



History of the Pelham Art Festival

What began as a small backyard art show in 1985 has since grown into one of Ontario's longest-running and most respected juried art festivals, raising over half a million dollars for libraries, student scholarships, and community art projects.

How It All Began

In 1985, the Friends of the Fonthill Library dreamed of hosting a backyard art show to raise funds for the local library. With the support of Pelham Art Club member Lois Schonewille and her husband, their backyard became the venue for the first show. By June 1986, local artists from the Pelham, Welland, and Port Colborne Art Clubs filled the space with artwork displayed on easels and poolside fences, marking the Festival's humble beginning.

The early success inspired organizers to think bigger. In 1986, Dorothy Higgins of both the Friends of the Fonthill Library and the Pelham Art Club suggested a more ambitious event: an arena show. With Barbara Simpson as convener, Marilyn Casson recruiting artists (assisted by Sylvia Blackmore and Higgins), and Margaret Rosinski and Barbara Culliford managing logistics and refreshments, the first arena show, then called **Artmart Niagara**, was launched.

The 1987 arena show added an unforgettable draw: Vern Simpson arranged helicopter rides over Niagara Falls, bringing crowds who eagerly entered the arena to see the art. That same year, the Pelham Town Council voted to build a new library, and the **Pelham Art Festival** Committee was formally established. What began beside a backyard pool had taken root as a major community event.

Becoming the Pelham Art Festival

In 1988, the date was moved to Mother's Day weekend and the name officially changed to the Pelham Art Festival, a title that soon earned recognition across Ontario. With help from Chief Librarian Hugh Molson, a provincial grant funded professional art display boards, crafted by volunteers led by Barbara and Vern Simpson. These boards, carefully maintained by volunteers, continue to serve the Festival today.

Food, refreshments and entertainment became an integral part of the experience, with Margaret Rosinski, the Friends of Maple Acre Library, and later Els Swart and Sandee Matthews managing "Salvador Deli". a playful nod to Salvador Dalí. Local caterers including Churchhill Natural Meats and Nature's Corner Bakery and Café kept visitors well-fed, while live music arranged by Jim Casson, son of Marilyn Casson, added atmosphere. Jim continues to arrange professional live music for the Festival to this day.

From 1988 to 2008, Barbara (Culliford) Lanneval served as Festival Chair and Convener, providing steady leadership for two decades. In 2008, Heidi TeBrake, formerly of the Pelham Art Association, became Chair and Convener, guiding the Festival through 17 years of growth, innovation, and resilience. Under their leadership, the Festival grew steadily, attracting more artists, visitors, and community support. In 2025, the Festival entered a new chapter as Tammy van den Brink became Chair, bringing fresh vision and energy while building on the Festival's strong foundation.

Artists, Community, and Growth

The Festival has always thrived on artist participation. Two artists, Beverly Sneath and Anne Reimer, have exhibited in every Festival for over 35 years. Each year, both new and returning artists are juried in, ensuring a fresh, dynamic showcase of talent. By 2019, the Festival had expanded to 81 artists in 87 booths.

Community support has been just as vital. Local businesses such as Vermeer's Garden Centre, Willowbrook Nurseries, and Gilbert's Flowers have provided plants and décor, transforming the arena into a lively, welcoming venue. For many years, fundraising raffles featuring donated artwork set the Festival's theme, while thousands of visitors enjoyed art, food, wine, and live music.

In 2019, the Festival found a new home at the Meridian Community Centre's Accipiter Arena, offering expanded space, fresh design, and new opportunities for growth. That same year, the Festival marked

contributions of about \$445,000 to the Pelham Library system and \$36,000 in scholarships to local students pursuing fine art studies.

Supporting Libraries and Students

Fundraising has always been central to PAF's mission. In addition to supporting the Pelham libraries, the Festival has funded scholarships at E.L. Crossley Secondary School, Notre Dame College School, and previously at Niagara College's Art and Design Program. In 2016, to celebrate its 30th year, the Festival supported the completion of the Maple Acre Branch Library, continuing its tradition of giving back to the community.

Adapting to Change

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the cancellation of the 2020 in-person Festival, but in 2021 PAF launched its first Online Festival, using a new e-commerce platform to showcase art to a wider audience. This success led to year-round initiatives like the Pelham Summer Gallery Online, Winter Gallery Online, and Pelham Holiday Artfest Online.

In 2022, following the amalgamation of Pelham and Lincoln libraries into the Lincoln Pelham Public Library, the Festival continued its support of both Pelham branches. By 2023, contributions had reached \$475,000 for libraries, scholarships, and community arts projects.

Looking Ahead

Now in its 39th year, the Pelham Art Festival remains a vibrant celebration of creativity, community, and connection. The 2026 Festival will be held May 8–12 at the Meridian Community Centre, with an Online Festival running May 1–31. Each year, more than 90 artists showcase their work, while visitors enjoy original art, live music, delicious food, and a welcoming atmosphere.

From its backyard beginnings to its current stature as one of Ontario's premier spring art festivals, the Pelham Art Festival continues to thrive thanks to the dedication of its artists, volunteers, sponsors, and community.