include living spaces.

To organize a studio co-operative, you must promote your idea to artists in the community. Have an initial meeting to find out the physical needs of the artists. Then scout your community for spaces that address your needs: affordability, safety, located centrally on a bus route or have parking, water, heat, and proper lighting. Other needs may arise depending on what mediums the artist work in: cement floors for a kiln or a welding booth, freight elevator and loading dock for those who work large, natural light for painters and ventilation for those who work in wood, metal, oil paint or other types of materials that are dangerous to work with indoors.

You may want to sign a lease with the landlord and with the individual members. Have the members pay last month's rent and set up an ongoing payment system and a bank account. A volunteer board of directors is a good idea so that funds are administered honourably and decisions are made cooperatively. As a Incorporated Not for Profit group, you may be able to apply for community or lottery funds to subsidize your core expenses or to support any projects you work on as a group.

CONCLUSION

The word salon is the French translation for Drawing Room, a place to meet. The physical location and the commitment of time and participation are the two basic obligations needed to get a salon started. All of these above-mentioned forms of artist groups and salons that develop the creative community and empower their participants, free the artist from the barriers of isolation: economics, intellectual, geographical, and time limitations. This social invention attests to the basic human need for the small group dynamic. Quite possibly the most important function of the salon is to enrich and rise the level of discourse among the participants, and by extension, the artistic community as a whole.

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