

Artists find inspiration in historic artefacts



By Brock Weir

Hillary House has no shortage of things to see and catch the public's eye, and artists are no exception to the rule.

The next wave of artists chosen to take part on the Aurora Historical Society's second annual Art at the Manor initiative descended on Aurora's national historic site last week to find inspiration for their work. Art at the Manor invites artists from Aurora and beyond to come to Hillary House, get a closer look at some of the artefacts on display ? and even some things not necessarily in the public eye ? to find inspiration for their work ahead of the spring art show.

Last year's crop of artists found inspiration in some of the building's more unique architectural elements, while others decided to focus on textiles and other objects. With the AHS in the midst of preparing their new exhibition in conjunction with Southlake Regional Health Centre on medical implements of the past and their present-day counterparts, this year's potential artefacts are taking on a bit of a medical edge as well.

Nestled on top of an ancient and heavy safe in the front examining room used by many generations of Hillary family doctors, is a leather bound medical case complete with a mortar and pestle for compounding and bottles still safely holding on to their yellowish sulfur-based compounds generations later.

This small artefact caught the eye of artist Elena Yim, one of the three artists selected to participate in this year's Art at the Manor.

A painter, who likes to work in acrylics, oils, and ink, Ms. Yim also has a particular penchant for micro-imaging, which makes this year's medical theme right up her alley.

?I have been interested in microscopic images and medicines for viruses and tissues for years, so I thought it would be interesting to apply that to something like this,? said Ms. Yim, leaning in to get a closer look at the medical bottles, with some assistance from AHS' Alexandra Riccio. ?I got a textbook about microscopic images and I found it really interesting. At first, it was the colours, the organisms, and they looked beautiful ? but these are also inside our bodies, so it is something we rarely see. I am interested in the body and the awareness of it and what is happening inside.?

Looking at things like this, she said, opens one up to new things and melding this sense with art, makes it ?accessible to people in a way that is not as foreign, making it more interesting.? When asked what she sees as the artistic possibilities when looking at a humble medical case, Ms. Yim said she sees the connections between the herbs in some of the compounds and traditional medicines.

?It goes back to alternative medicine of the plants and the roots and more of that imagery, so it is really going back to basics,? she said. ?Now people are taking pills and going back to basics and understanding how nature works for us, rather than understanding chemicals and where they come from.?

This year's artistic applications were handled and sorted by AHS Curator Catherine Richards. She said looking ahead to this year's partnership with Southlake, she knew it would be a good idea to have some of the medical artefacts handy for the artists.

?That was really the stimulus for the Art at the Manor theme being health and medicine and to root it with the other exhibition,? she said.

Ms. Richards was wading her way through an array of medical pieces ready to be installed in the new exhibit ? as well as things getting ready to be featured in their new culinary show (?Chicken Frills?, anyone?) ? as artists made their way through the house on Wednesday night seeing where they would be struck with the artistic thunderbolt.

?This is a preliminary step, showing them what material is going to be on display and if that ends up triggering their creativity, wonderful, but if they want to delve deeper into an area of how the doctor recorded patient histories, then we can pull those archives out for them,? said Ms. Richards. ?If they are really interested in amputation kits, then we can pull out more amputation kits for them, so tonight was really our preliminary scan on how their work could link to the historic exhibit, but it is not necessarily required.

?We want them to be creative, we want them to have fun with the content, and already one is toying with medicine bottles so we will support them to see if we can find more material that is in storage, so really at this point it is investigation for them and we will do what we can to keep feeling it.?

Art at the Manor will open May 18 at Hillary House.