'A woman in a city': What the Group of Seven lost in the northern woods

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By: Joseph Brean

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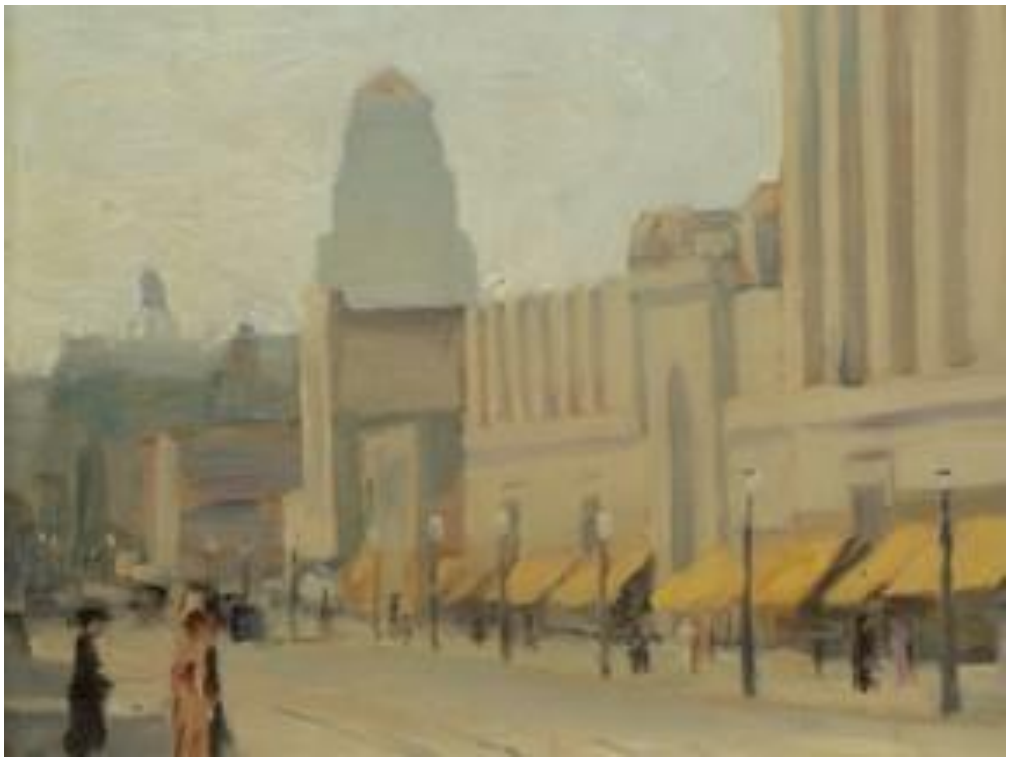
A new show at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection brings together the men's unheralded female contemporaries, no jack pines to be seen



Urban landscape: Marion Long's The Gay Yellow Awnings, c. 1931, oil on board, 26.7 × 21.4 cm. PHOTO BY COURTESY MCMICHAEL CANADIAN ART COLLECTION

As this summer began, the Twitter account @CanadaPaintings got hundreds of "likes" when it posted In The Woods, a 1939 painting by Paraskeva Clark, who came to Canada from Russia via Paris in the early 1930s, and who was unusually famous for a 20th-century Canadian woman artist.

The painting does exactly what it says on the tin. A keen eye might pick out the influence of Paul Cézanne, but to the casual viewer, it shows the view from behind a rock into a bunch of

trees. As a work of art, it is as Canadian as possible under the circumstances, and there is a subtle irony in the fact it is by a woman.

Canada is artistically “metrophobic,” says Sarah Milroy, chief curator of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, which has a lot of paintings set in the woods. Canadians do not think of themselves as an urban nation, although they mostly are, and Canadian fine art has perpetuated this distortion.

The received wisdom is that Canadian art is about wilderness, and Canadian artists are basically lumberjacks, epitomized in the all-male Group of Seven, the standard against which all else is judged.

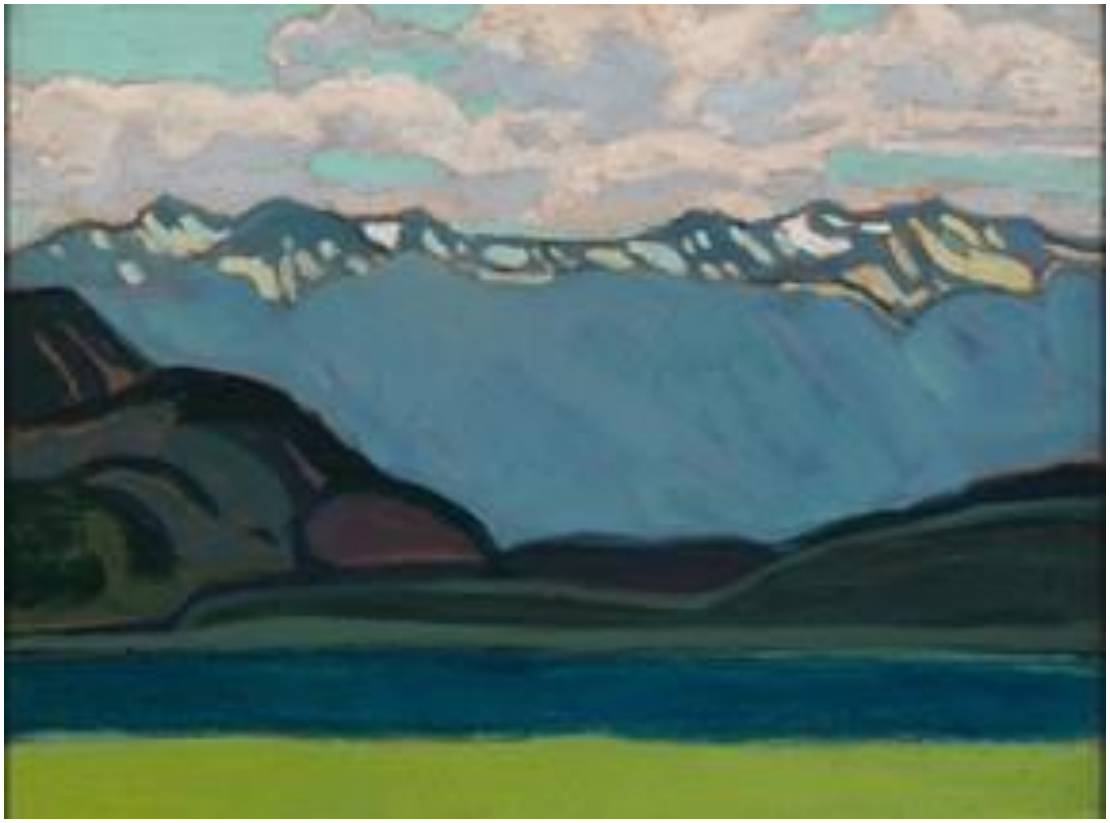
“The Group of Seven were put to various nation-building uses after the paint was dry that were not their explicit intention,” Milroy says. Their mindset was typical of their time. They were looking for a sense of open landscape ready for settlers to embrace. Their paintings of forests, lakes and mountains captured the imagination of a new nation finding its artistic identity in the natural world. “They were oblivious enough to not understand the violence of that, along with the rest of society.”

The Group of Seven nurtured the artistic careers of various women, and for their time, they were unusually open to women artists, Milroy says. But when they thought to open their ranks, it was to men only. This created the enduring sense that the quintessential Canadian artist is a man in the woods. But it did not have to be that way.

“Maybe it’s a woman in a city,” says Milroy. This counter-cultural notion is the premise of Uninvited: Canadian Women Artists in the Modern Moment, a new exhibit at the McMichael, which is normally devoted to the Group of Seven and associated painters such as David Milne and Emily Carr.

Looking back through these paintings, it is clear the women painters were focused on matters in the Group of Seven’s blind spots, notably cities and people. It invites reflection on a missed opportunity, and speculation about what might have been. The Group of Seven might have been the Group of Eleven, or Group of Seventeen. In hindsight, Canada’s greatest painters might actually be an informal Group of X.

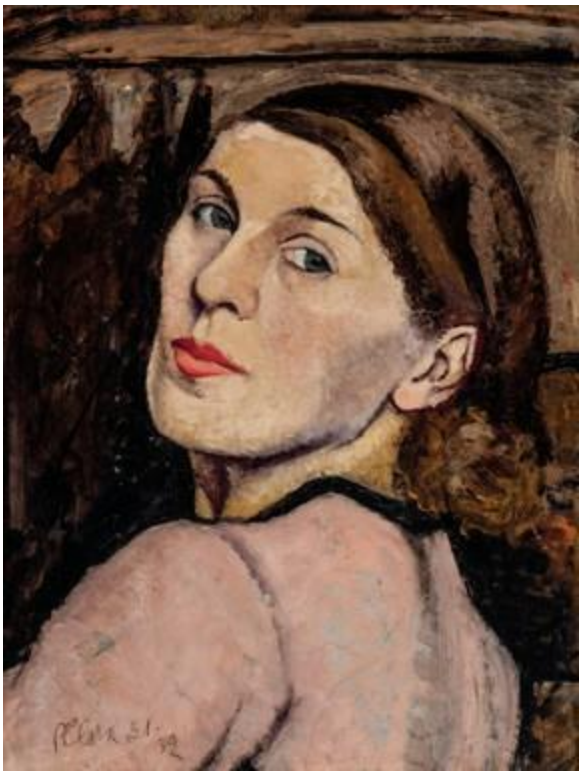
The women whose art makes up this exhibit were outside the canon looking in, and their contrasting interests show what women might have brought to the Group of Seven as members, had they been invited, as some other men painters were.



Anne Savage, Pink Sky, Skeena River, 1927, oil on panel, 23 × 30.5 cm. PHOTO BY COURTESY MCMICHAEL CANADIAN ART COLLECTION

These women were not pining for Algoma as they over-wintered in Toronto, expanding their sketches. They were not sleeping in tents. For the most part they were interested in the city, in the human subjects of portraiture, and if they did travel, the landscapes they took notice of were near wilderness or farmland, such as Anne Savage's The Plough, 1933.

Even in Ontario's northland, they saw the place differently from the men, as in Cobalt, a 1931 painting of the silver mining boom town by Yvonne McKague Housser. What she noticed was not untouched wilderness, but intense resource extraction and the people who lived that life. Her sketch for the painting of ramshackle houses was initially rendered in muted tones and only brightened, on the advice of a male colleague at the National Gallery, into the "strangely Disneyfied" final version, as Milroy describes it, which today is her best known work, but "strays from her original perception of the place."



Paraskeva Clark, Self-Portrait, 1931–32, oil on cardboard, 41 × 31 cm. PHOTO BY COURTESY MCMICHAEL CANADIAN ART COLLECTION

Paraskeva Clark, who did enjoy artistic fame to a level rarely matched by a Canadian woman and in 1937 challenged the Canadian art world with her manifesto “Come Out from behind the Pre-Cambrian Shield,” offers a unique female perspective, Milroy says, because so many of her paintings are views from the window of her house in Toronto, looking out from a domestic space.

“I see in these pictures a sense of longing for the world outside the home,” Milroy said. They were documenting another kind of exploration, of women out in the world, after the war, with increased personal liberty.

At the Theatre, 1928, by Prudence Heward of Montreal is what Milroy calls a “voyeuristic” picture of two women being observed while out unescorted in public, with the focus on their bare backs framed by evening dresses.

Even the presence of people in their paintings make Canadian women painters stand out, as in Marion Long’s paintings of people and places in The Ward, a Toronto neighbourhood of immigrants that was cleared to make way for much of the current downtown. The Furnace Man, 1921, for example, shows a working man whose rough but courtly demeanour is captured by the sensuousness of Long’s painting technique. A book compiled for the exhibit notes that Long painted this man in part to disprove the taunt that “women only paint the pretty pretty.”

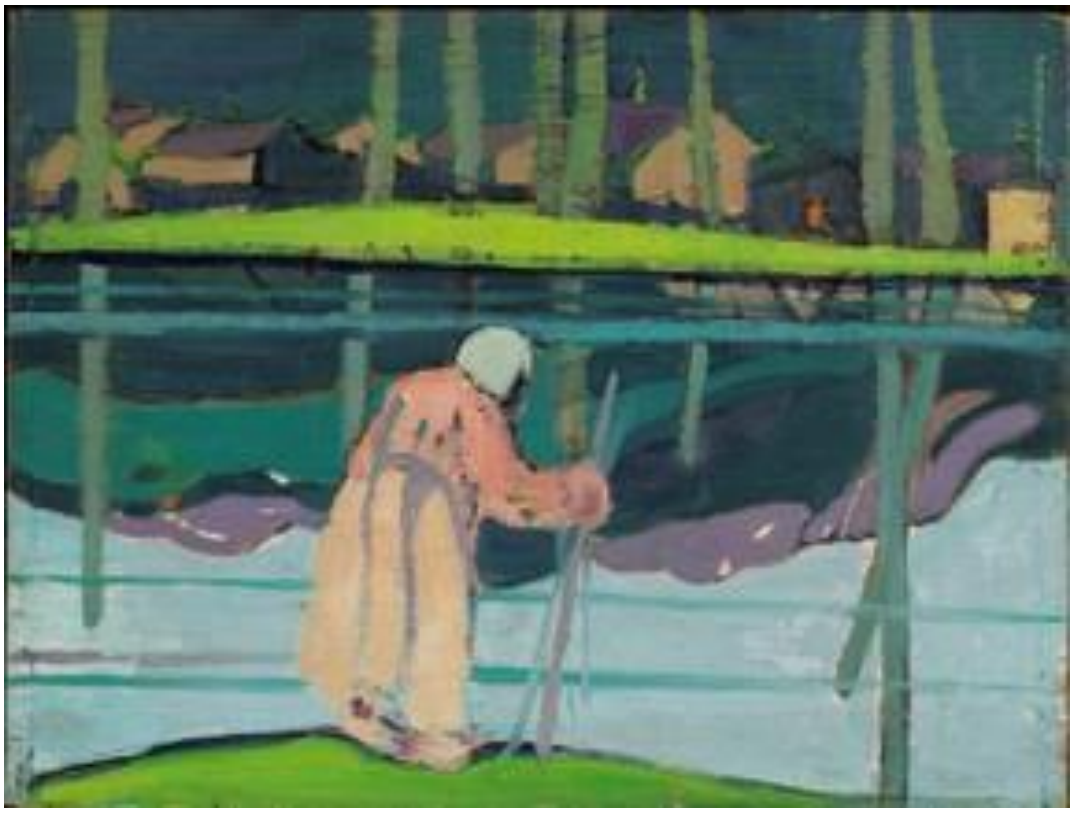
“We have all left them uninvited,” Milroy said. “This is the point. Museums for 100 years have not given the priority to women artists that they deserve. If there’s a show of a woman artist, it’s Emily Carr.”

Carr, of course, is an icon but an outlier, whose fame is the exception that proves the rule. The prevailing artistic obsession of the time was landscape, preferably with no trace of humans, Indigenous or otherwise.

“What the women were interested in was people. It’s like the dark side of the moon,” Milroy said.

Some of the exhibit is devoted to examples of Indigenous artwork that rose from craft to art in the growing capitalist context, such as Mi’kmaw and Coast Salish baskets for trade.

But the settler women artists who make up the majority of painters also had an orientation to Indigenous people different from the men. Notable in this was Winifred Petchey Marsh, who married an Anglican missionary and lived 40 years in the Arctic, using watercolour to paint Inuit women especially, with delicate attention paid to beadwork on parkas.

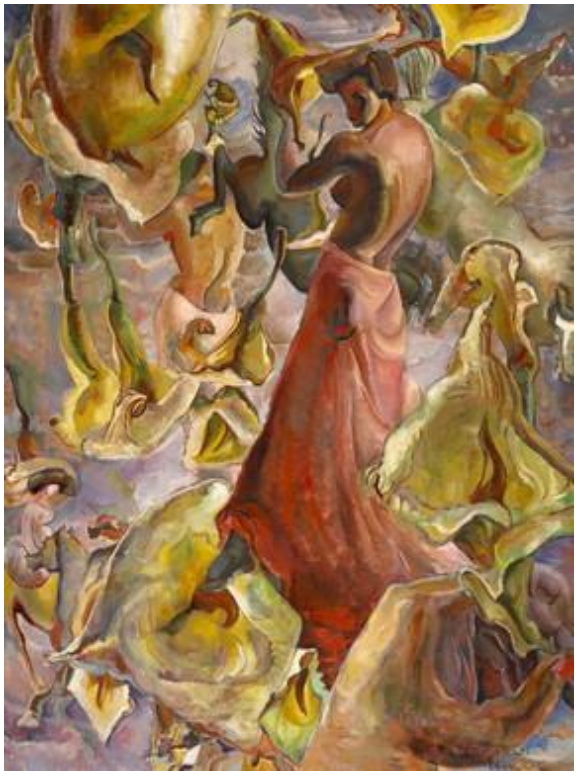


Anne Savage, The Skeena River, B.C., 1927, oil on wood, 23 × 30.5 cm. PHOTO BY COURTESY MCMICHAEL CANADIAN ART COLLECTION

In 1927, likewise, the painter Anne Savage and the sculptor Florence Wyle were invited by the Canadian government to tour the Skeena River Valley in British Columbia to depict the totem poles of the Gitxsan Nation. One essay in the exhibit book draws out the irony that they were welcomed by the people of Gitanyow, with hospitality that "defused the women's power to intrude. The chiefs who offered them shelter and were generous to them demonstrated their authority as much through the hospitality they extended as through their earlier decisions to withhold it (to men including A.Y. Jackson, a founder of the Group of Seven, and Edwin Holgate, who was invited to be the eighth)."

The reasons for this trend of women being uninvited to the heights of Canadian artistic appreciation are systemic and sociological. One is the typical career path of an artist of the time. Many of the Group of Seven worked commercially, and as Milroy puts it, some of the tenets of commercial illustration haunt their work. David Milne, likewise, spoke of having to unlearn his training and take a renegade, less balanced, more subjective approach to composition.

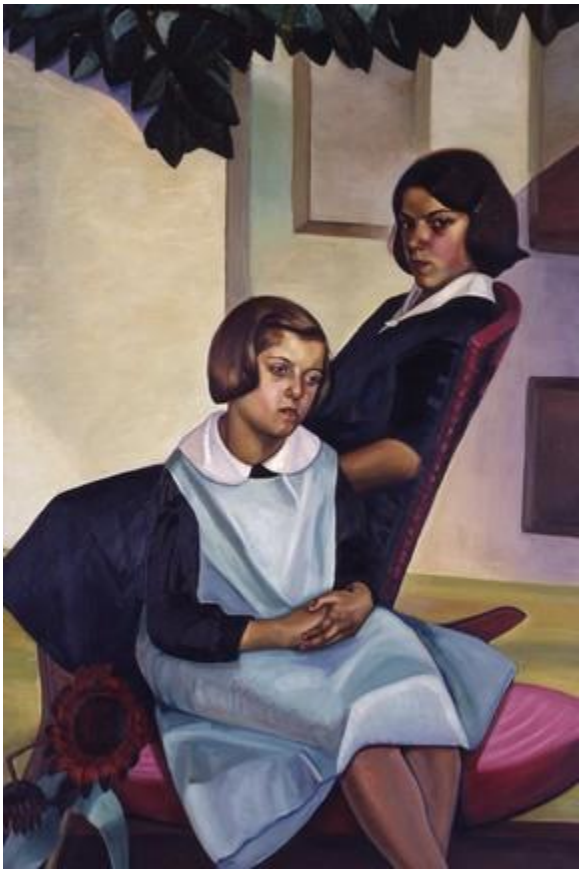
"The women often taught, but I don't think any of the women in this exhibit worked in commercial illustration," Milroy said. They trained in the finest art schools of London, Paris, New York and Montreal, but they never retrained to sell things in the mass market of advertising. The effect was greater eccentricity.



Pegi Nicol MacLeod, A Descent of Lilies, 1935, oil on canvas, 122 × 91.6 cm. PHOTO BY COURTESY MCMICHAEL CANADIAN ART COLLECTION

Some of the women were wealthy, which insulated them from pressures of the market. Milroy cites Pegi Nicol MacLeod, for example, whose wealth may have enabled her “bold and unorthodox experimentation.” This is on its grandest display in A Descent of Lilies, 1935, a fantastic scene of flowers and horses that Milroy calls “the definitive statement in Canadian art of female erotic experience.”

Prudence Heward, likewise, trained in Europe and Montreal, and the portraits she produced seem free of any commercial imperative. They are not the sort of things made to please clients, and they are stronger for it. Milroy calls her painting of a woman in a swimsuit, The Bather, 1930, “one of the toughest pictures in the history of Canadian art.”



Prudence Heward, Sisters of Rural Quebec, 1930, oil on canvas, 157 × 107 cm. PHOTO BY COURTESY MCMICHAEL CANADIAN ART COLLECTION

But it was a different sort of toughness, one that was too often overshadowed by macho myth.

The grandest “missing late career” of a Canadian artist is without a doubt Tom Thomson’s, the fallen prophet to whom the Group of Seven was devoted. It is an absence Canadians have filled not only with intense cultural interest in what he managed to complete before his death aged 39, such as Northern River and The West Wind, but also with lavish conspiracy theories of

thwarted passion, murder and grave-robbing. His 1917 death in Algonquin Park is Canada's Kennedy assassination, the nation's most enduring mythical whodunnit.

But there were others with missing late careers, women who, as Milroy puts it, "begin brilliantly and then drift away into obscurity." Even Paraskeva Clark was at times swamped by the duties of motherhood and later by the demands of her son's mental illness.

Near the end of her life, Clark reflected: "There is just cooking, cooking, cooking. Loblaws, Dominion; Dominion, Loblaws… What's a woman's fate? What has the Lord created us for? Just to produce more men. I can't forgive Him for that."

Women simply did not enjoy the support required to preserve an artist's work for posterity. If they turn up in the serious literature, it is focused on biography, not academic criticism. Their careers are spotty, Milroy says, because they did not sell a lot in their lifetimes. "You see genius rear up occasionally," she said.

Their legacies are fragile, often preserved only by interested family members. One of the paintings in Uninvited took two years to find because it was held in the family. One part of the family had it, but another part did not know.

As Milroy describes it, a male artist belongs to history, but a woman belongs to those she loved and cared for. The goal of this exhibit is that these women, excluded from the highest ranks in their lifetimes, should be enthusiastically claimed, at last, by Canada.

Uninvited: Canadian Women Artists in the Modern Moment opens Sept. 9 at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ont.