

The Gallery Buildings

Construction of the original Vancouver Art Gallery building began in earnest in March of 1931 in order to be complete for the October 5th opening. Funded by the \$130,000 raised by the Gallery Founders, the Gallery was constructed on a 132-by-66-foot site donated by the City of Vancouver at 1145 Georgia Street, several blocks west of where the Gallery now stands. Built for a cost of \$40,000, the Gallery was erected in a lot between a row of houses and a service station in what was then a residential area at the edge of downtown. Designed by local architects Sharp and Thompson, the Gallery was constructed in the Art Deco style and possessed a single floor of gallery space. Its façade incorporated a frieze on which the names of great painters were carved and the entrance was flanked by the busts of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci.



Vancouver Art Gallery at 1145
Georgia Street, c.1931

In 1951, the Gallery was expanded to three times its original size in order to accommodate 157 works by Emily Carr, willed by the artist to the province of British Columbia before her death in 1945. Fundraising for the expansion was led by Carr's good friend, Group of Seven artist Lauren Harris, who was instrumental in raising \$300,000 toward the project, a sum matched by the City of Vancouver. Removing the Art Deco façade, architect Ross A. Lort remodelled the Gallery in accordance with the International Style popular in Vancouver at the time.



Vancouver Art Gallery after its
1951 expansion, c.1951

The Gallery remained on Georgia Street until 1983, when it moved to its present location bound by Georgia, Howe, Hornby and Robson Streets. As part of a land exchange between the Province of British Columbia and the City of Vancouver in 1974, the city acquired a 99-year lease of the imposing, neo-classical courthouse building, built in 1906. The monumental structure was designed by Victoria architect Sir Francis Mawson Rattenbury (1867-1935), a colourful figure originally from Yorkshire, England who moved to Canada in 1892 and established himself as the major institutional architect in British Columbia, also designing Victoria's Legislative Assembly buildings and the city's landmark Empress Hotel.



Provincial Courthouse before
Vancouver Art Gallery renovation,
c.1910

Vancouver-based Arthur Erickson Architects was hired by the city to carry out a feasibility study on the possible civic uses of the building, and the firm returned a report recommending the Gallery renovate and relocate to the courthouse. Accepting with exuberance, the Gallery commissioned Erickson's firm, which had developed the plans for the new provincial courthouse and offices to be constructed on the two blocks south of the old courthouse, to

develop the design for the renovation. The three-block development became known as Robson Square, one of Erickson's largest and most renowned projects. Construction began on the \$20 million redesign in December of 1981 and the new Vancouver Art Gallery opened to the public in October 1983 with 41,400 square feet of exhibition space. Erickson's artful re-imagining of a place of law into a place for art saw courtrooms eloquently give way to lyrical gallery spaces, and Neoclassical architecture dynamically contrasted with Modernist design, making it one of Vancouver's most significant and intriguing buildings.



Vancouver Art Galley in its current location, 2006