

MOVING THE MUSEUM

INDIGENOUS + CANADIAN ART AT THE AGO



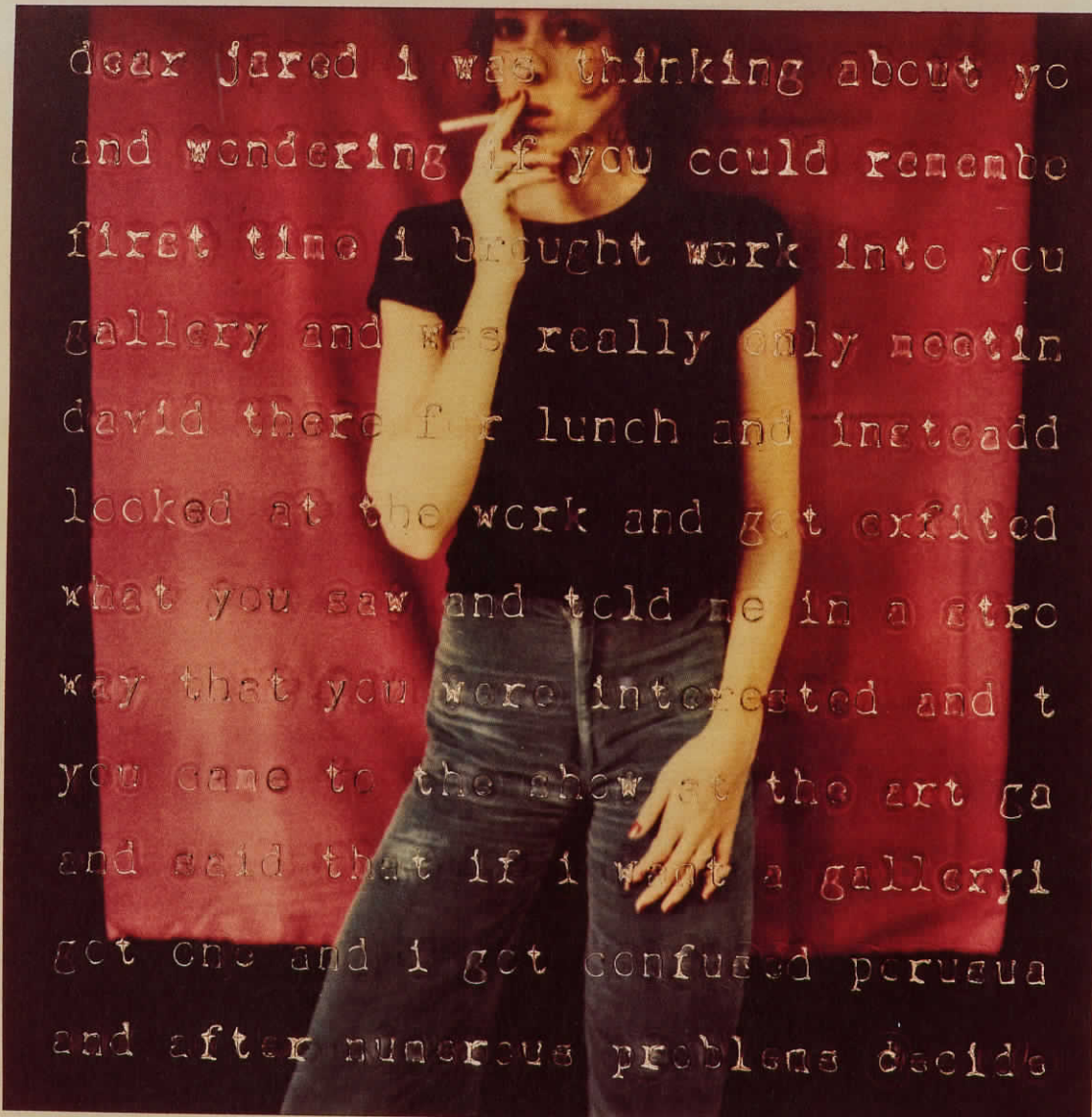
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EDITED BY
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AGO





dear jared i was thinking about yo
and wondering if you could remembe
first time i brought work into you
gallery and was really only meetin
david there for lunch and insteadd
looked at the work and got excited
what you saw and told me in a stro
way that you were interested and t
you came to the show at the art ga
and said that if i want a gallery i
got one and i got confused perusua
and after numerous problems decide

Dear Canadian Art, I was thinking about you...

GEORGIANA UHLYARIK

This essay traces a short history of Canadian art at the AGO—its collection building and evolving presentations—to establish the institutional context for the creation of the new Indigenous + Canadian Art department in October 2017. I then share a few examples of ongoing projects since the early 2000s that have created opportunities for new insights into artists and works previously overlooked or undervalued, and reflect on how these have built toward the possibility for an encounter shaped by our own time and place. Our reinstallation of the new J.S. McLean Centre for Indigenous + Canadian Art in 2018 was conceived from within our new curatorial structure, founded on the principles of the nation-to-nation treaty relationship.¹ Since then, I have developed a set of critical questions that guide my current curatorial responsibilities and practice, and continue to lead me to reimagine the possibilities of the AGO's Canadian holdings in this new phase of the department. The reflections that follow also underscore the necessity of remaining attentive, alert, and responsive in each new encounter.

100+ Years of Collecting Canadian Art at the AGO

The development of Canadian art studies during the twentieth century can be characterized as a process of making and unmaking: first overcoming a sense of inadequacy in order to articulate and promote a credible canon, then recognizing the ways in which that canon was limited and exclusive, and attempting to tell more inclusive, diverse, and resonant stories. In large part, even though the collections of Canadian art institutions, the exhibitions they present, and the artists they champion form the foundations of Canadian art history, these collections also validate key traits of settler Canadian identity, while excluding other voices.² At the AGO, the curatorial staff's focus on tradition has resulted in an acquisition and exhibition program that mirrored larger patterns of social privilege and marginalization. As a consequence, the works of Canadian women artists, Indigenous artists, and artists of non-European descent have been neglected and only incidentally collected, researched, and presented—until recently. This approach has had a profound and lasting impact on the kinds of curatorial programming the Gallery has been able to develop and advance.

Barbara Astman, *Dear Jared*, 1979–1980 (from the series *Untitled, I was thinking about you*). Chromogenic print, 144.8 × 119.4 cm.

¹ Our co-leadership structure means we are always working in relation to one another, separately and together. For details, see "J.S. McLean Centre for Indigenous + Canadian Art" in this catalogue, p. 17.

² Collecting art museums were established in Canada at the end of the nineteenth century, following the formation of the self-governing state of the Dominion of Canada in 1867. The national Centennial celebrations in 1967 invested significant funds in the building of many new municipal and provincial art galleries across Canada, resulting in a proliferation of collections, exhibition spaces, and educational programs.

The AGO has collected Canadian art since its inception in the 1910s, and has exhibited it in dedicated gallery spaces since 1977.³ Directors Martin Baldwin and William Withrow, whose combined tenures spanned from 1932 to 1990, were catalytic proponents of art and artists in Canada at a time when the field was marginally valued.⁴ In 1939, Baldwin established the Canadian Collection Committee and supported its work through two new acquisition funds dedicated to Canadian art.⁵ Honouring Canada's centenary, Withrow published the AGO's complete Canadian holdings as the Gallery's "appropriate" Centennial project to serve as "a reference book . . . to those studying Canadian art," and appointed Joan Murray to the newly created position of Curator of Canadian Art in 1970.⁶ Under Withrow's leadership, the first purpose-built Canadian Wing opened as part of the Stage II expansion (1977), and selections from the collection have been on view at the AGO ever since.

For over fifty years, the Curator of Canadian Art has overseen, installed, and grown the collection, which for many decades focused on historical art—that is to say, art made in Canada before 1945.⁷ While there is no longer a curatorial position dedicated to "historical" art, the Canadian collection's remit is broadly, though not exclusively, focused on art produced prior to the current generation, or twenty-five years before the present day.⁸ The work I do in this position, like the work that others have done before me, is inflected and circumscribed by the institution's active participation in the evolving formation and definition of Canadian art.⁹ After all, these parameters not

3 The Art Museum of Toronto (now Art Gallery of Ontario) was established in 1911; the first purpose-built galleries opened in 1918 and were connected to The Grange, the historic house bequeathed by Harriet Boulton Smith, its last owner. The first onsite exhibition was held in 1913 in The Grange.

Up until 1977, a few selected works were periodically on view. As of the opening of Stage I (1974), the J.S. McLean Gallery was originally located between the Henry Moore Sculpture Centre and the main lobby on the first floor, and was dedicated to "the exposure of young avant-garde Canadian artists" (see William Withrow's letter to Jeremy Adamson, July 30, 1975). Unless otherwise noted, all archival documents cited in this essay are housed in "Director's Office Records: William Withrow," Box 31, 1975–76 / File: Curator, Canadian Historical Art, April 1, 1975–March 31, 1976, and in Curatorial Files—General Business, Box 1B / File: Jeremy Adamson: Reports and Statements, E.P. Taylor Research Library & Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario.

In Stage II (1977), the McLean Gallery became one of three Canadian Historical Galleries located on the second floor. The other two were the Georgia Ridley and John Ridley Galleries. These three spaces made up the Canadian Wing. For more details, see *Art Gallery of Ontario Annual Report, 1977–1978: President's Report*. While the physical spaces no longer exist, these named galleries continue to be part of the J.S. McLean Centre.

4 As could be expected in a former colonial state with enduring ties to the British Empire, Canadian art was deemed either derivative or too provincial.

5 Minutes of June 2, 1939, Exhibition Committee: "Appointment of Sub-Committees. The Committee agreed to the suggestion that a sub-committee be appointed with a limited expenditure of between one and two thousand dollars per year for the express purpose of making purchases of Canadian works of art. It was left to Mr. Wood and Mr. Jackson to approach Mr. J.S. McLean to ask him to act as Chairman."

6 William Withrow, *The Canadian Collection* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1970).

7 AGO Curators of Canadian Art: Joan Murray, 1970–1973; J. Russell Harper, 1974–1975; Jeremy Adamson, 1975–1978; Dennis Reid, 1978–2005—first head of the Canadian Art department; Gerald McMaster, 2005–2009—first Fredrik S. Eaton Curator, Canadian Art; Michelle Jacques, 2010–2012, as Acting Curator, Canadian Art; Andrew Hunter, 2013–2017; Georgiana Uhlyarik, appointed October 2017 as co-lead of the newly created Indigenous + Canadian Art department.

8 For some decades now at the AGO, the temporal designation for the Canadian collection has advanced by five years, every five years. In 2020, the collection encompassed work up to 1995. The contemporary collection is responsible for works after this date. This is a guideline, and it is negotiated among curators in its practical application.

9 For an overview of the development of art history in Canada, see Laurier Lacroix, "Writing Art History in the Twentieth Century," in *The Visual Arts in Canada: The Twentieth Century*, eds. Anne Whitelaw, Brian Foss, and Sandra Paikowsky (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2012), 412–23.

only guide the collection's growth but also have been used to determine—sometimes deliberately, at other times unintentionally—works that are not of value to collect.

It is important to understand that it was not simply “a noteworthy coincidence that the renaissance in Canadian art began simultaneously with the awakening of the national spirit of the country,” as Newton MacTavish wrote in 1911 (my emphasis).¹⁰ Rather, it was a concerted effort to create and claim a distinct identity no longer “hampered by provincialisms and fettered by old country traditions.”¹¹ Indeed, in Canada in the 1920s and 1930s, as Joyce Zemans and others have argued,

... national unity, the promotion of a common understanding of Canadian life, along with the expression of “national feeling” and vigorous Canadianism would be the motivating factors in the establishment of each new national institution at this time. The visual arts ... were believed to have the capacity to mold public taste, to create proper moral values and identify the basic truths required to establish a sense of nationhood.¹²

Artists at this time frequently articulated their desire to create a national art movement rooted in the natural beauty and symbolic meaning of the land, and were able to effectively capture the ethos of the young, fast-growing nation. By 1939, Graham McInnes, one of the earliest chroniclers of Canadian art, contended that it had been a “struggle to achieve a national art,” but declared that by that time “the foundations of a national idiom were laid.”¹³

The key artistic development in these early decades was the formation in Toronto of the Group of Seven, whose association with the AGO was crucial to both the Group and the institution. Emboldened by their shared artistic vision to develop “a way of painting dictated by Canada itself,”¹⁴ these artists joined together and sought inspiration on camping trips in the northern forests, and along the shores of glacial bays and lakes in Ontario's north, surveying lands scarred by fires and decades of logging and mining, and later travelling further afield, to the Rockies and the Arctic. Their “art for a nation” project was launched with their first ever exhibition, held at the Gallery in 1920. In 1928 Lawren S. Harris (1885–1970)—the leader of the Group—hauntingly elaborated his notions of Canadian art as founded on a “oneness with the informing spirit of the whole land” and the artist as the creator of “an art and home for the soul of a people.”¹⁵ These

¹⁰ Newton MacTavish, “A Renaissance of Art in Canada,” *Art and Progress* 2, no. 11 (September 1911): 318–19.

¹¹ MacTavish, “A Renaissance of Art in Canada.”

¹² Joyce Zemans, “Establishing the Canon: Nationhood, Identity and the National Gallery's First Reproduction Programme of Canadian Art,” *Journal of Canadian Art History / Annales d'histoire de l'art canadien* 16, no. 2 (1995): 11.

¹³ Graham McInnes, *A Short History of Canadian Art* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1939), 2.

¹⁴ Lawren S. Harris, “The Group of Seven in Canadian History,” in *Canadian Historical Association: Report of the Annual Meeting Held at Victoria and Vancouver, June 16–19, 1948* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948), 29.

¹⁵ Lawren S. Harris, “Creative Art and Canada,” reprinted in *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada, 1928–1929* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1929), 185–86.

artists' ambitions expanded nationally and internationally, through many publications, exhibitions, and, most effectively, commercial reproductions, thus establishing a dominant Canadian art that would be mythologized in recurrent revivals throughout the century. The Group of Seven's ideas and vision of Canada and its artists have become deeply engrained in the fabric of the AGO's Canadian Art collection, not only through their art but also through their active engagement on the museum's collection committee and the board of trustees.¹⁶ Their works continue to be an AGO destination point for researchers and the public alike.

The Canadian Art collection at the AGO has grown over the century, though it has not always been on view. In 1976, in preparation for the inaugural installation of the AGO's Canadian Wing—the first time spaces were committed long-term to exclusively exhibiting the Canadian Art collection—Curator of Canadian Art Jeremy Adamson conducted the first qualitative review of the collection.¹⁷ Internal documents record Adamson's conclusions that, while there was “much to be properly proud of in our vaults,” the collection had “many gaps,” as it had been formed “more by chance than by design”—a consequence of relying primarily on donations.¹⁸ The Canadian collection was, he declared, at a critical juncture. Adamson was thus the first to articulate a clear vision for the collection to become “a significant resource tool for the study of Canadian history and culture,”¹⁹ and he aimed to build it into “the finest,” “the most important,” “broad, representative survey of Canadian art that present and future conditions allow.”²⁰ Noting that “a major public collection should contain a broader selection to provide a better explanative context for these pictures and to satisfy the needs of today's more critical and interested audience,”²¹ Adamson outlined a path toward this goal. He was guided by standardized Canadian art historical categories, based on the work of art historian and former AGO Curator of Canadian Art J. Russell Harper, who had followed Murray as the Gallery's Curator of Canadian Art,²² and by his own view of what constituted “important” art in Canada.²³ Adamson created a list of artists and works that he recommended be added, concentrating on the nineteenth century up to the Second World War in Ontario and Quebec, in the well-established genres of landscape, domestic interiors, marine, portraiture, and still life.²⁴

¹⁶ For example, Franklin Carmichael served from 1943 to 1944, A.Y. Jackson from 1944 to 1948, and A.J. Casson from 1945 to 1959.

¹⁷ The Canadian Wing galleries were part of the Stage II expansion in 1977; see note 3. It would be another thirty years until the next comprehensive review of the Canadian collection, undertaken by Alicia Boutilier in 2007–2008. Its parameters were set by Dennis Reid, and once again the collection was assessed in relation to the traditional categories of Canadian art, with side inquiries into the AGO's holdings of Indigenous and Canadian women artists.

¹⁸ Jeremy Adamson, “Curator's Plans for the Canadian Historical Collection,” March 9, 1976, 3.

¹⁹ Adamson, “The Importance of the Canadian Historical Collection in the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Need for Acquisition Funds,” 3.

²⁰ Adamson, “Curator's Plans,” 3.

²¹ Adamson, “The Importance of the Canadian Historical Collection,” 2.

²² Harper wrote the first comprehensive survey of painting in Canada in 1966 and played an essential role in the establishment of Canadian art history as an academic field.

²³ Before leaving in 1978, Adamson also curated a series of exhibitions, most notably a retrospective of urban views and landscapes by Lawren Harris.

²⁴ Adamson, “Curator's Plans.” Charlotte Schreiber (1834–1922) was the only woman artist named, and she is the only artist on Adamson's list who is yet to be collected by the AGO. Much has been written on the significant impact and profound contribution women artists have made, yet public institutions continue to be slow to acquire their work. See Joyce Zemans and Amy C. Wallace, “Where Are the Women? Updating the Account!” *RACAR: Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 38, no. 1 (2013): 1–29, jstor.org/stable/42630878, among many others.

younger artists, "I believe in myself, since it is all I have."³⁴ Munn's note to self reveals to me that in confronting an art world that is most often indifferent to and dismissive of their work, women have had to persevere and to insist on making space for themselves and for subsequent generations. They have taught me to carefully frame an open-ended proposition, in order to create a generous space for meaningful exchange that reveals layered and nuanced complexities and has the potential to shift and open up new views and to withstand—even embrace—contradictions, discomfort, and uncertainty.

Artists who inspire me are profoundly self-aware, self-empowered, and self-possessed. Barbara Astman has recruited instant camera technology, colour xerography, and digital scanners to mine her inner psyche and thus usurp the tools of new technologies into handmaidens for a homemade vision of the world and our individual selves in it. The title of this text references her series *Untitled, I was thinking about you...* (1979–1980), in which her own life-size image is permanently incised with a fragmented letter to someone in her life. The carefully orchestrated compositions of poses, gestures, colours, and textures clash with her raw, direct address. Narrative is distorted; meaning is elusive yet remains within reach. Performing for the camera, Suzy Lake opens up a space of engagement between her and us—between the self and the many others.³⁵ She conjures up experiences from deep within herself "to extend the act of looking to include a more direct act of experiencing, making and discovering."³⁶ Her very public introspection is a political act that opens up the world to challenge conventions, and imagines it as a bigger and more inclusive place. To spend time with a drawing by Margaret Priest (born 1944) is to feel its discomfort and its seduction, to accept her invitation to be permanently unsettled in the most ordered, structured way. Her drawings are slow and they are urgent. They are an act of premeditated rebellion.

How can we understand how radical and audacious these works still are—and have been for decades—in today's cultural deluge of apparently daring self-expression? Their acting out seems so familiar and common these days that we might miss the original revolutionary gesture. Exhibiting their work, I feel deeply implicated as a facilitator of meaning as I frame the contexts and the invitation that forms the interplay between artist, works of art, and visitors. I conceive of installations as both encounters and propositions, engaging artists' concerns and informed by knowledge gathered and tested through experience and exchange. The art museum can serve as a site where contradictions are brought to the forefront not to resolve them, but to face them.

³⁴ Notebook, c. 1925, unpaginated, Kathleen Munn fonds, SC105, E.P. Taylor Research Library & Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario.

³⁵ Since her 2015 AGO retrospective, *Introducing Suzy Lake*, Lake has received the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts (2016) and the Scotiabank Photography Award (2016), and her work has been collected by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, as well as by other international private and public institutions.

³⁶ Suzy Lake, "Artist Statement," *Artists with Their Work*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1981. Artist file, E.P. Taylor Research Library & Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario.

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