

Bertram Brooker

Border Crossings

By: Oliver Al Botar

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There is no doubt that Bertram Brooker was one of the most versatile minds in the Canadian cultural field of the first half of the 20th century. He was already a voracious reader as a teenager in Portage la Prairie, where he and his family had immigrated from Croydon, in 1905. He was engaged in multiple avant-garde undertakings; in 1912 he and his brother purchased and ran the Neepawa film theatre in rural Manitoba, and the young Brooker wrote screenplays for early silent films that were produced by the Vitagraph Company of America. The list of his accomplishments goes on. He acted as police reporter for the *Winnipeg Telegram* and music critic for the *Manitoba Free Press*, participated as a “special” (volunteer police replacement) during the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 and became a leader in the development of modern advertising techniques in Canada (he moved to Toronto in 1921 to work in advertising, retiring in 1955 as vice-president of MacLaren, the foremost firm in Canada and the one that pioneered TV adverts starting in 1952). He organized the first public exhibition of abstract art in Canada (Arts & Letters Club, Toronto, January 1927), wrote the first Governor General’s Award-winning novel (*Think of the Earth*, 1936), was one of the most imaginative and breathtakingly expert illustrators of literature in the country and edited the two most important compendia on contemporary Canadian culture of the interwar period (*Yearbook of the Arts in Canada*, 1928–29 and 1936). Brooker was unstoppable and unlimitable in his internally driven quest to both bring Canadian culture into line with international developments and encourage new varieties of Canadian culture. As the curator of the Brooker exhibition, Michael Parke-Taylor, aptly put it, “by present-day standards, Brooker may be considered Canada’s first multidisciplinary artist.”

Thus, it seems strange not only that this exhibition mounted by the McMichael Canadian Art Collection is Brooker’s first retrospective in decades, but that this beautifully curated show is not travelling beyond the GTA. Add the fact that it was expertly organized by one of the most important historians of mid-century Canadian art, former Art Gallery of Ontario curator Michael Parke-Taylor, who has written an extensive monograph on Brooker’s visual art to accompany the exhibition, and the mystery deepens. Are we really so narrow in our range of what should or shouldn’t be seen at any given time in our museums as to disqualify a figure of this import?



Bertram Brooker, *Sounds Assembling*, 1928, oil on canvas, 112.3 × 91.7 centimetres. Collection of Winnipeg Art Gallery. Photo: Ernest Mayer. Courtesy WAG-Qaumajuq, Winnipeg, and McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario.

I'd like to propose the McMichael as an exemplar of the way Canadian museum policy could function. Currently on display, along with the Brooker show, are a revelatory exhibition curated by Catharine Mastin of depictions of a northern Ontario mining town that attracted artists, and women artists in particular ("Cobalt: A Mining Town and the Canadian Imagination"); a stunning display of abstract paintings inspired by mining and its environmental effects by the Congolese-Canadian artist Moridja Kitenge Banza; a gorgeous and longoverdue Canadian museum show of new work by the Winnipeg artist and long-time Brooklynite Marcel Dzama ("Ghosts of Canoe Lake: New Work by Marcel Dzama"); Bonnie Devine's site-specific mural (*From Water to Water: A Way Through the Trees*); an installation of work by two Montrealers ("The Subtle Body: Betty Goodwin and David Altmejd") that both hovers and glows; and an engaging thematic rehang of works from the permanent collection that juxtaposes the classic works of the Group of Seven with contemporary, especially Indigenous, art ("Conversations: Masterworks from the Collection").

To return now to Brooker. The initial gallery presents the fascinating, highly eccentric early work and thought of the young Brooker, including the Nietzschean *Ultrahomo the Prophet* and its related "Ultimatism" idea first discussed by the pioneering Brooker scholar Joyce Zemans. Brooker was one of the most important North American representatives of the alignment between visual art, architecture, music and the esoteric (especially "fourth dimensional") thinking that changed the course of modern art, as American art historian Linda D Henderson has amply demonstrated. Parke-Taylor phrases it thus: "Brooker establishes that both music and architecture can be apprehended in the same way, in relation to form and mathematics. In his view, one can almost hear the staccato beat of solid and void evoked by the evenly spaced columns of a Greek temple, or the complex layered melody conjured by the stacked arcade, triforium, and clerestory of a Gothic cathedral." Brooker's interest in the alignment between vision, sound and proprioceptive experience, the full use of our sensorium, is evident throughout the show but most particularly in the gallery that brings together more of the abstract paintings of the mid- to late 1920s than have been seen since then. This includes the artist's 1928 masterpiece *Sounds Assembling*, once in the collection of the Winnipeg School of Art and now the pride of the Winnipeg Art Gallery. *Sounds Assembling* was purchased by student subscription in 1944, coordinated by the school's director LL FitzGerald; Brooker's relationship with FitzGerald is a major theme of the show. Not all of Brooker's abstract paintings are of equivalently high quality, however. Brooker struggled with "abstraction," misunderstanding, or perhaps ignorant of, its current debates, and opting, instead, for the kind of volumetric, perspectival abstract painting that was passé in Europe and even south of the border by that point. His abstract ink drawings were more consistently successful.



Bertram Brooker, *Figures in Landscape*, 1931, oil on canvas, 60.9 × 76.2 centimetres. Private collection. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario.

Perhaps it is such challenges that encouraged Brooker's discovery of FitzGerald's subtle, luminescent, phenomenological renderings of poplar trees along the banks of the Assiniboine River, one that initiated a lifelong friendship. Alongside his friendship with the pioneer of Canadian abstraction, Kathleen Munn, it was the most consequential of Brooker's career. The result of his connection with FitzGerald is that Brooker turned—for a time—from his esoteric-energetic visualizations, indeed illustrations (often of music), to a variety of vision that at first echoed the generalized surfaces of FitzGerald's depictions. In fact— though they influenced each other profoundly—Brooker seems to have adopted the deeply nature-centric manner of thinking that he found in FitzGerald. But he veered off almost immediately to a technically expert High Realism that, as in his *Ski Poles (Ski Boots)*, 1936, can hold its own against the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) of Weimar Germany that it reimagines so deftly.

Brooker's depiction of the female body challenged what could be shown publicly in Canada. Probably the greatest discovery of the show is *Figures in Landscape*, 1931, a canvas inspired by Edwin Holgate, of two female nudes seen from behind, against a body of water and low, dark

hills, under a leaden sky. The work was censored from inclusion in the 1931 Ontario Society of Artists (OSA) show at the Art Gallery of Toronto, in anticipation of the Toronto Board of Education accusing the OSA of “the corruption of children’s morals.” Brooker responded with his essay “Nudes and Prudes,” exposing the story and standing up for freedom of expression. It’s depressing to think that we’re now having to deal with equivalent attacks on school libraries. Long thought to have been lost, and recently located by McMichael associate curator John Geoghegan, *Figures in Landscape* is an important document of, and monument to, artistic freedom in this country. Not only a pioneer of Canadian artistic interdisciplinarity, Brooker was also an early standard bearer for artistic-intellectual freedom. ■

“Bertram Brooker: When We Awake!” was exhibited at McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario, from February 2, 2024, to June 2, 2024.

Oliver AI Botar is a professor of art history and associate director at the School of Art, University of Manitoba. His specializations include Canadian and European modernism.