

McMichael Talks: How A Curator Brings an Exhibition to Life

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How does one paint the likeness of glass? How does one interpret with oils and canvas the invisibility of cling wrap? How on earth can it be possible to paint the very essence of *light*? More than five years after visiting the Mary Pratt exhibit at the [McMichael Canadian Art Collection](#) in Kleinburg, I am still asking myself those questions. You see, I attended the exhibition to write about it for York Durham Headwaters (shameless plug: read the article [here](#)). I had arrived, prepared to show polite and genuine interest for the sake of my post, and left with an enthusiasm for Mary Pratt's unique eye and skillful artistry that I hold to this day. Every time I see an image of the painting *Jelly Shelf*, I am rendered as awestruck as the first time I laid eyes on it.



It is a sort of unspoken given that art exhibitions are meant to encourage introspection. They are meant to challenge and provoke the viewer's sense of aesthetic, and they are meant to enlighten the mind with new concepts and ideas. After all, isn't that why artists create? Exhibitions draw the viewer into a world where the art can speak for itself, and where art lovers can appreciate works in an environment that amplifies them. But I would be willing to bet that it doesn't often occur to those culture-seeking viewers to remember, in those introspective moments, that there was a second creative genius at work, in addition to the artist. This, my friends, is the genius of the curator.



The idea for an exhibition begins with the gallery's curators. They are the ones who pull from their own stores of knowledge, experience and connections to formulate a thesis or concept. And they do all this with the selfless end goal of making it seem as though they were never there in the first place—to allow the exhibition to be entirely about the art and the artist. They achieve this end result by being active participants in the art world. When they go to see other exhibitions in other galleries, when they engage with artists, and when they are in the vaults of the gallery's collections, this is where the sparks of imagination are happening.

It takes a special kind of dedication to stay as informed and up-to-date as a curator needs to be. "Most curators do some travel to see what is happening in the art world beyond their own institution," explains Jennifer Withrow, head of exhibitions at McMichael. "They have relationships with the artists with which they work, and are probably engaged in the wider arts community, beyond the visual arts—like literature, music, dance and craft. Those can all be sources for theses and exhibitions."



As head of exhibitions, Jennifer’s job is to work with the curators and oversee their efforts. Having been a curator herself, she knows how gratifying it is when visitors respond positively to what the gallery has put on. “One of the things that is really rewarding is when we have school visits come through,” she says. “School visits are a robust part of our program. For many of the children—from all ages right through to grade 12—it’s a first visit to an art museum. They hang onto those memories.”

In fact, Jennifer and her colleagues will often have adults approach them to tell them that the first time they came to McMichael was in grade school. “These are meaningful moments that people carry with them through their lives,” she says. “It’s hugely affirming to what we do that these exhibitions can have that effect on people.”



McMichael is the only art museum in Canada that is dedicated solely to Canadian art. There are three pillars of McMichael's permanent collection, the core pillar being its collection of Group of Seven works. "We consider ourselves the spiritual home of the Group of Seven," says Jennifer. "That was the founding collection of the gallery, and six of the seven members are buried on our site." The second pillar of the gallery's activities is indigenous art of Canada, and the third is Canadian contemporary art. McMichael has just celebrated its 50th anniversary. The gallery is located in Kleinburg, in a converted home. "There is this an atmosphere of respite from the city," Jennifer says. "It's cozy here. The architecture uses a lot of natural material like wood and stone. We are not intimidating the way some big-name studios and buildings in large cities might be."

If you haven't been to the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, we at York Durham Headwaters encourage you to make the trip to Kleinburg. An exhibition is something that needs to be experienced first-hand. To truly appreciate an artist's vision and talent, or to understand the nature of a collection, you need to be standing before the work and taking it in with your own eyes. While you do, we also encourage you to remember that there was a curator behind the exhibition. He or she has laboured long and hard to give you a transformative experience, and has quietly stepped away to allow you to enjoy your newfound connection with the art.



McMichael Canadian Art Collection – 10365 Islington Ave., Kleinburg

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