

More than just painting for sales

MAUD from E1

making paintings for sale, if she was really just cranking them out, she wouldn't have made so many changes and you wouldn't see that profusion of variety that provides so much pleasure for viewers when you bring them all together."

Milroy's referring to how, even though the subject matter is repeated over and over in Lewis's paintings of animals, harbour life and landscapes, there's wild variety in her treatment.

You might see the same, say, doe and fawn in a half-dozen works, but sometimes they're hanging out by a stream, or a farm; other times in a magical forest where evergreen trees are, strangely enough, covered in flowers. Lewis wasn't invested in faithfully representing reality. The whimsical scenes are part of a world she built herself.

To Milroy, this inventiveness shows that Lewis took an "obvious pleasure" in creative play, not just paintings for sale.

What's wrong with paintings for sale, anyway? Aren't all paintings, at the end of the day, for sale?

The distinction between commercial and fine art is a complicated maze of class, gender and race issues made all the more confusing by the public's romantic ideas about starving artists. That romanticism isn't always afforded to actual starving artists like Lewis, who despite achieving some popularity and acclaim in the 1960s died in 1970, essentially of malnutrition.



ART GALLERY OF NOVA SCOTIA

Maud Lewis's *Paintings for Sale* from the 1950s. The sign would have been familiar to thousands of mid-century road-trippers exploring Nova Scotia's Bay of Fundy.



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Despite being wildly popular and a national treasure, there's still a little resistance to the idea of her occupying a place in the Canadian art canon alongside that famed Group of Seven, whose paintings hang elsewhere at the McMichael. It probably doesn't help that she sold her paintings direct to the

consumer and at highly affordable prices: two or three dollars at first.

Her enterprise existed outside of the established regional folk arts and crafts industry which, thanks to historian Ian McKay's book *The Quest of the Folk*, we know was actually largely curated, shaped and

even invented by journalists who coached locals on how to make the most commercially viable art.

Artisans and songwriters were encouraged to stick to scripts and subject matter that painted a scene of a happy people living a simple life, untouched by urban problems and modern technology. Salty language was scrubbed, and political themes and labour grievances were off limits. Some were even told to tone down their bright colours so as to appeal to American tourists looking for outsider art.

By all indications, Lewis appears to have worked totally independently from that industry. Nobody told her to tone down her colours. Or, if they did, she didn't listen. She painted according to her own vision.

"She loved selling her work to people, but they came to her," Milroy says. "She just had a shingle out on the highway. That was her marketing. She did things her own way; I mean, she proved herself to be a very stubborn-minded woman in every aspect of her life. And as

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MCMICHAEL CANADIAN ART COLLECTION CURATOR

far as her art was concerned, I don't think she made pictures that she didn't enjoy making or feel connected to."

That enjoyment and sincere relationship with the subject matter, Milroy suggests, is part of what made these particular "paintings for sale" so popular with the road-trippers and, later, a wider public.

Lewis started to gain fame in the 1960s and, now, thanks to *Maudie*, a 2016 biopic, she is even more greatly appreciated. The film made it clear that she endured many hardships and, yet, still managed to paint with joy and conjure up that bright universe.

"There have been discussions that maybe Lewis become so popular because she was picturing a way of life that was disappearing," Milroy says.

"I actually think people's attraction to these works is far simpler. I think it's just about a certain undeniable emotional response you have when you look at these pictures. They trigger joy."

Which is also Milroy's pitch for why Torontonians, looking for a little light in these dark times, should consider heading to the McMichael and taking her up on the invitation to spend a little time in Maud Lewis's imagination.

"I think that joy is something that's always in shorter supply than we'd like," she says. "And I think people feel that joy and sincerity. That's the irony of Maud Lewis, that even though she made paintings for sale, there's complete sincerity in this work. It's not strategic, it's just simply her way of seeing the world."