

WATER + PIGMENT + PAPER:
EXPERIMENTS IN WATERCOLOUR FROM THE AGGV
COLLECTION, VICTORIA: ART GALLERY OF VICTORIA,
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Alexandra Macdonald, University of Victoria

Drawing exclusively from the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria's (AGGV) permanent collection, the exhibition *Water + Pigment + Paper: Experiments in Watercolour from the AGGV Collection* brought together over one hundred watercolour paintings spanning nearly two hundred years of production from the late 1700s to the first decades of the Twentieth Century.

With the goal of proving that watercolour is much more than “a medium of leisure, used for studies or sketches...”, curators Michelle Jacques and Nicole Stanbridge selected artists and works that demonstrated atypical, experimental, or rebellious qualities, showcasing the artists' creative use of this versatile medium.¹ In doing so, the show re-defines our understanding of the history of the medium by critically examining the ways in which watercolour has been viewed by collectors, the academy, and the

¹ “Water + Pigment + Paper: Experiments in Watercolour from the AGGV Collection,” Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, accessed June 14, 2016, <http://aggy.ca/exhibitions/water-pigment-paper>.

art museum, both in the past and the present. The careful treatment of this rich subject, which has not had significant exposure at the AGGV, featured an unexpected array of works that allowed gallery visitors to experience artworks that change our understanding of the development of the genre in Canada. In re-defining our notions of the genre, the exhibition convincingly argued for the re-integration of female artists into art historical discourses concerning watercolour. Highlighting women's contribution to this subtle, yet powerful genre, the curators moved beyond the artificial limitations of the academy to produce a show that offers a new and exciting way of understanding watercolour in Canada and the Pacific Northwest.

Rather than being organized on chronological lines, the exhibition was divided into six interconnected thematic sections: "Women and Watercolour," "Revolution," "Innovation," "Roots of Watercolour," "Tobey 'All Over'," and "Champions of the Local Scene." Didactic labels introduced the theme of each section, and provided both socio-historical and art historical background. While labeling was minimal, it effectively supported the goals of the exhibition, introducing a general audience to the ways in which watercolour embodies key art historical movements, and shifts within the last two centuries. Supplemental panels served to highlight the diverse and compelling ways in which watercolour has been treated by Canadian artists, as well as linking Canadian practice to British, European, and Asian practices, particularly in relation to the work of Mark Tobey and Jack Wise.

The initial room of the exhibition introduced viewers to the theme "Women and Watercolour." Historically, curators were often working within museum collecting systems with demonstrated biases towards male artists.

As a result, many prominent collections overlook the contribution made by female artists to the development of watercolour. The AGGV collection, however, includes a remarkable number of works by female artists, offering the rare opportunity to explore their contribution to art history. One particularly interesting feature of the exhibit was the juxtaposition of Emily Carr's early work with that of Sophie Pemberton and Ina D.D. Uthoff. Viewing Carr's 1909 *Beacon Hill Park* (Fig.1) together with Pemberton's *Straits of Juan de Fuca and Arbutus Tree* (1902) (Fig. 2) beautifully illustrated the artistic conventions that were important to artists in early 1900's Victoria.



Figure 1: Emily Carr, *Beacon Hill Park*. Canadian. Watercolour, 35.2 x 51.9 cm, 1909, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.



Figure 2: Sophie Pemberton, *Straits of Juan de Fuca and Arbutus Trees*. Canadian. Watercolour, 28.3 x 48.5 cm, 1902, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

Capturing the sweeping landscape of the coastline with subtle brush strokes and a soft colour palate, both artists were strongly influenced by the ‘naturalistic realism’ of the British Landscape tradition, which they would have studied in private art lessons. Despite gaining acclaim for her work in oil, Pemberton continued to work in watercolour throughout her career, relying on British influences to capture the coastal landscape.

Carr, however, went on to push the boundaries of conventional landscape traditions, seeking to capture “the spirit of her subjects.”² Her second piece in the exhibition is perhaps more akin to the work viewers have come to expect from this artist. With *Big Eagle, Skidigate, B.C.* (1929) (Fig. 3), Carr moved away from the English tradition, pushing her work in unique ways,

² Michelle Jacques and Nicole Stanbridge, “Women and Watercolour,” Exhibition Panel, 2016.

contributing to the development of more abstracted watercolour works. Bold jagged shapes allude to her emotive experience of the harsh winter sky while a First Nation's monumental pole dominates the landscape.³



Figure 3: Emily Carr, *Big Eagle Skidigate*, B.C. Canadian. Watercolour, 76.2 x 56.7 cm, 1929, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

Displayed beside Uthoff's *Snow Pockets* (1939), the juxtaposition clearly illustrated that both women were experimenting with new modernist ideas and flattened perspective. The gallery's didactic panel correctly noted that, while not all female artists included in this exhibition produced works that

³ Although sometimes referred to as 'totem poles', a more appropriate term is 'pole' or 'monumental pole', following the recommendations of Nika Collison, curator at the Haida Gwaii Museum at Kaay Lnagaay.

rivalled those by Carr, the very acquisition of their work by the gallery's collection is evidence that these women achieved levels of critical acclaim that were radical for their time.

The second and third sections in the first exhibition space, "Revolution" and "Innovation," underscored two important features in the history of watercolour: its portability, as well as the impact of the commercialization of vibrant, readymade, pigments and watercolour cakes during the second industrial revolution in the late nineteenth century. These developments allowed artists to both work 'plein air' and experiment with a wider variety of commercially available pigments. The result was works that pushed the boundaries of landscape painting, capturing the effects of light and atmosphere in an innovative and experimental way. To a general audience, many of the works included in this section may have appeared neither innovative nor revolutionary. At first glance, the works on display could come across as deceptively simple; capturing the fertile prairies, desolate Ontario winters, and windswept coasts of Canada. However, as the curators point out, owing to their interest in ecological preservation, works like Edwin Holgate's *Figures in a Stormy Landscape* (1921) (Fig. 4) were in fact revolutionary for the period.



Figure Four: Edwin Holgate, *Figures in a Stormy Landscape*. Canadian. Watercolour and charcoal, 21 x 27 cm, 1921, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

Holgate's depiction of human influence on the natural landscape, at a time when his peers in the Group of Seven were gaining prominence for their untouched landscapes, sets him aside as innovative. Indeed, by choosing to critically examine our relationship with the land, Holgate was exploring concerns for land preservation that we still grapple with today.

The second exhibition space moved away from British and European influences, highlighting instead Canadian artists' strong ties to Chinese brush painting traditions, as well as modern North American artists. Setting up the larger themes explored in the space, "Tobey 'All Over,'" "Champions of the Local Scene," and "Roots of Watercolour" introduced viewers to six works that captured the essence of ancient uses of watercolour and nat-

ural pigments. Juxtaposing modern works like Grace Wilson Melvin's *Summer Radiance II* (not dated) with Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) works *Cricket and Spider on Grass* and *Butterfly and Iris* by Chinese artist Yan Hua, this section illustrated how, despite utilizing different visual languages, all six works displayed captured the artist's interest in the "abstract potential of the mark."⁴ This search for the creative potential of the abstract ran throughout the final themes in the exhibition.

A Seattle-based artist, Mark Tobey was a friend, colleague, and mentor for many artists working in Victoria and along the Northwest Coast of North America in the first half of the twentieth-century. A member of the Northwest School, Tobey was influenced and inspired by the inherent spirituality of the natural world, as well as Zen Buddhism with its focus on simple forms and contemplative thought.⁵ The works on display under the theme "Tobey 'All Over'" illustrated Tobey's interest in Buddhism. Further, they clearly demonstrated the impact his work had on other North American artists and the Abstract Expressionist movement.

Circulating through the gallery space, viewers first encountered Tobey's work *Glue Calligraphy* (1963). Displayed alongside Helen Keen's *Wood's No. 5* (1955) and Jack Wise's *Spring* (1972), it was clear that Tobey's work had a powerful influence on his peers. A small painting, with *Glue Calligraphy* Tobey was clearly experimenting with the abstract potential of the mark as

⁴ Michelle Jacques and Nicole Stanbridge. "The Roots of Watercolour," Exhibition Panel, 2016.

⁵ The Northwest School was an arts movement based in Seattle and Skagit County, Washington. At its peak during the 1930s and 40s, the group included artists Guy Anderson, Kenneth Callahan, Morris Graves, and Mark Tobey.

non-representative figures dance across the space, evoking Chinese calligraphy. Similarly, Keen's work is evocative both of Chinese brush stroke painting and Tobey's interest in the potential of the 'mark.' Using a tri-chromatic palate, Keen captured the contemplative power of broad sweeping brush strokes. Expanding on Keen's colour palate and use of space, Wise's *Spring* used the entire surface of the work, experimenting with washes and unique fields of colours in a manner that calls to mind the experimental quality of Tobey's *Untitled-Abstract* (1959). These works were characteristic of all the watercolours on display in this section. As a grouping, they highlighted the ways in which, in the hands of a skilled practitioner, watercolour can push the boundaries of our preconceptions. Not only do these works re-define our notion of landscapes, they beautifully illustrate the experimental nature of mid-twentieth century Canadian and North American watercolour practices.

The final theme introduced audiences to the Limmers (founded 1971), a Victoria-based artists' collective. Included in this section were works by key figures such as Maxwell Bates and Mfanwy Pavelic. Rather than being drawn together by a manifesto, the Limmers were driven by a desire to support and challenge one another. Deserving of a standalone exhibition, the works in this final section highlighted the ways in which each member of the collective experimented with watercolour in a unique and curious way. The curators deserve praise for their vision of how to conclude the exhibition. The assembled works expressed powerful themes of radical landscapes, an experimental use of colour and line, and the indebtedness to abstract expressionism. By finishing the exhibition with works by local

artists, the curators concluded their narrative on local ground, bringing the vibrancy of the local arts scene to life.

Looking intently at the works in this exhibition, prying beneath the surface of our preconceptions and expectations of the medium, the exhibition viewer is reminded that watercolour is not a simple medium. Granted, watercolour is indeed a subtle medium at times, but in the hands of certain artists this subtlety packs an important punch, inviting us to engage in detailed study and re-negotiation. Labeling watercolour as a ‘simple medium’ for ‘simple works,’ overlooks the intricacies of the genre. The works included in this show accomplished the curators’ goal of re-defining how we look at watercolour as a medium within Canadian and Pacific Northwest art histories. Highlighting works that pushed the boundaries of the medium, *Water + Pigment + Paper* challenged audiences to re-think their understanding of watercolour and artistic practice more generally. There can be little doubt that we need to do a better job of reframing and re-integrating female artists into key art historical movements and collecting habits.

This is not to say that the exhibition was without challenges. Despite noting in the didactic panels that one of the goals of this exhibition was to re-insert women’s voices back into art-historical discussions of watercolour painting, comparatively few works by women artists were discussed on the panels themselves or explored within the themes “Revolution,” “Innovation,” and “Champions of the Local Scene.” While it is possible that this is due to the limitations of the AGGV collection, it nonetheless suggests that we are still learning how to effectively re-insert women into these key artistic movements and into art museum collections. Further, given

the scope of the works displayed, each theme could have benefited from further social-historical and art historical background to fully develop the complex ideas being discussed. As this exhibition introduced audiences to works that have not received sufficient attention in the past, the addition of larger panels or a catalogue would have helped to concretely situate the works with the themes, the larger medium of watercolour, and the broader movements addressed in the exhibition. But these are minor observations: in reality, the exhibition presented a powerful vision of the complex and dynamic medium of watercolour and the curators are to be commended for the ground-breaking approach taken in the exhibition. In presenting works that challenged our preconceptions of the medium, the curators accomplished their goal of re-framing watercolour as a dynamic medium and, I would suggest, provoked new and important conversations about the role played by women artists in the development of watercolour in Canada and the Pacific Northwest.