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'Low-tech' artistry wins top cultural prize

By Scott Dunn, Sun Times, Owen Sound
Sunday, February 11, 2018 5:35:27 EST PM

Lifetime Achievement Award winner Stephen Hogbin with a wooden marquetry box presented to him Sunday at the 2018 Owen Sound Cultural Awards. The box was handmade by artist Diane Edwards, who used Tom Thomson's landscapes for inspiration. (Scott Dunn/The Sun Times)

OWEN SOUND - An Owen Sound artist, wood-turner and furniture maker was the 2018 Lifetime Achievement Award winner at the ninth annual Owen Sound Cultural Awards Sunday.

Stephen Hogbin was selected by a jury, in a non-competitive process, which considered different candidates and selected the person members thought best meets the criteria for recognition.

Owen Sound Coun. Scott Greig, who presented the award, described Hogbin in prepared remarks as one "who has spent his life as an artist, a designer, a curator, an author, a teacher, an inventor and a mentor."

Greig said Hogbin is "recognized internationally by collectors, educators and professional organizations for his influence in studio

woodturning and furniture making."

Past lifetime achievement winners have included former Georgian Bay Symphony music director John Barnum, musician and broadcaster Alfie Fromager, and local music teacher and active community member Ariel Barkley.

Hogbin said he was "very touched" and surprised during his remarks upon receiving the award. "But I'm really not old enough," the 75-year-old said to a roar of laughter from event attendees at the Harry Lumley Bayshore Community Centre.

"The joke in the family is that I'm going to work on my projects until I'm 100, and then take the next five years off."

He noted the "humble nature of woodworking" and that he likes creating "low-tech" worthwhile, useful, beautiful, lasting things with wood.

The annual awards event recognized eight individuals and organizations in various categories to honour contributions which have enriched to the city's culture.

They included scenic painter Chris Morton (Emerging Artist), musician and radioman Steve Ritchie (Outstanding Individual), Georgian Bay Symphony (Outstanding Group), the 42nd Annual Summerfolk Music and Crafts Festival (Outstanding Event), the Awesome Sydenham Riverfest Extravaganza (Most Promising New Event), Maryann Thomas (Cultural Heritage), and Michael Warren (Cultural Catalyst).

Sandcastle Theatre and Owen Sound's poet laureate, Lauren Best, performed during the two-hour awards ceremony.

Hogbin opened his Intersections woodworking studio and shop in downtown Owen Sound in late 2016. There he teaches woodworking to classes and in seminars. He shows and sells wood-related art in the adjoining studio.

He has curated many gallery exhibitions featuring the work of dozens of local artists. In 2016 he curated an exhibit at the Tom Thomson Art Gallery, which raised the question whether trees were sentient, as one gallery writer observed.

That exhibit began with the Extraordinary Tree Project, which Hogbin has said he conceived while reflecting on the changes he expects the region to see in the coming years with the invasion of the emerald ash borer.

People nominated special trees across Grey-Bruce for their beauty, historical and personal significance. Those selected were exhibited at Grey Roots, while the gallery ran a related exhibit of Tom Thomson's paintings. There were other related projects which ran in conjunction with the project too.

In an interview after the awards event, Hogbin said he wasn't as "bright" as his three academically oriented brothers so he entered a live-in cabinet college to learn how to use woodworking tools. But he was more interested in design and so went to art school.

Hogbin graduated from the Royal College of Art in London, England, in 1964. He moved to Canada in 1968, taught design and woodworking at Sheridan College, and opened a studio in Toronto.

He has been creating art, furniture and other pieces from wood in his studios since 1971. He has written books, essays and articles, curated exhibitions and taught people about woodworking over the years.

His work can be seen in Chapman House, which has a clock he made, and in Harrison Park, where there's a wood representation of a canoe near where canoes are rented in summer. More of his public work can be found at his website, http://www.stephenhogbin.com /publicart.html.

Hogbin is involved in a new project to beautify the Owen Sound hospital grounds by planting trees. Though one tree would provide him with enough wood for work for a year or two, it is essential that he replant what is taken, he said.