

# The People's Art Collector

For over 25 years, the Alberta Foundation for the Arts has been collecting, preserving and exhibiting the works of Alberta artists

BY MARY-BETH LAVIOLETTE



ABOVE: **Doug Haynes**  
*Breda*, 1987, 167.0 x 227.3 cm,  
acrylic on canvas.

RIGHT: **A.C. Leighton**  
*Prairie Town, Airdrie*, 1952,  
60.7 x 76.2 cm, oil on canvas.

Whether we know it or not, we Albertans are art collectors. We've been acquiring art for more than 25 years and we now have over 6,400 works—paintings, sculpture, drawings, ceramics, fibre art, original prints, photographs—valued at more than \$9-million. This is the legacy of the collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts (AFA).

The collection is owned by the AFA and located in Beaver House Edmonton. But, like an archives or a library, the lottery-funded collection is a public resource belonging to all Albertans.

The AFA Collection was begun in 1972 by the newly elected government of Peter Lougheed. The idea was to encourage Alberta artists by buying their work and at the same time to “preserve for the benefit of Alberta an important part of our culture.” Horst A. Schmid, Lougheed's first Minister of Culture, convinced Chip Collins, then deputy provincial treasurer, that it would not be outrageous to devote \$50,000 annually to an arms-length agency to buy art.

How far-sighted they seem now.



By 1973, with a system in place to “collect, preserve and exhibit” art, the AFA was in a position to acquire art. In that year, Dr. Naomi Jackson Groves and an anonymous donor paid a visit to Peter Lougheed's office to donate 18 drawings as a gift to the people of Alberta. They were the work of Dr. Groves's uncle—the Group of Seven's A.Y. Jackson. During his visits to his brother Ernest, who lived in Lethbridge, A.Y. travelled and hiked the distinctive countryside with members of the Lethbridge Sketch Club, participants of the Banff School of Fine Arts, and Henry G. Glyde, who had established the Fine Arts Department at the University of Alberta in 1947.

“With the mountains as a background, the foothills

could afford the artist with endless material,” Jackson once said. A favourite theme of Jackson's was the then-omnipresent grain elevator. He wrote: “Like France's cathedrals, the prairies have their grain elevators.” The artist's perspective certainly enables us to see ourselves in a new way.

The collection was given another significant boost in 1973 when Janet Mitchell and James and Marion Nicoll donated 200 art works in support of the government's initiative. The Nicolls continued to support the collection and in 1981 donated 421 artworks by both themselves and others. To this day, the AFA continues to receive donations.



ABOVE: **Katie Ohe**  
*John Snow*, 1993, 63.0 x 37.0 x 22.0 cm,  
 clay.

RIGHT: **Marion Nicoll**  
*Foothills*, 1969, 41.9 x 34.9 cm, clay print.

OPPOSITE, TOP: **Euphemia McNaught**  
*Entrance to Monkman Pass*, 1985,  
 55.8 x 75.0 cm, oil on canvas.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: **Darren Petersen**  
*Lapis Trumpet Bowl*, 1994, 31.0 x 35.0 x  
 28.2 cm, handblown glass.

The seventies were quite literally the high-flying “international” days. In the fall of 1975, 75 pieces from the 600-work collection went on display at Canada House in London, in Brussels and in Paris. On its return, the exhibit was seen at New York’s Rockefeller Centre, appeared in Montreal during the Olympics and had special showings in Calgary, Edmonton and Grande Prairie. The province’s art was employed to make an impact both on the home front and in places where Alberta was unknown. International exposure for Alberta art was intended to instill in Albertans more confidence in buying the works of their own artists and at the same time to present to the world a more modern, sophisticated image of the province.

For a Canadian province, the 1975-76 tour was an original and bold move. “While the premier spent a quiet first day in London with only private talks on energy, Mrs. Lougheed introduced 500 people to the works of 75 Alberta artists,” reported the *Edmonton Journal*. “The premier’s wife did not shirk on her task either, offering the opening night crowd a 15-minute history of Alberta art (saying that while) the older works in the collection reflect the harsh conditions of taming prairie nature, the recent paintings show ‘we have developed a new self-confidence... a spirit of vitality.’”

Veteran Edmonton artist Violet Owen attended the swishy opening in London. She remembers the event, overseen by Paul Martin Sr., High Commissioner for Canada, as “highly successful, and nobody there believed it would be, because they thought we were ‘provincials.’”

In a sense, the exhibition and the subsequent reaction to it marked a coming of age for the province. The BBC’s Mervyn Levy said, “...what I am left with finally is a picture of Alberta art as something immensely virile, quick-witted and striving hard to establish itself a personal as opposed to an international identity.” *Arts Review*’s Max Wykes-Joyce commented, “if the Alberta artists have read the art magazines and visited the inter-

national exhibitions, as some of them must have, they nevertheless have preserved a proper independence.” *Le Figaro*’s Pierre Mazars said, “What is it that distinguishes the best among them from the painters of other countries? Frankness and vigour.” And *Le Libre Belgique*’s Jean Pigeon observed, “Women seem more in evidence than would ordinarily be so.” The late W.B. McMullen, then chairman of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, said, “The most apparent comment about our art in Alberta is that it has a place in the mainstream of world art.”



Collection artwork was on display during the 1978 Commonwealth Games in Edmonton. In his exhibition greeting, Horst Schmid proclaimed, “The people of Alberta present to you with just pride the works of our artists.” Significantly, the Games exhibition of so long ago featured many artists still recognized and honoured today. Although the collection was in its fledgling stage, there was already a sense of who in the province was going to “matter” in the risky and by no means fair game of history. This at a time when scholarly research about Alberta’s artistic Who’s Who was largely absent, and even for those studying Canadian art, “Alberta was a no-name,” as Gail Lint of the AFA collection team recalls.

Included in that 1978 showcase, which presented the talents of 52 Albertans in a variety of media, were such notables as Marion Nicoll, the province’s first serious abstract artist; Walter J. Phillips, a printmaker and watercolourist; Douglas Motter, the avant-garde fibre artist; Illingworth Kerr, a landscape artist;

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Katie Ohe, a sculptor in metal and clay; John Chalke, the nationally honoured ceramic artist; Alex Janvier, Canada’s great aboriginal modernist; and Janet Mitchell, the imaginative painter.

In 1986, a blockbuster effort curated by Jetske Sybesma—*Spaces and Places: Eight Decades of Landscape Painting in Alberta*—was mounted to highlight how recognized artists have responded to the diverse landscape of the province, including its urban areas. Catalogues were produced, so a public record remains. The 61-work exhibit travelled to centres in Alberta, six out-of-province cities across Canada, and Hartford, Connecticut. Later it went to Japan and China. The exhibition featured the work of well-known historical figures like H. G. Glyde (with “The Exodus”) and Euphemia McNaught, and more recent work such as that of Dulcie Foo Fat and Sylvain Voyer.

Space and Places is the only survey of historic and contemporary landscape art to be organized in the province. Along with an earlier trio of exhibitions documenting Alberta’s remarkable history of ceramic art, it shows how the collection has made a noticeable difference to what is known about Alberta’s art heritage.

In 1997, to celebrate the collection’s 25th anniversary, five major exhibitions—three of which featured 100





ABOVE: **Maxwell Bates**  
*Interior with Boy*, 1963, 91.0 x 60.6 cm,  
oil, canvas collage on masonite.

RIGHT: **A.Y. Jackson**  
*Ranchland, Alberta*, 1940,  
21.4 x 30.0 cm, pencil on paper.

OPPOSITE, TOP: **Janet Mitchell**  
*Proportional Representation*, 1973,  
55.9 x 76.2 cm, watercolour on paper.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: **Jane Kidd**  
*Shrine/Surrender*, 1992,  
143.5 x 122.5 cm, woven tapestry.

works—each with a different curator, were presented at the Prairie Art Gallery, the Medicine Hat Museum, the Triangle Gallery in Calgary, the Crowsnest Pass Allied Art Gallery and the Edmonton Art Gallery. Four other shows travelled the province. Nearly 150,000 viewers in 130 communities across Alberta saw one or more shows drawn from the collection.

To make its holdings even more accessible in our cyber-age, the Foundation produced a CD-ROM to be donated to schools, libraries, public galleries and visual arts organizations throughout the province. Showcasing more than 280 artworks and organized around themes such as “Redefining the Alberta Landscape (1940-1965)”, “From Documentary to Art—The Growth of Photography”, “Fibre, Glass & Clay—The Foundation of a Strong Craft Movement”, the CD conveys a little-known story unavailable, for instance, in book form.

Today, the AFA Collection holds the work of more than 1,600 Albertans, most of whom are active, practising and developing. Funded by the lotteries, the AFA’s annual acquisition budget is around \$250,000, with which it purchases about 250 works a year. Through the efforts of its small staff of four—Barbara Johnston, Gail Lint, Betty Rothwell and Graeme Moorhouse—the collection is an active cultural force in the province.

The AFA lends works to art institutions across the country; generates smaller (catalogue-less) shows for events such as Edmonton’s visual arts festival, The Works, and Calgary’s ArtWalk Festival; provides art for the AFA’s Travelling Exhibition Program (organized by four regional public art galleries and designed to get AFA art out to smaller Alberta communities); and operates an Art Placement Program. The latter enables Albertans to see their art not just in the usual gallery locations but also in dozens of provincial government offices and sites, libraries, hospitals, educational institutions, town halls, nursing homes, non-profit organization halls and Alberta Treasury Branches.

Donna White, former director/curator of the Prairie Gallery, organized two to four shows a year out of the



collection. “The local audience (in the Grande Prairie area) feel it is a privilege to see art from the AFA. It is also valuable in that it allows developing artists to see that art has to be about more than being technically competent. There has to be a level of inspired creativity.”

With at least half of its holdings out on loan at any given time—enhancing public offices and spaces throughout the province—the collection’s use and popularity is “remarkable and unheard of regarding all other public Canadian art collections,” says Les Graff, former head of Alberta Culture’s Visual Arts Branch.

The AFA Collection was evaluated in 1995 by Lelde Muehlenbachs, an Edmonton-based writer and curator. “The collection provides an exemplary visual record of Alberta,” she writes, “(which) reflects the broad social history...and of course the look and feel of Alberta in its infinite variety. ...visual records of architecture, civic growth, prairie life, recreation, including sports...in fact, most aspects of life past and present in Alberta. In addition to revealing the changing ‘look’ or character of Alberta, the collection also gives evidence of the connections established by Alberta artists with the rest of the world.... the collection reveals a sense of these artists’ eagerness to assimilate and disseminate influences that arose beyond Alberta’s borders. It also reveals a level of sophistication for which Alberta



artists are not always given credit.”

Although Muehlenbachs states in her appraisal that minor works are a large portion of the collection, these pieces have the redeeming purpose of being a heavily used resource for the Art Placement Program.

Before Muehlenbachs undertook the curatorial review, the American-trained art professional told me she expected to find the collection “pedestrian and mediocre, (because) you couldn’t have put it together in a more egalitarian way.” Indeed, the Foundation, over a number of years, had sought input not only from the art “specialist,” but also from what Muehlenbachs describes as “your severely normal Albertan.” Both types have been represented on the government-appointed board responsible for the collection.

In the first decade, board members (which included artists) chose the art. This process, though, eventually evolved to include the recommendations of regional review committees composed of art professionals. Now, the task of acquiring art is largely undertaken by non-board members—a changing slate of peer juries who meet twice yearly to consider purchases from artists’ submissions.

“People who serve on juries are



TOP: **Dulcie Foo Fat**  
*Forget Me Not Ridge*, 1995,  
 61.0 x 61.0 cm, oil on canvas.

BOTTOM: **Ron Moppett**  
*Mirror and Moon*, 1990/1991,  
 162.4 x 325.1 cm, oil, acrylic on canvas.

RIGHT: **W.L. Stevenson**  
*Landscape with Buildings*, no date,  
 38.4 x 44.0 cm, oil on canvas.

incredibly responsible,” says Barbara Johnston. “For instance, for the 1999 Fall jury, they had two slide projectors going in the room—one with slides of past acquisitions, and the other with slides submitted for their consideration. They were making curatorial decisions about what was now needed from the selected artist and whether there would be any duplication.”

The AFA continues to provide support to local artists by purchasing their work, but far beyond that, it plays an important role for all Albertans. It has engendered a more balanced, holistic picture of the province—one that goes far beyond public perceptions and media portrayals of oil, mountains and cattle. The collection’s existence is a measure of the province’s self-confidence, even self-respect, and its regard for its own backyard. It demonstrates an understanding that what its artists, past and present, have engaged in and shared, is significant and reflective of what it means to be an Albertan.

With artwork from practically every medium and region; subject matter that ranges from the significant to the mundane; work that can be placed within the context of international trends, and others rooted in local traditions; and most of all, the refusal to favour any one style, school or region, the AFA Collection is, for all of its Made in Alberta focus, broader in scope than many of the so-called “national” or “regional” holdings resident in the country’s public art gallery system. At the National Gallery of Canada, for instance, western Canada is, by and large, a footnote in the display of their permanent collection.

In this sense, while the collection is, as Muehlenbachs suggested to me, “a provincial curiosity,” it is not passé, but rather a phenomenon tied to the future, tied to what the Toronto-based writer and curator Terrence Heath defined as “the art of regional nationalism.” In a recent *Border Crossings* article, Heath argues that as a “dynamic post-national country,” it is really difficult for Canada to have a national art, and



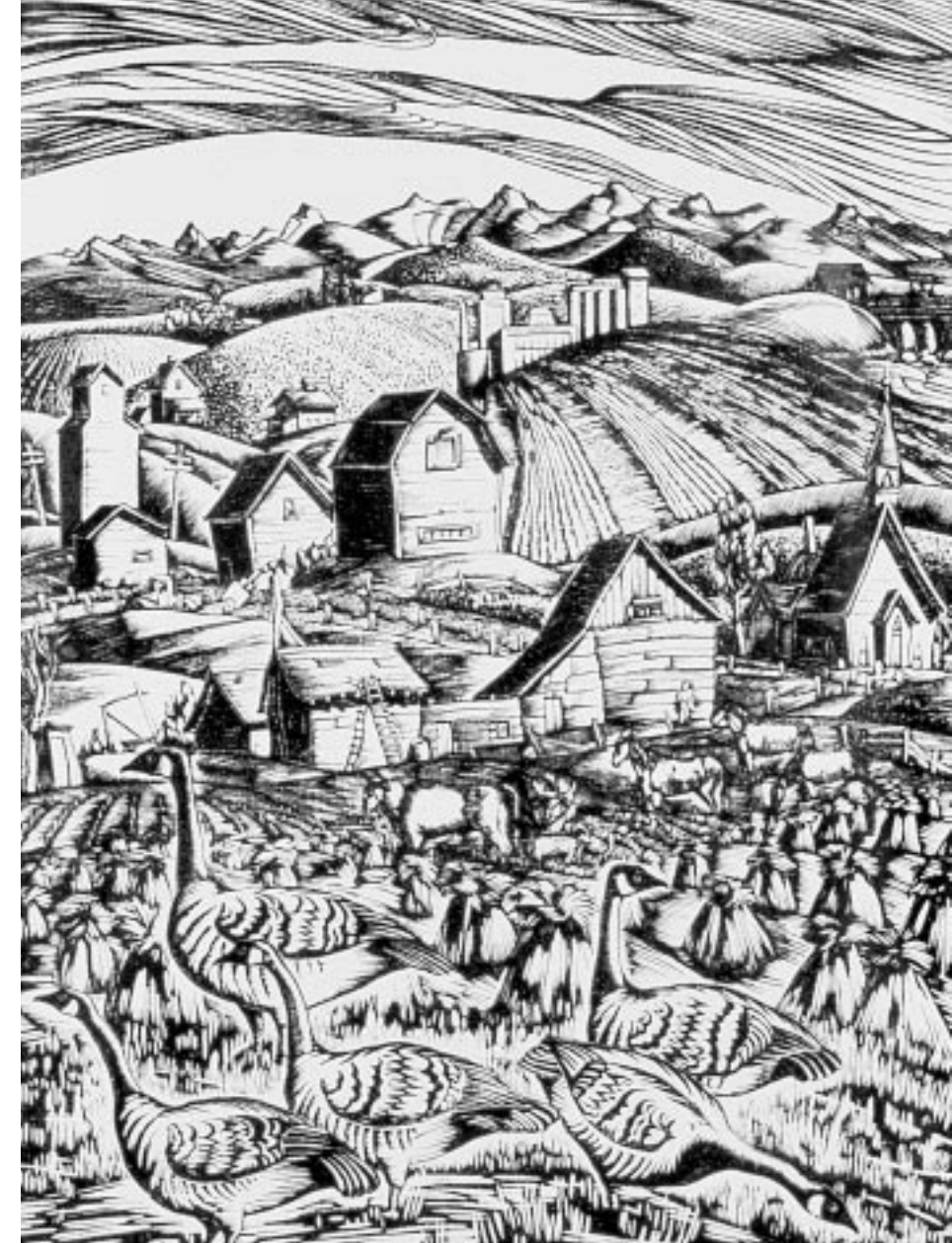
despite what many art professionals may claim, even the Group of Seven are essentially a regional phenomenon. Didn’t *The Globe and Mail* refer to them as the “Algonquin Group” in their early years?

Heath continues, “Artists in each region of Canada see themselves as Canadian in their loyalty to their region. They assert the work of the region as an essential and integral part of what Canadian art is and what should be collected by a national institution. All Canadian art is regional and they are regional nationalists.”

Because of its unique and privileged position in the country, the AFA Collection may be one of the best expressions of this post-national development—and all because we cared so much about what was going on in our own backyard. 🐾

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AFA Art Collection @25 is now available on the web at [www.affta.ab.ca](http://www.affta.ab.ca)



ABOVE: **Cliff Robinson**  
*Alberta Scene*, no date,  
 50.5 x 38.5 cm, woodcut on paper.



LEFT: **Harry Palmer**  
*Marion and Jim Nicoll*, 1983,  
 22.0 x 31.6 cm, silver gelatin photograph.