Chapter 14
Cultural and Religious Dialogue: A Legacy of Religious Art

Judith E. Dietz
Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Canada

ABSTRACT
The exhibition, “An Expression of Faith: Sacred Art of Centuries Past,” first displayed at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in 1998 illustrates the positive effects of mutual co-operation between the cultural, religious, and civic communities in preserving religious and cultural heritage. The exhibition featured a select group of European sculptures from the Renaissance period donated by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Halifax. In this chapter, the history and preservation of the three featured sculptures from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries are revealed – from their installation in the Chapel Built in a Day in Halifax, to their removal and long-term conservation in Ottawa, and finally to their eventual return, public display, and ultimate community impact, resulting in additional donations and a new and rare discovery.

INTRODUCTION
As the former Manager of Collections and Gallery Services at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (a provincial government institution under the Department of Tourism, Culture and Heritage), communications and public relations played a pivotal role in my professional association with donors to the Gallery’s Permanent Collection. However, for me, the most memorable donation was the acquisition of a rare collection of religious sculptures and the subsequent installation of the exhibition, An Expression of Faith: Sacred Art of Centuries Past. Cultural and religious dialogue played a key role and was instrumental in forging a
strategic partnership between the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Halifax, the Provincial Government of Nova Scotia and the Federal Government of Canada. On-going communication and co-operation, over a period of several years, ensured the eventual success of the project and multiple re-installations of the exhibition and presentations of related public programs.

The history behind this fascinating story, one that may also be considered an example of communications and collaboration, began with Bishop William Walsh, the first Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Halifax. One of the most notable projects undertaken by Bishop William Walsh was the 1843 opening of Holy Cross Cemetery and the construction of the Chapel of Our Lady of Sorrows, also known as Our Lady of Dolours (Figure 1), more commonly called the “Chapel Built in a Day”.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

On July 26, 1843 a group of volunteers, including Clerics, politicians, bankers, merchants, tradesmen and laborers, predominantly of Irish descent, gathered in the south end of Halifax in response to the Bishop’s plea to clear the ground, erect a fence, lay out walks, build a bridge and prepare a foundation in preparation for the construction of a chapel. On August 31st in an extraordinary feat of organization and skill, nearly 2,000 volunteer workers raised and roofed a Gothic chapel, 55 feet long and 25 feet wide, all in one day (Burns, 1940, p. 139). As the daily newspaper, The Register reported on September 7th, 1843, it was indeed “the miracle of the day”.

Upon completion the Chapel’s interior featured a collection of 15th and 16th century European carvings, as well as a stained glass window containing fragments presumed to have been acquired by the Bishop during his travels in Europe in the 1840’s. Three of the sculptures, scenes from the Passion of Christ, now in the Gallery’s collection and featured in the Expression of Faith exhibition are the originals that were installed in the Chapel after its construction.

In the late 1970’s, a visitor to the Chapel, who unbeknownst to me at that time was my late father Robert Dietz, noticed the fragile condition and extreme state of deterioration of the wooden carvings. He approached the archdiocese administrator to advocate for their care and attention and recommended that professionals in the field examine them for restoration. As a result, the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI - a federal government institution under the Department of Canadian Heritage), was contacted for advice and recommendations. Following preliminary examination, the sculptures were removed from the Chapel in 1980 and transported to Ottawa. Further research and assessment deemed the sculptures to be of such artistic and historic merit that CCI agreed to accept this major project.

Examination of the individual sculptures was undertaken using a variety of analytical and photographic techniques revealing the presence of multiple layers of polychrome, or coloured paint below numerous layers of white over-paint. These layers of white over-paint were removed down to the most complete underlying colored layer as determined by chemical and instrumental analysis (Arnold, 1998, p. 4, 5). This unveiling, particularly on