



Collecting and Painting Vancouver's History



By Jurian ter Horst

Tom Carter with his huge 2018 painting set in the 1940s looking west across False Creek and Vancouver, a commission for Chip Wilson's corporate office. **PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN NICOLAY**

“Those who came to Vancouver back in the day were the ones who had nowhere else to go.” Early on in our conversation, Tom Carter suddenly brought up this gloomy historical

This month's speaker:
Tom Carter

perspective on the city. It's an interesting statement coming from a man whose positive energy spreads throughout the room when talking about his three biggest passions: art, entertainment and history – ideally, all three together in the same conversation.

Yet, it shouldn't really come as a surprise either: in his vistas of the city, set in the 1940s and '50s, the neon theatre lights, colourful cigarette or pop soda advertisements, and flashy old-time cars stand in striking contrast with the

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dark clouds that hang over *his* Vancouver (more about this later).

Tom Carter is an artist, collector, and Board member of VHS (and many other organizations!). He moved to Vancouver from Surrey 20 years ago, and more or less by accident rolled into researching Vancouver's history.

TC: "I was having breakfast with my father at a restaurant on Broadway that had a good view north across False Creek over the city, when he casually pointed towards the Downtown Eastside and mentioned that my grandfather had a café on Hastings in the early 1930s. I'd never heard about it and asked when he left and Dad said "after they bombed a theatre and the ticket office flew through his front window." He didn't know anything more than that so I had to start digging to find the story! At that point there wasn't much online so I learned how to research at the VPL Special Collections and at the Vancouver Archives. I discovered the Royal Theatre on Hastings was bombed during the night of March 20th 1933 and the café across the street was the Vancouver Cafe & Grill (later the Common Gold)."

Also by accident, Tom Carter started collecting relics, about a decade ago, from old theatres that were to be demolished. While he has always been a collector, the scheduled demolition of the 1907 Pantages Theatre on East Hastings Street in 2011 took him into an entirely new direction.

TC: "The first entertainment-related things I collected were recordings. I've always loved early music – I had classical piano training and played ragtime as a kid. I inherited my grandmother's 78s when I was about 10 years old and fell in love with her music – 1920s and '30s jazz, big band swing, that sort of thing. When other kids were collecting hockey cards, I was spending my allowance at flea markets on 78s!

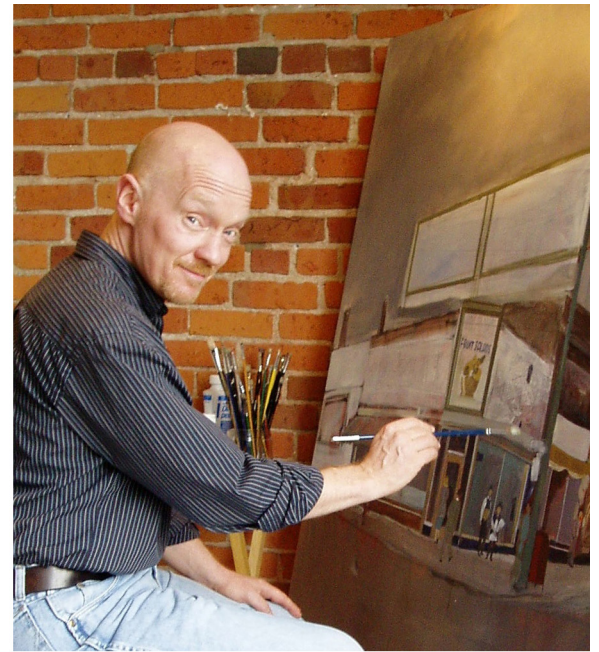
"I discovered Vancouver labels like Aragon and then radio transcription discs

from stations like CKMO, CKLG, and CKNW. Back in the '70s these actually showed up at flea markets and I was mesmerized by local music and broadcast history.

"I had already started picking up nightclub ephemera and the odd theatre program when I stumbled into the Pantages demolition, which was really by accident. I was introduced to the demolition guys by John Atkin and at first just wanted to have a few pieces to remember it by. Of course, as soon as I realized anything I didn't buy would be destroyed, I had to get it all! Word got around I was rescuing some things and people started calling me up to offer things they couldn't bear to see thrown out."

Through his paintings and theatre collections, Tom Carter has been able to, as he calls it, reclaim some of Vancouver's history. His paintings of the city are, consciously, not always 100% historically accurate: they tell the narrative of a Vancouver that *he* thinks of – a Vancouver that through his father's and grandfather's stories, and his own research, has become *his* Vancouver. The same goes for his theatre memorabilia: his collection of objects tell the stories of nightclubs and theatres that once thrived in Vancouver – *that* Vancouver is *his* Vancouver.

TC: "Vancouver has had such a transient population and gone through so many building booms over the years that the evidence of colourful lives and wonderful stories gets swept away pretty regularly. Through digging into my own family's time here I reconnected with the city as I remember it feeling in the early '70s before it started disappearing. My paintings of Vancouver are my way of recovering something previously lost and re-



claiming it. The collecting and salvaging I've done of actual artifacts has gone hand-in-hand with the painting, as has meeting so many people I'd call "historical figures" who have kindly shared their stories. Sometimes these stories have actually been triggered by my paintings, which I love. Little by little I hope to reclaim this city of fascinating stories and inspiring people."

On April 27th, come to the MoV to hear Tom talk about his remarkable and varied career and interests.

Above: Tom Carter at the easel.
Below: On Tom Carter's apartment floor, the soft golds and pinks of plasterwork rescued from the first Pantages Theatre on East Hastings Street before its demolition in 2011.

