

Maud Lewis

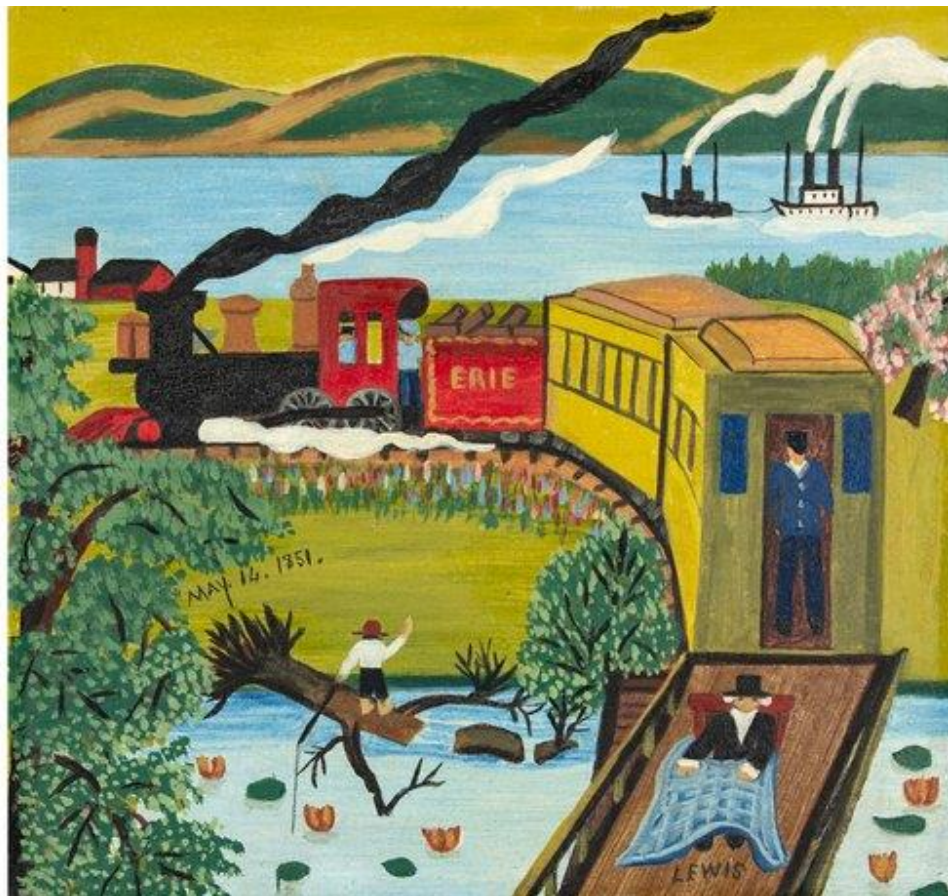
Galleries West

By: Paul Gessell

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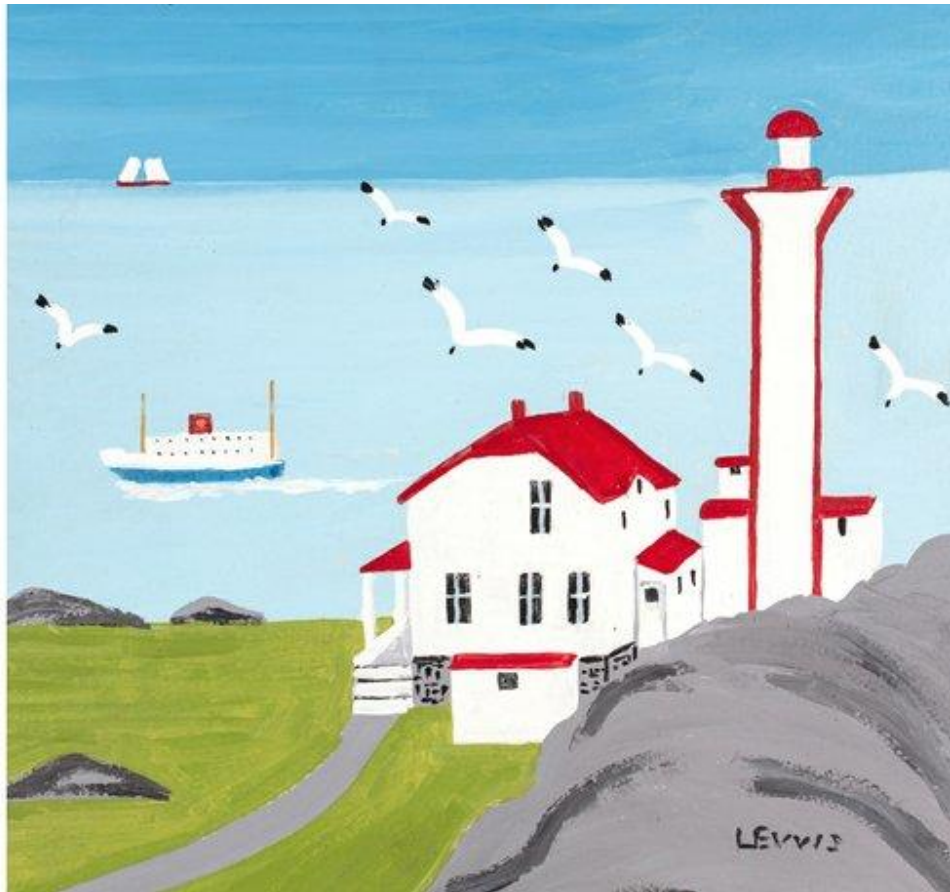
A crowd-pleasing show – complete with gaily painted cats, flowers and oxen – wends its way to Calgary.



The McMichael Canadian Art Collection, a major gallery near Toronto, normally doesn't show paintings of adorable cats, bright flowers and oxen with impossibly long eyelashes. Instead, it prefers exhibitions of the Group of Seven, Tom Thomson and other favourites of the Canadian establishment.

So, why did a 2019 show of naïf paintings by Nova Scotia folk artist Maud Lewis become, in the words of McMichael chief curator Sarah Milroy, “one of the most successful exhibitions” the gallery has ever had?

The popularity of Maud Lewis, which opens June 19 at the Glenbow in Calgary, was demonstrated by large, summer-long crowds at the McMichael and brisk gift shop souvenir sales. And visitors engaged with the paintings, stopping in front of each work and slowly drinking in details of the composition and colours.



Why do people love these paintings so much? An answer comes from Shannon Parker, a curator at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia who manages the Halifax institution’s collection of some 40 Lewis paintings, assorted artifacts and even the artist’s tiny, gaily painted house, relocated right into the gallery.

“So many people try to explain what draws them to her artwork,” says Parker. “And they just say: ‘She makes me smile.’”

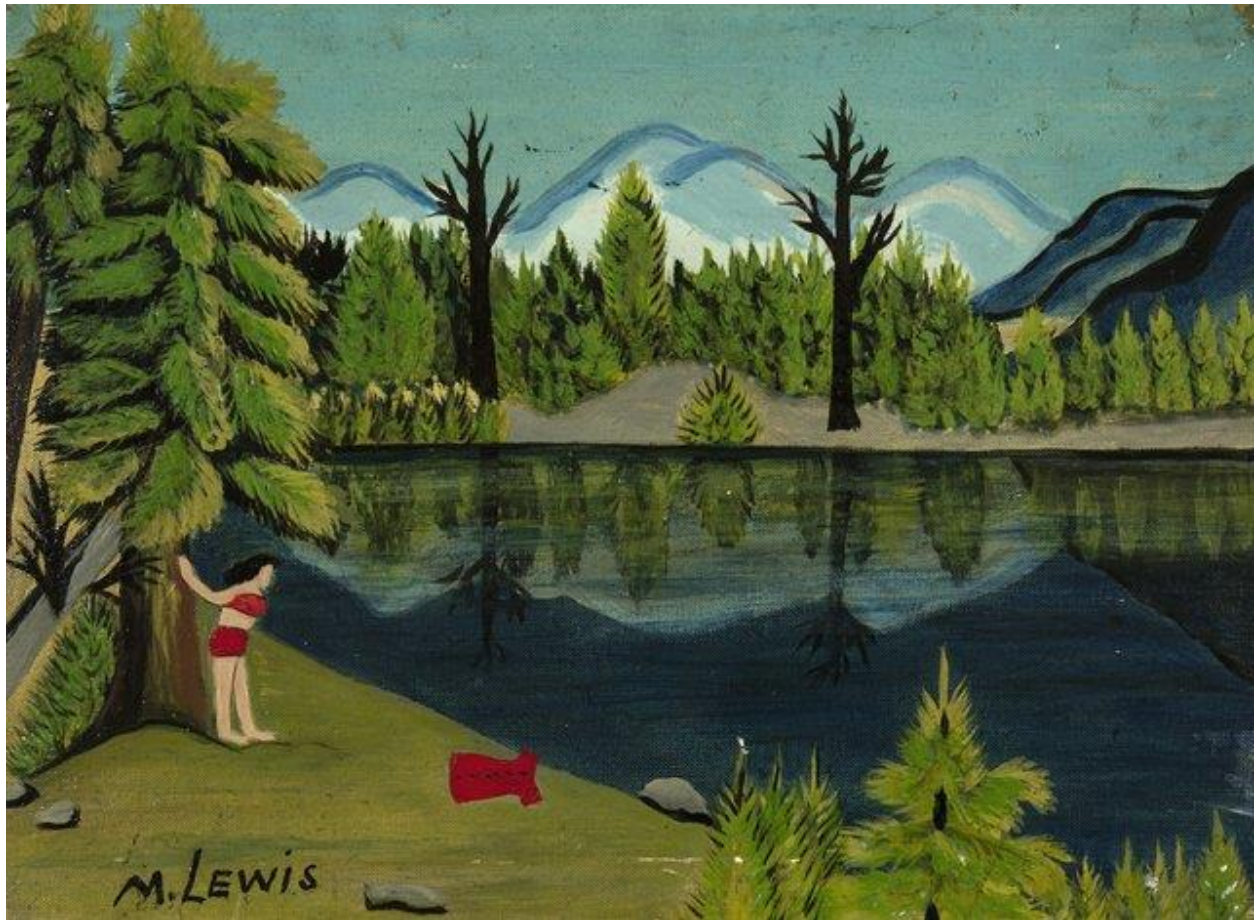


After a year of COVID-19, including the third wave that hit Alberta so ferociously this spring, Calgarians undoubtedly will welcome a chance to smile when the Glenbow reopens June 19. (Admission will be free until June 26 to welcome people back.)

The show, which includes 140 paintings gussied up in eye-catching primary colours with cheerful scenery featuring winter sleigh rides and bucolic pastures, continues until Aug. 29.

Both Milroy and Parker say part of the allure is the backstory – many people feel a desire to make a connection to Lewis, whose sad, hard life has been publicized in books and film.

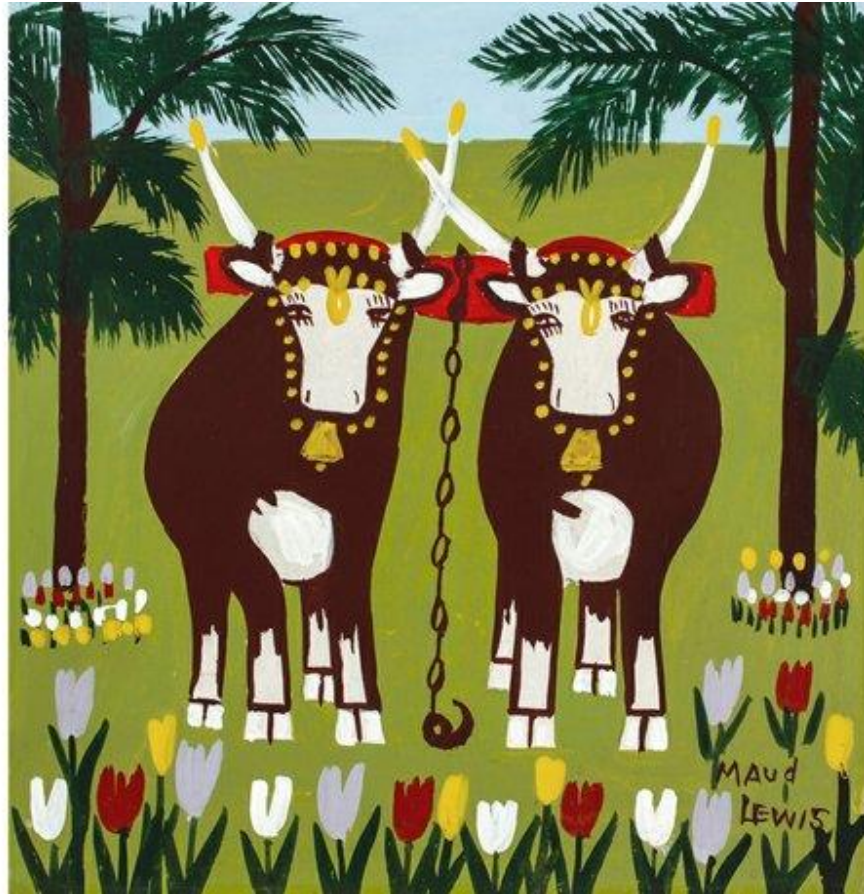
This phenomenon is not limited to Lewis. Think of Dutch artist Vincent Van Gogh. We are drawn to his work even more upon learning of his extreme poverty and mental illness.



Lewis was born in 1903 in Yarmouth, N.S. As a child, she developed juvenile arthritis, which left her body and hands deformed. In 1938, she married Everett Lewis, a fish peddler of ill repute in Marshalltown, N.S., and moved into his 12-foot by 12-foot house. The 2017 feature film *Maudie* presents a romanticized version of a difficult marriage.

From that house, Lewis created paintings and sold them to passersby for a few dollars each. Everett seized much of the money and buried it in the backyard. Life was hard for Lewis. Her nostalgic paintings surely reflect her desire to escape the bleak present for happier, idealized days.

News stories about Lewis during the 1960s made her famous, but she was not rich when she died in 1970. These days, her paintings sell for as much as \$45,000.



Milroy, a former editor of Canadian Art magazine and the curator of the travelling exhibition, calls the paintings a “guilty pleasure.” The pleasure comes from “the riot of her colour and the eccentricity of her creations.” The guilt, because people like Lewis who produce made-to-order art are generally perceived by the art world, in Milroy’s words, as “inauthentic” artists.

One can only wonder what Lewis would think about her current fame and prices, or how her art, whether authentic or not, can draw crowds and ring up gift shop sales of colouring books, pandemic face masks and other paraphernalia decorated with child-like images of cats, flowers and oxen with impossibly long eyelashes. ■

Maud Lewis at the Glenbow in Calgary from June 19 to Aug. 29, 2021.