

The Saskatchewan Art Progress Show: 1880-1955



A MacKenzie Art Gallery Outreach Exhibition

As the popularity of the Western Canada Farm Progress Show attests, the people of Saskatchewan maintain a strong connection with agriculture and the land, one that began with its first generation of settlers. That historical connection to the land also runs deep in the province's artistic community. The Saskatchewan Art Progress Show focuses on the establishment of the arts during the settlement and wartime era by using the land—in particular, the way it is measured, divided, produced and sold—as a model for display and analysis. In the spirit of the times, the grid imposed by the Dominion Land Survey is used as a metaphor for the development of Saskatchewan's earliest art communities.



Inglis Sheldon-Williams, *The Fire Guard*, 1923

The Dominion Land Survey, which began in the 1870s, defined Saskatchewan's geography by dividing its land into one-square-mile sections suitable for agricultural production. Settlement proceeded according to the grid's logic, resulting in the dislocation of Aboriginal people as towns and farms were established in relative isolation from each other. The grid had an unforeseen but palpable impact on the environment, as natural habitats of the prairie grasslands were irrevocably disrupted. Despite its shortcomings, the grid succeeded in facilitating a commodity-based economy in Saskatchewan that would sustain the province for years to come.

Just as the grid divided land into parcels suitable for occupation, so divisions within the cultural community defined the positions which were available for artists to take. Artistic boundaries defined which mediums were to be taken seriously, such as oil painting, and which were not, such as watercolour. Other divisions were more political and social in nature, discriminating between professional and amateur artists, and between subject matter with wide appeal and that which was considered foreign or unfit. Delineations existed between male and female artists, white and non-white artists, and even between artists from larger centres, such as Regina or Saskatoon, and artists working in smaller towns or on farms. These divisions influenced the way that artists worked and identified themselves within Saskatchewan's social terrain.



Ernest Luthi, *April Twilight South of Dafoe*, no date

Although the cultural grid is arbitrary in nature and in a constant state of flux, its presence and influence on artistic production provides a useful reference point for historical analysis and a window into settlement society's culture, political values, and sense of public identity. What do the artistic boundaries of this era say about how Saskatchewan's audiences valued, appreciated, and understood art? What can we learn about contemporary artistic experience in Saskatchewan by analyzing the foundations of its artistic scene over a century ago?

This exhibition proposes an analysis of Saskatchewan's emerging artistic scene through a grid, which sets out five artistic positions that were available to settlement-era artists. These positions include: 1) artists that establish and work within a dominant "tradition" of Saskatchewan art; 2) artists who partake in and administer organizations that support grassroots art creation; 3) artists who create work in relative geographic isolation; 4) artists who react against tradition to create work inspired by new artistic dialogues; and 5) artists belonging to the crafts tradition.

Contemporary historical research, as well as recent acquisitions to the MacKenzie's permanent collection, allow for an expanded analysis of the art made during the settlement period—providing a glimpse into Saskatchewan's art scene over a hundred years ago, and offering insight into its artistic legacy as shaped by social and economic conditions of the time.

Erin Gee, Curatorial Assistant

The Saskatchewan Academy

The work of pre-settlement artists who passed through Western Canada afford only occasional glimpses of the region which was to become Saskatchewan. A sustained treatment of the province's landscape would have to wait for the arrival of such artists as James Henderson, Augustus Kenderdine, and Inglis Sheldon-Williams, immigrants to Saskatchewan who spent the rest of their lives capturing its landscape with their paintbrushes. These painters had strong roots in the British Academic tradition, and became Saskatchewan's first post-secondary art teachers and its most popular painters. With successful art careers in Europe behind them, they maintained an abiding confidence in the British Academic style and a general disinterest in modern styles of abstract painting. Teachers such as Inglis Sheldon-Williams, Augustus Kenderdine, Hilda Stewart, and James Henderson (who was said to have "taught from example"), gave Saskatchewan artists the first professional models from which to work. While not all of their students agreed with their teachers on a stylistic level, this group of artists enjoyed years of relatively uncritical praise from Saskatchewan audiences, as well as years of successful sales and commissions.



Augustus Kenderdine, *The Buffalo Hunt*, 1915



James Henderson, *The Approaching Storm, Qu'Appelle Valley*, no date

Romantic Portraiture of First Nations People

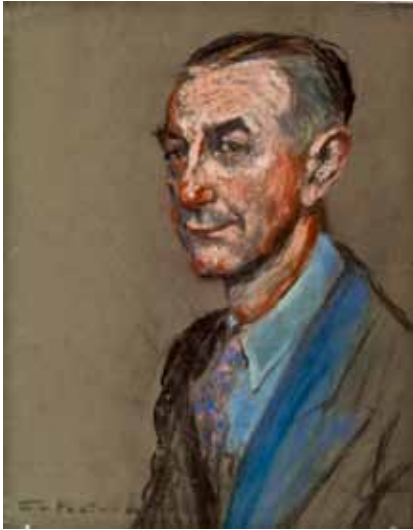


Inglis Sheldon-Williams, *Ne-Pah-Ness*, 1913

Canadian artists of the nineteenth century commonly traveled cross-country in search of interesting and varied subjects for their work. While many of these artists focused on landscape, others, such as Paul Kane*, Edmund Morris*, and Frederick Arthur Verner, sought to record the way of life of Canada's First Nations people. Verner lived in Manitoba during the 1870s, where he painted frontier subject matter, but after the construction of the railroad in the 1880s, he traveled west to record the vanishing bison herds. Morris, who lived in Ontario, regularly traveled to the prairies on government commissions between 1907 and 1910 to create portraits of First Nations leaders. These works belong to a genre of romantic portraiture which displays the artists' ability to capture their subjects with accuracy and attention to detail; however, the works also conform to romantic conventions that visually propagate the mistaken belief that the artists were capturing the image of a "noble and dying race." The enthusiastic reception of these works points to an underlying irony of the settler era: intense interest in First Nations culture at a time when government policies threatened the traditions, ceremonies and languages that defined First Nations ways of life. In many cases, the contents of the paintings are embellished for the sake of artistic expression, entertainment, or "documentation." Despite these embellishments, the portraits represent a "truly Canadian" subject—the mixing of cultures within a politically tense atmosphere. The works exist somewhere between documentary and fiction, between a settler's fantasy and a highly politicized reality.

Saskatchewan's Tradition of Community Arts Initiatives

As Saskatchewan's artistic scene developed, patrons of the arts recognized that artists required support systems that went beyond traditional models which were suited to large urban centres. Early news reports from Saskatchewan in the magazine *Canadian Art* often featured educational, community and outreach programs as initiated by organizations and local artists rather than the large exhibitions and prominent artists of more developed provinces. Continuing along this path, Saskatchewan established some of the strongest organizations and education programs for the arts in Canada—for example, the **Saskatchewan Arts Board**, formed in 1948, was the first arts agency of its kind in North America. In Regina, the first community organizations were led by groups of women—the **Regina Local Council of Women** and the **Women's Education Club** were the main sponsors of exhibitions for local artists and traveling exhibitions from eastern Canada, as well as avid collectors. The MacKenzie Art Gallery received many donations of art from these women's groups in the 1950s, gifts which expanded the representation of Saskatchewan's artistic community in the permanent collection.



Frank Portnall, *Untitled*, no date



Harriette Keating, *Untitled*, no date

Artists also organized their own support groups, creating venues where artists could meet to give constructive criticism and intellectual stimulation to one another. **The Regina Sketch Club**, formed in 1920, gave artists in Regina a chance to meet regularly and engage in group critique as they developed their skills through the study of live models. The development of **Ernest Lindner's Saturday Nights** in Saskatoon presented another important informal opportunity for artists to meet and share critiques. The "Saturday Nights" group, which Lindner saw as a microcosm for an enlightened, democratic, Western Canadian society, became a mainstay for Saskatoon artists from the 1930s through to the 1950s.



Thomas Fisher, *Untitled* (Queen Elizabeth over Vale Port and Gibbs), 1955

From the Fringe: Saskatchewan Artists in Isolation

The image of an artist toiling in obscurity is a romantic stereotype which continues to grip the public imagination. Because isolation was a way of life for people living during Saskatchewan's settlement era, this stereotype has become an enduring myth. As the artists in this portion of the exhibition demonstrate, the stereotype did not always apply. Some artists found it possible to be socially and commercially successful despite isolation—other artists obtained artistic training in larger centres before returning to the rural environment. For artists living on homesteads, such as landscape painter Ernest Luthi, art making was not only a way of attracting income, but a way to attract visitors to his studio. For poster maker Andrew King, geographic isolation proved helpful in that it allowed for the development of a unique poster making business: King's company was the first full-time show poster printing plant in Canada. The inclusion of Thomas Fisher's work in this historical overview addresses Saskatchewan's unofficial histories while simultaneously acknowledging the role of self-taught artists in our province.

Born on Saskatchewan Soil: The Next Generation

The development of abstraction in the first half of the twentieth century can be attributed at least in part to technological progress. During this time, artists questioned traditional methods of representation as notions of space and time were radically reconfigured by the automobile, the telephone and the camera. As a result, abstraction became emblematic of social, technological and artistic progress. Despite the growing popularity of abstraction, the strong, professional presence in Saskatchewan of artists subscribing to the British Academic tradition created an environment in which abstraction and its values were regarded with suspicion. In many cases, Saskatchewan-born artists belonging to the next generation of painters—such as Illingworth Kerr and William Perehudoff—left the province to receive artistic training in order to gain a broader knowledge of contemporary artistic practice. A common aspiration among these artists was to successfully “bring” abstraction to Saskatchewan in a way that would resonate positively with its audiences. Unfortunately, the Great Depression created an environment particularly discouraging to young artists with new artistic ideas, making it difficult for such artists to establish a place in Saskatchewan’s art market at this time.

However, by the end of the 1940s horizons had expanded and there was a growing interest in abstraction among the more progressive of Saskatchewan's artists and audiences. As a result, the 1940s and 1950s were decades of fruitful exploration, a time when artists experimented with new materials and styles while maintaining a firm grounding in the traditions of landscape and representational artwork. These years would set the stage for the post-war period, and a definitive shift towards abstract, "international" styles of painting.



William Pehudoff, *Prairie Landscape*, c1950

LIST OF WORKS

* 2011 only ** 2012 only

SASKATCHEWAN ACADEMY

JAMES HENDERSON

Canadian, 1871 – 1951

The Approaching Storm, Qu'Appelle Valley, no date

oil on canvas

30.5 x 35.7 cm

MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina Collection, gift of Mr. Norman MacKenzie, 1936-014

AUGUSTUS KENDERDINE

Canadian, 1870 – 1947

Homeward Bound, 1925

oil on canvas

51.3 x 76.3 cm

MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina Collection, 1953-065

INGLIS SHELDON WILLIAMS

Canadian [British], 1870 – 1940

The Fire Guard, 1923

oil on canvas

66.0 x 88.9 cm

MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina Collection, gift of Mr. Norman MacKenzie, 1924-001

HILDA JOYCE STEWART*

Canadian [English], 1892 – 1978

Unity Station, 1946

watercolour on paper

28.0 x 38.1 cm

MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina Collection, 1972-030

FREDERICK ARTHUR VERNER**

Canadian, 1836 – 1928

Young Bull on the Prairie, 1898

watercolour on paper

34.3 x 52.1 cm

MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina Collection, gift of Dr. J. M. Goodman, 1983-017

FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE

JAMES HENDERSON

Canadian, 1871 – 1951

Male Indian Head, no date

oil on cardboard

25.3 x 20.2 cm

MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina Collection, gift of Mr. Norman MacKenzie, 1936-001

AUGUSTUS KENDERDINE

Canadian, 1870 – 1947

The Buffalo Hunt, 1915

oil on canvas

59.7 x 90.2 cm

MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina Collection, gift of Estate of Dr. John B. Ritchie, 1974-016

INGLIS SHELDON WILLIAMS*

Canadian [British], 1870 – 1940

Ne-Pah-Ness, 1913

watercolour on card

27.3 x 22.2 cm

MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina Collection, 1953-072

LIST OF WORKS *continued*

J. RICHARDSON**

deceased

Indian Encampment, Balgonie, NWT, no date

oil on cardboard

15.8 x 22.9 cm

MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina Collection, gift of the Brown Estate, 1972-028

COMMUNITY ARTS INITIATIVES

STANLEY BRUNST*

Canadian [English], 1894 – 1962

Untitled (Laundry), 1940

watercolour on card

40.0 x 32.2 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery gift of the Brunst Estate, 1991-042

HARRIETTE KEATING*

Canadian, 1898 – deceased

Untitled, no date

charcoal and pastel on paper

39.8 x 29.8 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery Regina Sketch Club #148

ERNEST LINDNER*

Canadian [Austrian], 1897 – 1988

Untitled (Light in the Forest Clearing), 1950

watercolour on paper

38.0 x 54.0 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery gift of E. Anthony Merchant, 1994-008

FRANK PORTNALL*

Canadian, 1886 – 1976

Untitled, no date

charcoal and pastel on paper

34.0 x 26.5 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery Regina Sketch Club #78

JEAN BELL**

Canadian, 1884 – 1970

Untitled, 1931

charcoal and pastel on paper

40.5 x 30.5 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina Sketch Club #171

STANLEY BRUNST**

Canadian [English], 1894 – 1962

Night Firing, 1937

watercolour on card

31.1 x 27.3 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery, gift of the Brunst Estate, 1991-041

ROBERT NEWTON HURLEY**

Canadian [British], 1894 – 1980

Untitled, 1949

watercolour on paper

22.5 x 27.7 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery, bequest of Dorothy Stillwell, 2006-001

FRANK PORTNALL**

Canadian, 1886 – 1976

Untitled, 1931

charcoal, pastel on paper

42.0 x 30.5 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina Sketch Club #097

LIST OF WORKS *continued*

ARTISTS IN ISOLATION

THOMAS FISHER

Canadian [English], 1885 – 1965
Untitled (Queen Elizabeth over Vale
Port and Gibbs), 1955
oil on paper mounted on cardboard
58.4 x 48.2 cm (framed)
Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery
gift of Susan Parkin, 2002-037

ANDREW KING*

Canadian, 1885 – 1981
Melfort Horse Show, no date
woodblock on paperboard
55.9 x 34.6 cm
MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of
Regina Collection

ERNEST LUTHI*

Canadian, 1906 – 1983
April Twilight South of Dafoe, no date
acrylic and watercolour on paper
26.0 x 36.9 cm
MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of
Regina Collection, gift of Mrs. F. M.
(Mary) Froom, 1978-002

ANDREW KING**

Canadian, 1885 – 1981
*Le Carnivale Conklin Exposition Provin-
ciale*, no date
woodblock on paperboard
55.9 x 35.6 cm
MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of
Regina Collection

ERNEST LUTHI**

Canadian, 1906 – 1983
Stooks, no date
oil on board
30.5 x 38.1 cm
MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of
Regina Collection, gift of the Estate of
Ernest Luthi, 1984-037

THE NEXT GENERATION

ILLINGWORTH KERR

Canadian, 1905 – 1989
Ravenscrag, Ross's Ranch, 1930
oil on canvas
76.8 x 92.1 cm
MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of
Regina Collection, 1934-001

WILLIAM PEREHUDOFF

Canadian, born 1919
Prairie Landscape, circa 1950
oil on board
65.5 x 55.5 cm
Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery,
gift of the artist, 2000-033

A MacKenzie Outreach Art Exhibition

Exhibition Dates

Provincial Outreach: January 2011 – December 2012

Curator: Erin Gee

Gallery Educator: Ken Duczek

Design: Hilary Knutson

Photography: Don Hall

ISBN: 978-1-896470-76-4

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Front cover: Illingworth Kerr, *Ravenscrag, Ross's Ranch*, 1930

The MacKenzie Art Gallery Outreach Program is dedicated to providing exhibitions of original works of art to people across Saskatchewan. The exhibition is organized with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Saskatchewan Arts Board, and the City of Regina Arts Commission. The MacKenzie Art Gallery Provincial Outreach van is proudly supported by Conexus Credit Union.

The MacKenzie Art Gallery is a non-profit cultural organization supported by membership and volunteers, and generously funded by individual donors and corporate sponsors, the University of Regina, the Government of Saskatchewan, the Saskatchewan Lotteries Trust Fund for Sport, Culture & Recreation, the City of Regina, the Saskatchewan Arts Board, the Museums Assistance Program of the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Canada Council for the Arts, the City of Regina Arts Commission, and the City of Regina Public and Catholic School Boards.

