



Maxwell's celebrates 50th

One of the oldest art stores in Western Canada, Maxwell's Artists Materials Ltd. of Vancouver, celebrates its 50th anniversary in August 1999. Here is Part One of looking back over the past fifty years.

The beginning of an era . . .

In the 1940's, *Les Hill*, a longtime salesman with *Reeves & Sons* in Toronto, regularly travelled by train across Canada to distribute art supplies. He was instrumental in making art supplies accessible across the country. In his 1982 memoirs, Les tells of meeting *Alf Maxwell*, the manager of an art department, in 1947. They remained close friends until Alf's death in April 1977. Les Hill encouraged Alf Maxwell to act on his life long dream of operating an art supply store. It was a viable dream (in the 1940's there were only a few outlets for art materials in Vancouver), but Alf didn't have the finances. Les Hill met with his employers at *Reeves & Sons*, who also knew Alf well, and a mutually-benefiting proposal was made. As a result, *Maxwell's Artists Materials* was founded in 1949.

History of Maxwell's . . .

Alf Maxwell originally opened shop at 167 West Cordova. The store was 750 sq.ft., rent was \$100.00 monthly including heat, and starting salaries were \$12.00 weekly. At early ages, his children John and Helen began helping their father in the store. John's first memories of working at the store were sweeping, vacuuming, emptying waste baskets, and being chased around the counters by the salesmen from the *Acme Ruler Company*. John eventually became president of the business. Alf's wife, Winnie, also gave her support and ingenuity to the business throughout the years. Still alive at 91, one of her tasks was bottling poster colour. In the early years, tempera colour would settle — the water rose to the top, leaving the pigment on the bottom. To correct this, Winnie and Alf worked with a Toronto company to develop a process called *Thixotropic*. The product is still requested by schools today.

Needing more space, the store moved to 169 West Pender. This location put them closer to the (then named) *Vancouver School of Art*, and between the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Vancouver Province*. Both newspapers were independently owned then. (John remembers delivering brushes and supplies to illustrators *Len Norris* at the *Sun* and *Al Beaton* at the *Province*). At this location Maxwell's introduced several products to Vancouver and the West; *Bienfang Paper Products*, *Daler Boards*, *Pelikan Chin-Chin Ink* and *Arches Papers*. John took on the duty of cutting the large quantities of paper and board they sold. He was the "power" behind the power cutter. It was a tough job with the old manual machine.

Seven years later, in 1956, Maxwell's moved to 854 Dunsmuir. City streets at that time were still two-way. Three years later they outgrew that location, and moved to 519 West Pender. Business boomed with the F.C.A.'s *Painting in the Parks* summer student program. With the increased demand for paper and board, Maxwell's purchased an electric cutter, saving hours of time — and John's back. Maxwell's still has the cutter today, although it cost more to move it to each location than it did to buy it. *Painting in the Parks* was created in the early 1960's by Ralph Hanslow, who was the first Art Consultant for the Vancouver School Board. John and his sister Helen attended Ralph Hanslow's morning classes, before working in the store in the afternoons. Many of the art teachers for *Painting in the Parks* were from various school districts throughout the province. John recalls the dedication and enthusiasm of these instructors, who loved teaching art.

**Part two of the History of Maxwell's continues
in the next issue of *The Artist's Journal***

(See next page.)



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to our loyal patrons!
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our 50th; Watch for
our in-house
specials!**

**Maxwell's
Artists Materials**

206 Cambie Street (in Gastown), Vancouver BC
Oen 9-5:30 Mon-Sat

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PART II — The History of Maxwell's . . .

After five years at their 519 West Pender location, a fire close to the store forced a move to 366 West Hastings (the old *Pall Mall Cafe* where many of Vancouver's "old timers" gathered). Here they remained for 20 years, establishing many of their loyal clientele of today. Maxwell's began importing merchandise from England (*Daler Boards & Rowneys*). The shipments were so big, they had to unpack them in the lane. Warehouse space was later rented across the alley. They also introduced *Portfolios* and *Presentation Cases* to Vancouver, and the first shipment sold out in 10 days. In 1979 John Maxwell added Graphic Supplies to their stock, which proved to be a wise move. The Bowling Alley above Maxwell's burned, but Maxwell's survived and later expanded upstairs into the vacant Bowling Alley space.

In 1983 Maxwell's moved to their most famous location, 601 West Cordova — the former dining area of the old *C.P.R. Railroad Station*. The tastefully-decorated interior had many impressive features: 48 feet of mahogany wood shelves and an antique glass case from the old *T. Eaton Co.* served as their airbrush cabinet. The high rent for the historic building prompted a move to their present location at 206 Cambie Street in Vancouver's charismatic Gastown. Their back door of 50 years ago is just across the lane from their back door of today, where Maxwell's continues to provide their friendly, knowledgeable service.

Pioneers of the art industry . . .

Maxwell's pleasing and impressive interior is well-stocked with a variety of artistic supplies. In fact, over the past half century, Maxwell's has introduced many art products into Canada. It's no wonder they've been credited as pioneers of the art industry. They introduced Western Canada to *Reeves & Sons Products* in 1949. Here are just a few more of their historical contributions to the arts community; First in Western Canada to sell *Bienfang Paper Products* and *Daler Boards* (1953), *Tempodisc Sets* and *Temperablocks* for schools (1954), *Liquitex Acrylics*, *Arches Watercolour Paper* and *Pelican "Chin-Chin" ink and Designer Colours* (1957), *Lucas Oil Colours* (1958), *Derwent Coloured Pencils* and the complete line of *Rowneys Art Materials* (1968), *Portfolios/Presentation Cases* (1976), the full range of *Daler Board Products* (1977), and *Canson Scrap/Photo Books* (1994).

Maxwell's was also the first in Canada to stock the first economy priced oil colour in studio tubes *Reeves Greyhound Oils*, and *Holbein Artists Materials* (1956), *Grumbacher "Golden Palette" Oil Colours* (1964), *Acrylic Designers Gouache* (1971), and a complete line of *Edding Felt Pens* (1981).

Fifty years of friendships . . .

Les Hill was a good friend of the Maxwell's and a longtime art supply salesman for *Reeves and Sons*. In his 1982 memoirs, he recalls Alf Maxwell's consideration of his staff and patrons. Students at the old *Vancouver School of Art* (many became well-known artists) were taking their courses on Veteran's allowance during the Second World War. Although Alf couldn't afford it, he gave many of these students work in the store to supplement their meagre government allowance. With Maxwell's first move in 1952, the students showed their appreciation by arriving at 7am with battered cars and trucks to help move to the new store in time for the next day's opening. They wouldn't accept money. However, Alf insisted they would always be given 20% off on all their purchases.

Maxwell's have been honoured with visits from some of the icons of the art industry; *Tom Rowney*, *Jim Daler*, *Len Boccour*, and Directors from *Winsor and Newton*, *Swan Pencil Co.*, *Pelikan*, *Grumbacher* to name just a few. And they've also received several plaques for their services; *Winsor & Newton*, *Strathmore Paper Co.* (for outstanding merchandising & product support), and a trophy from their good friends at *Reid's Art Supplies*.

The kindness and endless contributions to the art industry has made Maxwell's unforgettable to many.

To this day, Maxwell's still has some of their original customers from their early years. Former staff

members (from as far away as Sweden and New York) also remain loyal to their past employer, and frequently visit the Maxwell family today.

**Our sincere thanks
to our loyal patrons!**

Editor's 2024 Note: Maxwell's moved to Langley in 2000 and closed its doors in 2005 when John Maxwell decided to retire.



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