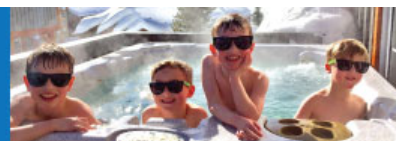


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Stroke of a Brush



Skiing's art culture is alive and thriving across the globe

STORY: S-Media

BY: Michael Mastarciyan

Ever wonder why the world's biggest ski destinations are often full of art galleries?

Here's my theory: Skiers are passionate by their very nature; seeing the sport they love depicted on canvas, or in bronze, is a gratifying and sensual experience.

World-class resorts such as Whistler and Mont-Tremblant, classic stops in France like Chamonix and Megeve, Colorado's alpine jewels Aspen and Beaver Creek, Austria's Kitzbuehel, and the culturally-rich smaller ski towns like Fernie, Revelstoke, and Whitewater on B.C.'s famed Powder Highway, are packed with galleries full of ski-inspired paintings, sculptures and photography, as well as other works of fine art that have little to do with ripping down mountains. Après ski activities in sophisticated towns like these are certainly not limited to swilling beer and chomping nachos at the local bar, pub or saloon.

Beaver Creek hosts an annual art festival in August and is a prime location for gallery hopping after a day on the slopes in winter, an activity that's becoming more and more popular with ski travelers in search of a soul-lifting experience that doesn't involve boots, skis and poles.

No less than 15 galleries can be found within walking distance (or a five-minute drive) from whichever run you call your last. My personal favourite in Beaver Creek is the C. Anthony Gallery, the perfect place to pick up a very lifelike depiction of your favourite alpine World Cup racer (signed by the athlete) by artist Malcolm Farley. If realism isn't your bag, this gallery also carries the whimsical works of Anton Arkhipov, wonderful, colourful paintings of skiers in magical wintry settings.

While covering the Hahnenkamm race in Austria a few years back, I discovered the divine skiing-inspired masterworks of Alfons Walde (1891-1958) at the Kitzbuehel Museum. Walde, who pioneered ski art, is the alpine world's Van Gogh and his paintings regularly sell for hundreds of thousands of Euros when they come up for auction. A visit to this museum is a must for any true lover of skiing.

If you can't afford a Walde while in Kitzbuehel, pop into Maria's Gallery located in the Hotel Ludwig, about a couple of hundred metres away from the Hahnenkammbahn Gondola and check out the impressionistic takes on the mountains surrounding this medieval Tyrolian village.

Artist Maria Lammerer, who literally lives in the shadow of the famed Streif race course at the Hotel Ludwig (which she runs with her husband Walter), is best known for her beautiful watercolour and acrylic landscapes inspired by the peaks that gave birth to the alpine World Cup's legendary race. Her series of paintings focusing on the Streif are outstanding interpretations of the world's deadliest downhill course, and the Todd Brooker portrait behind the front desk is quite pretty impressive!

"The scenery around Kitzbuehel inspires artists like myself as much as it inspires the athletes who race here every year," Lammerer commented. "Painting the environment I live in is an addiction for me. I get the same feeling the athletes get standing at the top of the mountain on a perfect blue bird day! You develop a passion for it, some like to race down the Streif, I like to paint it!"

Just over on the other side of the Alps, in France, art galleries are as common in ski towns as ski and boot rental shops.

In France's Rhone-Alpes region, big name ski resorts like Chamonix and Megeve – and the myriad of smaller alpine hamlets close by – are home to a wide assortment of art galleries that specialize in painting and sculpture and an abundance of spectacular photographic art works.

At the top of my must-see and must-buy list in the area, Megeve's mixed media artist Olivier Tops, an artistic alchemist who transforms vintage black & white ski photos into works of modern art by selectively adding bright colours to nostalgic photographs of the resort he lives and works in. If ultra hip, modern ski art is what you want to hang in your home or chalet, then don't miss going to Galerie & Atelier Olivier Tops the next time you're in Megeve.

If breathtaking photos of mountain scenes are what your eyes enjoy seeing most, then you've got to see the works of world renowned mountain photographer Mario Colonel at his gallery in Chamonix. Images of the worlds highest and most famous peaks in summer and winter, vivid portraits of the people of the mountains, and the culture of sport and mountaineering in these places are the subjects Colonel has soulfully captured armed with a camera and an intense passion for the highest places on earth.

Closer to home, if you're in Aspen anytime soon, don't miss the post-modern works of **Tania** Dibbs at the **Tania** Dibbs Gallery, a popup art shop at 308 E. Hopkins Ave, on restaurant row, just across from Jimmy's. Gibbs, a Colorado based artist and sculptor, once only known for her dreamy, pastoral landscape works, has switched her focus to what she calls the "biology behind nature". My favourite Dibbs painting is called "Slipping," an oil on canvas piece that looks like an otherworldly tree covered in ice, an image eerily familiar to those of us in Ontario and Quebec who have suffered from and marveled at the beauty and beastliness of nature when the temperature hovers at the freezing point.

On this side of the border, Canadian artist Leanne Spanza, who I was first introduced to by World Cup skier Manny Osborne-Paradis, is making a name for herself by brightening up the mountain abodes of skiaholics around the globe with her super bright, Technicolor mountain scene paintings.

"I love the atmosphere of ski communities, there is a real connection between the people and the mountain and everyone is up there to have a good time. The art scene seems to express both the ever changing elements of the mountain and sense of play through both music and art," says Spanza, whose works will put a smile on your face even if you just spent an entire week fogged out indoors instead of hitting the slopes.

Spanza, who grew up at the base of Mount Seymour in North Vancouver, says her art is inspired by her travels throughout the province of British Columbia, and the outdoor winter and summer activities she's enjoyed there all her life.

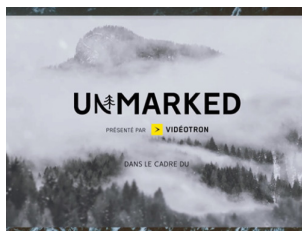
"I paint because it makes me happy and I try to keep life simple, my hope is that those who view my art feel the same way. I have a saying that is 'Bold Colours. Simple Lines. Happy Art.' I try to strip away anything that might complicate the scenery and capture the simplistic beauty in our everyday landscapes while having fun with lines and colour," Spanza adds.

Spanza's vibrant artworks have been exhibited in Whistler, Revelstoke, Golden, Kelowna, and for the past three years at Far and Wide in Big White Village. She's also had solo exhibitions at public art galleries on Vancouver Island and the Sunshine Coast and her pieces are collected across North America and Europe.

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