

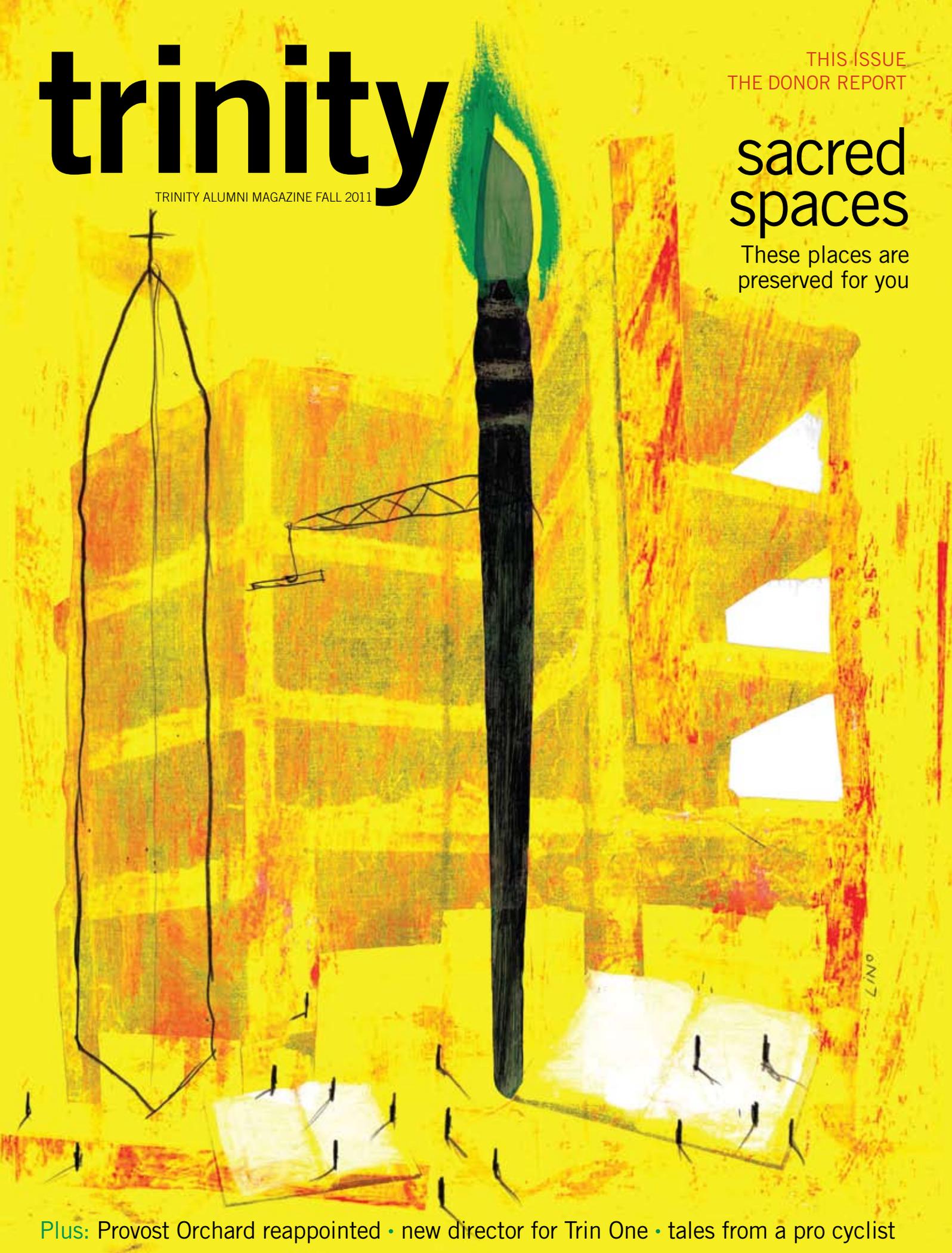
# trinity

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# Victoria Dickenson

Giving an iconic museum back to Canadians

BY VANMALA SUBRAMANIAM

On a hot August day, Victoria Dickenson '71 is all smiles. I meet her for tea at a small bakery in the heart of Toronto's financial district. With a chuckle, she laments the lack of a good pâtisserie in Canada's largest city.

"Good pastry and good shopping – those are the two things I absolutely miss about Montreal," she says.

Dickenson spent more than a decade in that city as executive director of the McCord Museum, which is dedicated to the preservation and appreciation of Canadian history. Her roots, however, are in this part of the country. She grew up in Etobicoke, Ont., and did her undergrad at the University of Toronto.

"Oh, that was so many years ago! I do remember dancing with Michael Ignatieff at one of the dances though," she says, laughing.

Back in April, Dickenson was appointed director of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, an iconic Canadian institution, albeit one better known for its controversies than its collections.

Her predecessor, Tom Smart, resigned abruptly last July after just over four years on the job. In fact, when he became director of the museum in 2006, he inherited an institution that was already in the middle of a protracted tussle between the province and museum founders Robert and Signe McMichael.

The position is a prestigious, yet demanding one. Dickenson is charged with giving the McMichael an image boost, taking it in a new direction and appealing to a younger audience.

"No doubt it's a tough job," Dickenson says. "But I knew there were changes to the legislation from the province that had gone through. That was a factor in my decision to take this job."

The change she refers to is the repeal of Bill 188, which lifted the restrictive clauses under which the museum had been forced to operate for decades.

"It's much more standard now – gone are the difficult periods for this museum. It's a breath of fresh air, really.

"There is a better chance of bringing the McMichael back to the Canadian public now that there is more room for different art collections. At the same time, I know it would be silly to throw away the legacy that Robert and Signe gave to it."

That is Dickenson's balancing act: retaining Canada's historical art legacy while bringing in new collections that will not only appeal to younger generations, but also reflect Canada's diversity.

What is it about museums that make her tick? Dickenson lights up instantly at the question.

"I've been going to museums since I was 12. My mother used to take me to the Saturday Morning Club at the ROM (Royal

Ontario Museum). Some days we would take road trips to the McMichael, which was a big, exciting event for me!"

But it's the idea that a museum allows its patrons to own the space that really appeals to Dickenson.

"When you walk into a museum, you get a serene feeling that the space you are in truly belongs to you. And it's free access to all," she says. "Not in a monetary sense, but in a way that you don't have to be a privileged member of society to be able to experience the wonders of history. And it's not history in a

"When you walk into a museum, you get a serene feeling that the space you are in truly belongs to you. And it's free access to all"

textbook – it's history right in front of you, hard and solid."

But getting younger generations to appreciate the rich history that cultural institutions such as the McMichael have to offer is no easy task. Dickenson believes part of the solution is using the appropriate channels to reach out to kids.

"The McMichael needs a bigger web presence. New media is what I really want to focus on as we begin the structural planning phase of the museum. We need to reach out to kids and get kids to *want* to spend a day at a museum, over spending a day at a shopping mall, she says."

Dickenson's passion, excitement and incredibly quick thinking are convincing – she *is* the person to carry the McMichael Canadian Art Collection forward and engage youth.

Corey Timpson, a former colleague of Dickenson's at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg (where she worked before her present stint), recalls a meeting where board members were at times unable to keep up with the speed at which she was operating.

"It was simply amazing," Timpson says.

Dickenson is thrilled about her new role. "I still cannot believe that I get to work in such a beautiful place – a place that really inspired my love for museums so many decades ago." ▲

