



Local events make this gallery a true destination

written by Debra Usher

The once sleepy village of Clarksburg has blossomed into destination “Artsburg,” thanks in part to painter Debra Lynn Carroll, her husband Phil McCormack and their Loft Gallery.

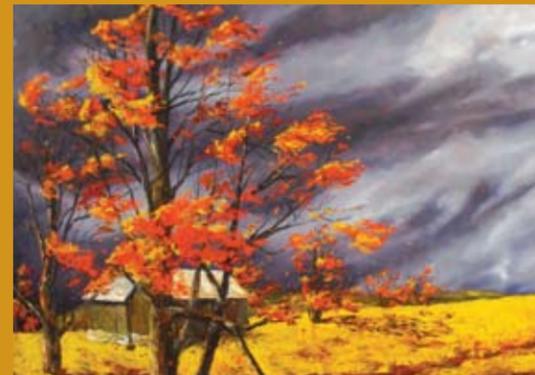
The couple was introduced to the picturesque village 22 km west of Collingwood in 2005 by an artist friend who had been born there. He shared stories of sunny afternoons painting by the Beaver River. On their first drive through Clarksburg, on a desolate early March day with the river running high, Debra asked Phil to slow down so she could see the village. “There’s nothing to see,” replied Phil.

Not so. A For Lease sign at 183 Marsh Street caught their eye and they discovered that the



building was being fixed up to accommodate an art gallery, office and artist-in-residence studio. Shortly thereafter, Phil and Debra realized their dream and opened Loft Gallery in the renovated structure.

However, on the weekend the gallery opened – also their first wedding anniversary – Debra and Phil were brought back to reality. They propped open an old wooden door at the entrance as an invitation for people to come inside, but by around two o’clock in the afternoon not a soul had come through that door. They looked up and down Marsh Street, spellbound. Not a person or a vehicle was in sight. It was absolutely quiet. It was stiflingly hot. A dry wind was blowing dust down the road.





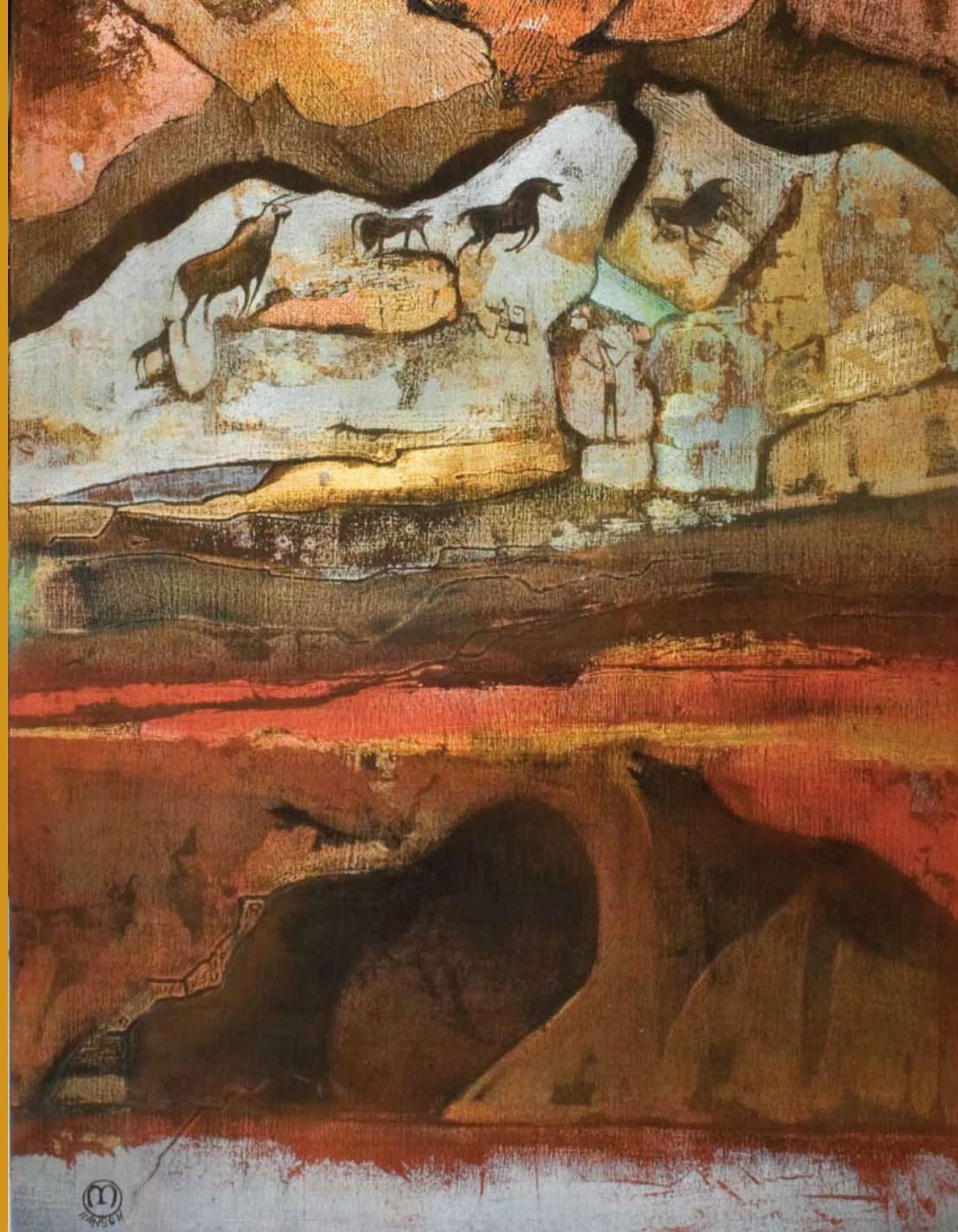
The newlyweds burst out laughing, asking each other what they had gotten themselves into. They decided then and there that they would have to make the Loft Gallery a true destination. That was in June 2006.

With years of retail experience behind him, Phil got to work. The Loft Gallery looked for new artists who were not under contract or being shown in other galleries in the Collingwood area. It became the venue for events and a variety of exhibitions. Twice a year, Debra and Phil host the Square Foot Show, which features about 300 small paintings. The next Square Foot Show takes place in April. At the end of April, during the annual Georgian Sound Festival, Loft Gallery will be one of ten hosts for Jazzmania. The gallery will be turned into a bistro for the evening with a live jazz band performing. In July the gallery hosts the fourth annual Bruce Trail and Niagara Escarpment Art Exhibition with artists from across Ontario. Having Debra as a resident artist adds a special focus to the gallery.



During the art tours, Debra and invited artists paint for the public in Debra's studio.

One of the local artists, the late Bill Hartman, sent Debra and Phil an email affectionately nicknaming Clarksburg "Artsburg." The name has stuck. The village has become a vibrant and exciting arts community with four galleries, a metal works artist and woodworkers. There is even a day of celebration, Artsburg Day, in July every year. The streets are packed with people. Plans are underway to increase parking, although it is usually possible to find a parking space on





the main street immediately outside the gallery.

Inside their gallery, Debra and Phil emphasize providing attentive and personalized service to all their customers. Phil's natural, easy-going and unpretentious manner immediately engages visitors. He is eager to please and will transport works of art to the homes of potential buyers so that they can see how they will look on site.

He can often be found at the main desk of the gallery, while Debra can be found in the studio painting. Despite Phil's congeniality, people still want direct contact with the artist, so Debra puts down her brushes and chats with the guests too.

Loft Gallery represents Debra Lynn Carroll, Laurie DeCamillis, Peter Reid and Mary Hanson, Jamie MacLean and Carola Grimm. They feature

about 20 other painters, with guest artists included in theme shows. Rock sculptures by Doug Butler are also displayed at Loft Gallery.

The gallery's mission is to provide an opportunity for artists to sell their original paintings and sculptures and for buyers to easily acquire art for their homes and businesses. Although the gallery has a wide variety of styles

and contemporary paintings, Loft's focus is on landscape, with an emphasis on paintings from Georgian Bay and southern Ontario.

One of the biggest reasons for the success of the gallery is the relationship that Phil and Debra have built with their artists. They seek out artists who enjoy creating the kind of art that people want to place in their homes, who have a body of work, a well-developed style of painting, who are pleasant and willing to work in partnership with the gallery. The artists come from Ontario and Quebec and include a few from the immediate area.

Despite the economic recession and competition from Internet sales, the gallery has had another year of growth. Inspiring the artists to paint what customers want is one of the keys to its success. Phil and Debra solicit feedback from clients and pass it on to the artists. Sometimes they collaborate with an artist to create something specific to a customer's needs. They focus on providing a full-service operation that allows artists to do what they do best – create art – while they find great homes for their creations.

The couple warns customers that relying on the Internet for purchasing art has drawbacks. It is impossible to get an accurate sense of a painting from a screen image. The impact of a 6-foot by 9-foot work of art cannot be conveyed on a 2-inch by 3-inch screen image. Even seeing a painting in the gallery is different from seeing it in a home, where it is not competing for attention.

Loft Gallery is not only about selling the art. Both Phil and Debra love to have people come in just to admire the beauty of it all. With plenty of room for wandering around, the gallery fits into the lifestyle of the community and its visitors. People come in wearing their sports clothes after being out on the ski slopes, snowshoeing nearby paths, paddling the Beaver River or bike riding. Children are welcome; there is even a toy box. The gallery has become a place to bring friends, family and visitors as an outing. Many people tell Debra and Phil that they are coming in for their art fix.

Debra has overall responsibility for the gallery. She curates the shows, comes up with themes and markets the gallery. She spends time with visitors to the gallery but usually is behind the



scenes, creating the paintings that have enabled the gallery to survive and flourish. Phil jokingly refers to Debra as “the factory.”

Debra and Phil have a life now that revolves around the community of Clarksburg. Phil is the president of the local business association and sits on the board of the Marsh Street Centre, the arts centre for the area.

Their academic backgrounds have allowed the couple to fit in quickly with the business and arts community. Debra had already started Debra Lynn Carroll Fine Art in 2000, after getting an MBA from Dalhousie University and graduating from the Ontario College of Art and Design. She did solo shows and sold her art through the Toronto Outdoor Art Exhibition,

Toronto Art Expo and the One of A Kind show. She was also picked up by galleries in the Greater Toronto Area.

Phil had studied business administration with a major in marketing at Ryerson University. His work experience was in management and sales, including business retail management.

Their staff is also well qualified. Carolyn Colangelo does the book-keeping for the gallery and has become invaluable to its success with her keen organizational skills, not to mention the special treats she bakes for some of the gallery’s events. She also decorates the gallery. Jennifer Gilbert is a part-time sales associate who brings to the gallery a design background and a wealth of information about art.

Loft Gallery now has a long list of customers. Most of the gallery’s advertising is done by email. Readers are invited to send their email addresses to info@loftgallery.ca to receive information about upcoming exhibitions and events, or visit the website, www.loftgallery.ca, or call 519.599.5912. Readers are also invited to make this gallery their destination for a weekend drive. The Loft Gallery is located at 183 Marsh Street, Clarksburg, Ontario – 22 km west of Collingwood and immediately south of Thornbury.



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