

McMichael On The Map

By: Paul Gessell

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If you visited public galleries in Calgary, Saskatoon, Windsor, Ottawa, Montreal or Charlottetown this summer, you likely saw exhibitions from the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ont. And that's on top of the numerous shows organized by the McMichael, either solely or in partnership with other institutions, that book-ended the important summer season at venues across the country.

The solo exhibitions ranged from those by Indigenous artists Dempsey Bob and Meryl McMaster to Nova Scotia folk artist Maud Lewis, Vancouver artist Gathie Falk and Toronto's Rajni Perera, who was born in Sri Lanka. The major group shows included the Sobey family's art collection and *Uninvited*, a well-received look at Canadian women artists between the two world wars.

So, just how did the McMichael, located in a sleepy village near Toronto and long known for its Group of Seven collection, become such a dominant force in Canadian art world? Will that strength remain as executive director Ian DeJardin retires and chief curator Sarah Milroy steps into the gallery's top

leadership role on Nov. 1? And now that the McMichael, an Ontario government agency, has seemingly conquered Canada, how will it fare as it moves onto the international circuit?

The story begins six years ago when Dejardin, a Scotsman who knows more about Tom Thomson and Emily Carr than the average Canadian curator, arrived in this “absurdly big” country to become the McMichael’s executive director. Dejardin, now in his 60s and about to retire, formerly helmed the prestigious Dulwich Picture Gallery in London, best known for its collection of European old masters.

Chantelle Culshaw, Dulwich’s deputy director, describes Dejardin’s management style as “inspiring” and says he is remembered there for “leading a fantastic exhibition program, introducing British audiences to artists who are well known in their own countries, but not as well known here.”

Culshaw’s postscript? Desjardin is also memorable for his knitting. Yes, he loves to knit, especially socks, particularly when engaged in his other addiction, watching Korean TV shows on Netflix.

During Dejardin’s last years at the Dulwich, the institution became the go-to place for exhibitions of Canadian historical art – including the 2011 show, *Painting Canada: Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven*, as well as exhibitions about Emily Carr and David Milne. Dejardin has had a thing for Canadian art, especially the Group of Seven, since discovering them in the 1980s as a junior curator. So, who better to bring a breath of fresh air into what he calls “the world’s biggest log cabin,” one mandated to collect and exhibit only Canadian art?

Milroy helped organize some of those Canadian shows at the Dulwich. Then, in 2018, she joined Dejardin at the McMichael, where he had become director the year before. She will keep her title as chief curator when she assumes the executive director’s post.

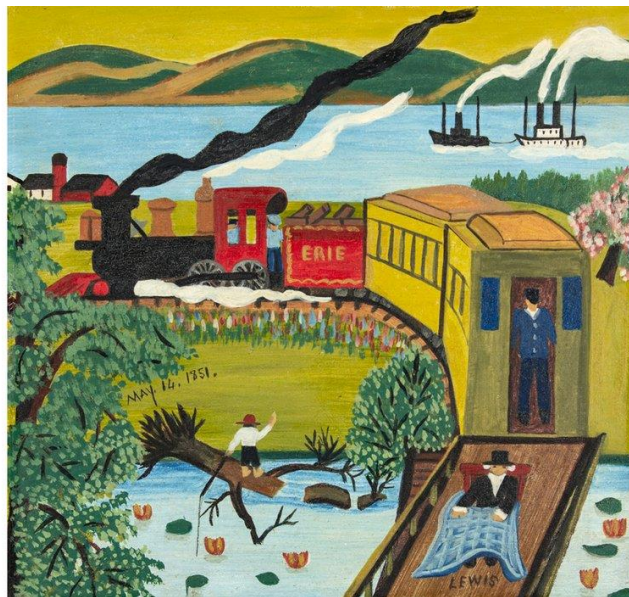
“Sarah has gone on to be a triumphantly good chief curator,” says Dejardin. “My great Canadian adventure has coincided with Sarah’s late-career adventure in museum professionalism.”

Milroy has been steeped in art since childhood. Her late mother, Elizabeth Nichol, was the founder of Vancouver’s Equinox Gallery. Nichol placed Andy Warhol on the walls of the family home and invited the likes of Gathie Falk and Bill Reid to dinner.



Before the McMichael, Milroy was best-known as an arts journalist, serving as editor and publisher of Canadian Art magazine from 1991 to 1996 and as chief art critic for the Globe and Mail from 2001 to 2010. More accustomed to the fast-paced daily newspaper environment than a meandering scholarly timeline, Milroy and her team have been curating up to eight major exhibitions annually and sending them on the road. Her output astonishes curators at other galleries.

“What I have observed is that Sarah Milroy is everywhere, that she is really having a moment in her career and so, from one curator to another looking on, I think it’s great for her and wonderful that they (the McMichael) seemingly made a decision internally that this is the direction that they are going to go,” says Lindsey Sharman, a curator at the Art Gallery of Alberta. The Edmonton gallery hosted the McMichael’s Maud Lewis exhibition in 2022 and the Sobey show earlier this year. It will present the McMichael’s Tom Thomson exhibition next spring.



Sharman is correct that the McMichael had a deliberate strategy to create several large travelling exhibitions each year, along with several smaller in-house ones. Before Dejardin, the McMichael organized only one or two major shows annually.

“They’ve got a really good, small, but mighty team,” say Melanie Kjorlien, vice-president of access, collections and exhibits at Calgary’s Glenbow Museum. “It’s a lot of work they’re doing and they’re doing a great job.” The McMichael’s exhibition, Gathie Falk: Revelations, is at the Glenbow until Oct. 15. *Uninvited* was shown there last year.

The lack of a budget for an ambitious touring program did not deter Dejardin when he arrived at the McMichael in 2017. In an interview, he explained that he financed the exhibitions through increased fundraising, including renting rooms for wedding receptions. “We are raising two or three or four times what we raised before,” he says, noting that donations have jumped from \$500,000 annually to \$2.5 million over five years. And the fees other galleries pay to show a touring exhibition generate more income that helps bankroll future shows.

“It’s a robust revenue stream for the museum,” Milroy acknowledged in a separate interview, although she declined to identify how much other galleries are adding to the McMichael’s bottom line.

The McMichael’s total budget for the fiscal year 2021-22, the most recent with available figures, was \$10.7 million; expenses were almost \$11.5 million, and revenue exceeded both the budget and expenses at more than \$12.1 million. The Ontario government contributed 47 per cent of that year’s funding. There are about 40 employees.

Before Dejardin and Milroy arrived at the McMichael, most exhibitions were seen only by visitors who made the trek to Kleinburg. But now, its travelling exhibitions are seen by many more people across the country. For instance, attendance during the five-and-a-half-month run of *Uninvited* at the National Gallery this year topped 100,000. Visitors to the Calgary and Vancouver iterations pushed total attendance even higher.

Now, having conquered Canada, the McMichael is starting to take on the world. *Early Days*, an exhibition of Indigenous art from the McMichael collection, opened Sept. 1 at the sprawling Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona. The American tour also includes the Albuquerque Museum in New Mexico and the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia. Then the show heads back to Canada for a return engagement at the McMichael. It was first shown there early in the pandemic and attendance was low. The show will be expanded for its rerun.

Another big Indigenous exhibition featuring drawings from Kinngait, formerly known as Cape Dorset, is on the horizon. The McMichael has custody of 90,000 drawings by artists from this Baffin Island community. Prints were made from some of these drawings. But non-Indigenous curators tended to select which drawings would be immortalized as prints. Milroy is eager to showcase the raw drawings, the ones not tweaked to appeal to customers at southern galleries.

Dejardin says the McMichael's best touring prospects internationally rest with Indigenous and other art from diverse cultural communities. He recently visited galleries in Britain, seeking venues willing to host his swansong Tom Thomson exhibition, which closes Jan. 14 at the McMichael. He found no takers for "dead white guys."

"The moment was just wrong," he says.

That plays well to Milroy's strengths. She has long been a fierce advocate of Indigenous art. She calls Haida artist James Hart the greatest influence in her career: "He really opened a window for me on Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding the world." Milroy's first purchase for the McMichael was the sculpture *Wave Sound* by Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore.



The McMichael's ambitious growth came as the National Gallery, which once had a vibrant touring operation, became more preoccupied with its inner workings than in staging exhibitions in Ottawa, or elsewhere.

"I haven't seen the National Gallery so unproductive in years, and their inactivity has served as an excellent foil for the McMichael," says Diana Nemiroff, a former curator of contemporary and modern art at the National Gallery. "The McMichael seems to have its finger on the pulse of Canadian art issues these days and has been exceptionally productive."

Milroy says Sasha Suda, a previous National Gallery director, encouraged the McMichael to borrow works. Both Uninvited and the Tom Thomson show contain many loans from the Ottawa institution. In Calgary, Kjorlien worked closely with both Ontario institutions as she prepared to install Uninvited at the Glenbow: “I just can’t say enough about both of those teams and how great they are.”

Milroy will continue to curate exhibitions after she assumes the top job at the McMichael. But she will also be preoccupied with stick-handling improvements to the facility itself. The main museum structure, which measures 85,000 square feet, is built of logs. It is located on a 100-acre property that also contains the graves of six members of the Group of Seven. There are 6,500 works in the collection, plus 90,000 drawings held on behalf of Inuit artists.

The structure has gone through several transformations since it was erected in 1953, but the last major changes were made in 1983. Milroy cites the lack of a loading dock, a proper space for framing art and a need to improve facilities for revenue-generating weddings and conferences. Other issues include outdated lighting, low ceilings and “architectural chokepoints” that create challenges when moving large works.

“We have really severe challenges with our building,” she says.

Does this mean building an addition? Milroy won’t say.



“We are looking at what we need to serve the Canadian public better and we’ve turned the museum into the kind of laboratory where we’re cooking up all this content and gathering all these voices across the country and sending them out.”

The McMichael’s 2024 business plan raises the building issue: “The McMichael has developed strategic plans to address those limitations of the current gallery that prevent us reaching our full potential. These involve a major capital investment in the building, and much of fiscal 2024 will be dedicated to persuading our provincial, federal, municipal and philanthropic stakeholders of the urgency of making these plans happen....”

Solo shows in the works for next year include Marcel Dzama, a Winnipeg artist now based in New York, and pioneering abstract artist Bertram Brooker, who migrated to Toronto from Manitoba. Other galleries are already lining up to book those shows.

Touring exhibitions, depending on their price, can save hosting organizations staff time and thus money, no small consideration as revenues at many galleries remain tight due to the pandemic and the upward pressure inflation is exerting on expenses. But those shows also give curators opportunities to present work they might not be able to access on their own. Is the McMichael sending art to galleries that otherwise would just not be seen in those communities? “Yes, without question,” says the Glenbow’s Kjorlien. Clearly, Canadians who appreciate art have a big stake in the McMichael’s future.