

# Exhibition Review



## **Isabel McLaughlin (1903–2002): Painter, Patron, Philanthropist.**

AGNES ETHERINGTON ART CENTRE. Mounted at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Samuel J. Zacks Gallery, 9 July to 30 September 2007.

Upon first entering *Isabel McLaughlin (1903–2002): Painter, Patron, Philanthropist* at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre<sup>1</sup> in Kingston, Ontario, it is apparent that this is not a typical art exhibition. While McLaughlin's life as a painter is given primacy in the title of the exhibit, her artistic career is represented by only one painting, in addition to a number of sketchbooks and small paintings she made as a young girl. Given that the exhibition was curated by Heather Home, the Public Service Archivist for the Queen's University Archives, using the extraordinary materials found in the Isabel McLaughlin fonds, the focus on archival materials should not be surprising. While the distinctly archival curatorial stance taken by Home might very well be shocking to the unsuspecting art lovers who wandered into the Samuel J. Zacks Gallery, the Art Centre should be commended for embracing an alternative mode of display in presenting this remarkable archival collection in a manner that highlights the richness of the fonds while drawing the viewer's attention to key elements of archival work.

Isabel McLaughlin was an exceptionally important early modernist Canadian painter. She studied in Paris at the Sorbonne, the Scandinavian Academy, and at the Ontario College of Art under Arthur Lismer, Yvonne McKague Housser, and others.<sup>2</sup> As an artist, McLaughlin was constantly refining her style and was perennially interested in the latest developments in

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aec.ca/exhibitions/2007/mclaughlin.html> (accessed 13 February 2008).

<sup>2</sup> A short *curriculum vitae* for McLaughlin, which provides a detailed list of her studies and lists select solo and small group exhibitions, can be found in Alice Boutillier, *4 Women Who Painted in the 1930s and 1940s: Rody Kenny Courtice, Bobs Cogill Haworth, Yvonne McKague Housser; Isabel McLaughlin* (Ottawa, 1998), p. 56.

the art world. She is particularly noted for adapting German Expressionism into a Canadian context.<sup>3</sup> As a result of her open-minded approach, her contacts and friends in the Canadian art community, which span several generations, are wide-ranging, encompassing the avant-garde of the Canadian scene. McLaughlin's paintings were generally well-received by her contemporaries, praised by critics as well as her peers, but her work was not universally embraced. Her painting *Tree*, for example, which is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, was lampooned in the *Toronto Telegram* following its exhibition in a 1936 Canadian Group of Painters show.<sup>4</sup> While McLaughlin was greatly admired, particularly by other Canadian women painters coming of age during the 1930s and 1940s,<sup>5</sup> she is not as well-known today as some of her peers.<sup>6</sup> Beyond her artistic output, McLaughlin's influence is most keenly felt in the support she provided throughout her life to individual artists, and to groups and societies devoted to the arts in Canada. It is the records she created and received in fostering personal and professional networks that are the focus of the exhibition at the Agnes Etherington Arts Centre.

When entering the gallery, the viewer is confronted, not with a painting by McLaughlin, but with an archival box and a finding aid. From the first instance, the viewer is made aware that what is on display is but a fragment of a much larger archival collection.<sup>7</sup> The materials are displayed in groups, which reflect some of the numerous roles McLaughlin took on in her life: artist, correspondent, member of the artistic community, and patron of the arts. Concise but informative text panels, which provide background information about McLaughlin and the cultural milieu in which she lived and worked accompany each section of the display. Additionally, the texts discuss archival issues, such as the fragmentary and incomplete nature of archives. The text panels introduce the problem of the "one-sided conversations" in archival records and this is highlighted in the records, which are displayed in exhibition, virtually all of which were received by her from others. McLaughlin did

3 Joan Murray, *Isabel McLaughlin: Recollections* (Oshawa, 1983), p. 11. The essay published in this exhibition catalogue was reprinted in an edited form in Joan Murray, "Isabel McLaughlin," *Resources for Feminist Research/Documentation sur la recherche féministe*, vol. 13, no. 4 (December/January 1984/1985), pp. 17-20.

4 Murray, *Isabel McLaughlin*, pp. 18-19.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

6 Heather Home and Clelia Scala, "A Christmas Card to Isabel McLaughlin," *Queen's Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 4 (Winter 2006), p. 561. While McLaughlin is briefly discussed in Dennis Reid's *A Concise History of Canadian Painting*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, 1988), p. 182, she is not mentioned in J. Russell Harper's, *Painting in Canada: A History*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, 1977).

7 Descriptions of the Isabel McLaughlin fonds, at the fonds and series level, can be found online at the Queen's University Archives website at <http://archives.queensu.ca/dbtw-wpd/fondsdb/query-fonds.html> (accessed 13 February 2008).

not keep copies of her correspondence, so while the viewer is given a great deal of insight into the activities, thoughts, and feelings of her correspondents, they can grasp very little of who McLaughlin herself was. What can easily be inferred from the documents on display is that she was a good friend, that she was passionate about art, and that she was selfless in her support of the people and things she loved. The viewer, however, is left wondering what McLaughlin thought, how she viewed her activities, and what she was trying to accomplish in undertaking them.

Largely missing are records that reflect her personal life. The final section of the exhibition notes the distinct documentary gaps in the archival record, introducing the viewer to the problems of silences in archives.<sup>8</sup> At the rear of the gallery, a metal wastepaper basket filled with torn paper is placed on the floor. The text panel above explains that a similar trash can was found in McLaughlin's home when the archivists went to acquire the fonds after the artist's death in 2002. As she requested, records were destroyed by McLaughlin's executors immediately following her death, and the archivists were not provided with any information about the records that were shredded. We can only assume that they were of the utmost personal and private significance to McLaughlin. This simple but extremely evocative display deftly illustrates the impact on future understanding when the archival record is compromised by the loss and destruction – willful or accidental – of documents. No fonds is ever going to be complete, but by ensuring that certain records were destroyed, McLaughlin was able to exert control over the future understanding of her life and work. By shaping her archive, McLaughlin limited and directed our knowledge of her. In frankly discussing the destruction of the records without condemning McLaughlin for her decision, the exhibition was able to show how fragile, ephemeral, and incomplete the archival record is.

One of the most pressing concerns in the display of archival materials in a gallery setting is that the records will lose meaning as they are removed from their context and displayed as discrete items. This decontextualization, which is antithetical to the archival endeavour, is intrinsic to museological displays, as art and artifacts are divorced from their context of creation and use, and are placed in a new context. They are no longer considered as an organic part of a larger fonds, but rather evaluated in relation to the other objects on display in the gallery space.<sup>9</sup> Curatorial practices have been invoked to aid the viewer's

8 See Rodney G.S. Carter, "Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence," *Archivaria* 61 (Spring 2006), pp. 215-33.

9 Marie Louise Stig Sørensen and Mary Leighton, "Breathing Life into the Archives: Reflections upon Decontextualization and the Curatorial History of V.G. Childe and the Material from Tószeg," *European Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 7, no. 1 (April 2004), pp. 43-45.

understanding, such as the provision of text panels and essays in catalogues to exhibitions,<sup>10</sup> but when removed from the original context, meaning is inevitably lost. This loss of meaning is always a danger when displaying archival items in isolation, removed from the surrounding documents in their series, which provide a broader understanding of the record. Home not only accepts this inevitable decontextualization that arises from the display of archival documents, but embraces it, providing no identifying information for the vast majority of individual items on display. The artist's works on display are not privileged, as records are placed on top of one another, scattered throughout the cases, and groups of photographs and cards were placed together in large numbers and framed together. In particular, by framing the Christmas cards together – every one of which is a mini-masterpiece<sup>11</sup> – without identifiers, there is an effort to construct an alternative method of viewing to that which is traditionally found in art galleries. The cards are treated entirely aesthetically, to be judged for their own particular merits and in relation to those surrounding them. The viewer is confronted with them not as the work of the dozens of artist friends of McLaughlin but as a unified reflection of McLaughlin herself as the focus is moved away from the sender and placed on the receiver. Of the hundreds of items exhibited, including Christmas cards, letters, exhibition catalogues, and photographs, very few clues are provided to what they are, who their creators were, and why they were created. Instead, the Archives has provided photocopies of every document on display, along with the finding aid to the fonds, forcing the viewer to investigate the broader context and meaning of the items for themselves.

With this approach, the viewer is provided with the opportunity to be introduced to archival research outside of the sometimes-intimidating confines of an archive. By supplying reproductions, the viewer is allowed to discover for themselves further meaning in the records. The original letters are displayed with only one side visible or, particularly in the case of numerous letters to McLaughlin from A.Y. Jackson, arranged in a large pile so a sense of the volume of the correspondence is conveyed without displaying each letter on its own. With the reproductions, the viewer is able to handle the copies as they would the originals in the archives, and if they were so inclined, could read the full documents or even the complete series. Touching art objects is a serious taboo in gallery spaces and the viewer is separated from the artifacts by their placement in frames on the wall and in vitrines. By

10 Elizabeth A. Sackler, "The Ethics of Collecting," *International Journal of Cultural Property*, vol. 7, no. 1 (January 1998), p. 137; Richard Handler, "On the Valuing of Museum Objects," *Museum Anthropology*, vol. 16, no. 1 (February 1992), pp. 21-28.

11 See Home and Scala for a small sampling of the Christmas cards in the fonds, each of which was handmade by some of Canada's most important artists.

providing the reference copies, the viewer is invited to experience the intimate archival act of holding the correspondence in their hands and is able to read along with McLaughlin.

The exhibition *Isabel McLaughlin (1903–2002): Painter, Patron, Philanthropist* provides tantalizing glimpses of extraordinary lives. It presents a veritable who's-who of the Canadian art scene in the twentieth century, illustrating their interaction and their interconnectivity. Personal glimpses of well-known artistic and literary figures – including touching and very personal correspondence from eminent Canadians such as Timothy Findley, who was a life-long friend of McLaughlin – are on display, providing insight into their thoughts on artistic practice and theory as well as a multitude of private matters in which McLaughlin was intimately involved. The exhibition is successful from an art-history perspective, as it introduces McLaughlin to a wider public and demonstrates, using documentary evidence, the vital role she played in the formation of the Canadian art scene in the twentieth century. From an archival point of view, it succeeds on several fronts, as it stakes a claim for archival records in the gallery setting. Documents are shown, not as curiosities or illustrations, but as significant cultural objects in their own right. Additionally, it serves as a wonderful introduction to a particular resource of Queen's University Archives that has largely been untapped, as well as to introduce gallery visitors to archival work. This exhibition offers a stunning example of how archives can be shown in a gallery without fully conforming to the current paradigms of display in order to celebrate the life and work of the records creator while, at the same time, leaving a great deal for the viewers to discover for themselves.

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