

Biography of Bertram Charles (B.C.) Binning 1907-1976



Binning's studio. Photo by Heather Skydt

Bertram Charles (B.C.) Binning was influenced by the likes of William Morris, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and the Bauhaus school. Binning was still in the height of his youth when the Bauhaus participants were demonstrating their new philosophy; a philosophy which linked artistic craft and the industrial revolution. This strongly influenced Binning's personal artistic practice through the emphasized interconnectedness of artistic practice and day-to-day life. From an early age, Binning felt the urge to meld art and life, and thus became dedicated to that vision and was set on implementing it in his personal practice in British Columbia and throughout Canada.

Binning was born in Medicine Hat, Alberta in 1909, and moved to Vancouver with his parents in 1913. Influenced by both maternal and paternal grandfathers who were architects, the combination of that in conjunction with living in an up and coming newly developed city gave Binning the impetus to take up sketching, drafting, and painting. In 1927, he enrolled in the Vancouver School of Art (now the Emily Carr Institute) and began his life in art. A year after graduating in 1932, Binning was recognized as a teacher and was appointed to the Art School's staff. Three years later, he married Jessie Wyllie, the daughter of a Vancouver business man, who had a reserved but thorough appreciation of art. In 1938, Bertram and Jessie decided to spend a year in Europe, away from teaching, furthering his personal artistic education. Binning said that during his time in Europe he realized how in earlier periods of art history, art, and architecture seemed to intermingle easily in "dynamic unity."

With growing unrest in London, the Binnings left Europe in the spring of 1939. Bertram and Jessie had the fortune of acquiring a beautiful hillside plot on the developing North Shore of Vancouver. Soon, the Binning began developing plans for an ultra modern, Bauhaus inspired residence. Binning wanted to build the house to prove "that there was a contemporary architecture" and that "it worked."

During the 1940s, Bertram and Jessie developed intimate social contacts with prominent figures among Vancouver's artists and architects, notably Group of Seven member Lawren Harris and wife Bess. Throughout their life, the Binning's interacted with prominent figures in the world of Vancouver art such as Gordon Smith, John Koerner, Jack Shadbolt, Lionel Thomas, Fred Lasserre, and Arthur Erickson.

In 1949, Binning was approached by Fred Lasserre to teach art to the Faculty of Architecture at the University of British Columbia. Binning accepted the proposal, which eventually resulted in his founding of the School of Fine Arts.

Later, in the 1960s, Binning became one of Canada's pre-eminent muralists through his completion of those for the Imperial Bank of Commerce, and the colour scheme for downtown Vancouver's B.C. Electric Building, and Dal Grauer Substation.

Despite his many notable accomplishments, Binning was not removed from community or teaching. Everyone that surrounded him benefited from his passion for the arts, and passion for life which was imbued with much good humor and joyfulness.