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New galleries for carpets and textiles



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Collective creativity

An exhibition of textile art from the Canadian Prairies is currently touring art galleries in Canada. Co-curator Michele Hardy introduces the show and explains how influential artists and teachers sparked renewed interest in weaving and fibre-based art in the mid-20th century

The Canadian Prairies (consisting of the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba), is a region of vast grasslands in the southern region and forests in the more northerly areas. The Prairies encompass the traditional territories of different Indigenous nations, each with their own unique cultural traditions. The region attracted settlers from other parts of Canada as well as waves of mainly European immigrants, especially from the late 19th century.

Artists working on the Canadian Prairies participated in and contributed to a surge of interest in textiles in the mid-20th century. They are the focus of the major travelling exhibition, 'Prairie Interlace: Weaving, Modernisms and the Expanded Frame, 1960–2000' which opened at Nickle Galleries at the University of Calgary on 9 September 2022 and will be touring other Canadian galleries until spring 2024. The exhibition looks back to the explosion of innovative textile-based art on the Canadian Prairies during the second half of the 20th century. With a focus on weaving and other interlace practices, such as rug hooking and crochet, it examines how artists of diverse backgrounds wove new histories of fibre during a period of intense energy and collective creativity.

Until about the mid-century, weavers on the Prairies tended to concentrate on the production of cloth for domestic use. Tuition focused

1 'Mindscape', Inese Birstins, 1979. Free-form weaving, hand-dyed; jute, sisal, mixed fibres. Surrey Art Gallery, Gift of Bruce Ambrose, 2004.05.01

2 'Prairie Interlace: Weaving, Modernisms and the Expanded Frame, 1960–2000'. L-R: Anne-Marie, Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, 1976. Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity; West Coast Tree Stump, Katharine Dickerson, 1972. Canada Council Art Bank / Collection de la Banque d'art du Conseil des arts du Canada; Rising from the Ashes, Ilse Anysas-Šalkauskas, 1988. Collection of the artist



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3 *Another Year, Another Party*, Ann Newdigate with members of the Prince Albert Spinners and Weavers Guild and the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology Weaving Program, 1994-1996. Mann Art Gallery Permanent Collection

4 *This Bright Land*, F. Douglas Motter, 1976. City of Calgary Public Art Collection, 1983 990072 A-F, Gift of the Calgary Allied Arts Foundation



Dave Brown, LCH PhotoServices

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5 'Prairie Interlace: Weaving, Modernisms and the Expanded Frame, 1960-2000'. L-R: *Woodlands Undercover*, Brenda Campbell, 1975. Alberta Foundation for the Arts, 1977.042.001; *Close Knit*, Aganetha Dyck, 1976. SK Arts Permanent Collection, 2022-074; *Sun Ascending* (12 of 24 panels), Kaiji Sanelma Harris, 1985. MacKenzie Art Gallery, Gift of Cadillac Fairview Corporation Ltd.

on the acquisition of technical skills. All that began to shift with the introduction of new modernist ideas encouraging experimentation with form, materials, intent and scale. On the Prairies, this coincided with an oil boom and new opportunities for artists.

One of the most important crucibles for creativity in North America was the Banff School of Arts, located in Alberta. From an early date, traditional weaving had been taught in short courses; however, with the arrival of Mariette Vermette-Rousseau in 1979, weaving tuition shifted from technique-driven instruction to something much more conceptual and experimental. Vermette-Rousseau was already an internationally renowned 'painter-weaver' who had completed monumental commissions for the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC as well as for the National Arts Centre in Ottawa.

She attracted to Banff an international roster of artists working with textiles (including Magdalena Abakanowicz, Neda Al-Hilali, Claire Zeisler), as well as curators, scholars, critics and others. Among them, Lithuanian-born weaver Inese Birstins would arrive as a student but stay on to help lead the programme. Her work *Mindscape* (1979), included in the exhibition, illustrates the gutsy, experimental approach to fibre she and her Banff cohorts embraced (1).

Banff was not the only centre of textile energy on the Prairies. In Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, a community of fibre artists developed that included Margreet van Walsem, Aganetha Dyck and Ann Newdigate. They supported one another, shared skills, materials and techniques. *Another Year Another Party* (1994-96), was woven with yarns dyed and spun over decades, gifted to younger weavers who commemorated their mentors with this tapestry (3). 'Prairie Interlace' features works from all three artists.

Joining what is today known as the Alberta University of the Arts in Calgary in 1960, F. Douglas Motter taught weaving until 1977. In 1961 he founded Motter and Associates, a hand-weaving studio that produced woven goods, custom yardage and commissioned hangings. Motter frequently employed students, helping them hone their skills before launching their own careers. If Motter's work tended to the planar (4), his students' work grew increasingly three dimensional. One of those students, Brenda Campbell, would go on to a prolific career weaving large-scale commissioned tapestries including works shown at Alberta House, the provincial government hub in London. Alas, few of Campbell's commissioned works exist today (5).

6 *Sun Ascending* (12 of 24 panels), Kaiji Sanelma Harris, 1985. MacKenzie Art Gallery, Gift of Cadillac Fairview Corporation Ltd.

7 'Prairie Interlace: Weaving, Modernisms and the Expanded Frame, 1960-2000'. Selection of hooked rugs by members of the Sioux Handcraft Collective rugs and Florence Ryder



Dave Brown, LCH PhotoServices

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Taking over from Motter was Katharine Dickerson, whose monumental weaving *West Coast Tree Stump* (1972) is on show in 'Prairie Interlace' (2). Born and trained in the US, Dickerson arrived in Calgary via Vancouver Island. This work, made just before her arrival in Alberta, expresses her concern with clear cutting old-growth forests. She brilliantly captures the thick, fibrous bark of the subject with jute, burlap and wool. Dickerson inaugurated new ways of working and new approaches to weaving at the school.

In Saskatchewan, Indigenous women of the Qu'Appelle Valley came together as the Sioux Handcraft Cooperative. Between 1967 and 1972, members reinterpreted traditional designs with latch-hooking. Their rugs were widely shown across Canada and internationally. Group members Marge Yuzicappi, Martha Tawiyaka and Bernice Runns were commissioned to create latch-hooked rugs, specifically for the interior of the Minoru Yamasaki-designed John Archer Library of the University of Regina. Their works (7) are timeless in their appeal even if the cooperative was short lived and members shifted to quilt making and beadwork.

In 2014, *Sun Ascending* (6), a monumental 24-panel tapestry (each panel 0.86 x 3.96 m (2' 10" x 13' 0")), woven by Kaija Sanelma Harris, was

decommissioned from the TD Bank Tower in Toronto and offered to the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan. The gift was appropriate given that the Finnish-born Harris had immigrated to Saskatchewan and was so inspired by the Prairie light and landscape. The arrival of the work provoked the curiosity of Timothy Long, head curator at the MacKenzie Art Gallery, as to what other textiles might be out there.

That question prompted a journey shared by three curators, two institutions, and textile makers spread across three provinces. The exhibition resulting from our research brought sixty textiles together from forty-eight artists, with their works drawn from collections across Canada. Despite these numbers, the project is inherently incomplete. We hope it inspires more research, fresh insights and new creative engagement with the rich and often overlooked history of textiles. ❖

'Prairie Interlace' (www.prairieinterlace.ca) is a collaboration between Nickle Galleries at the University of Calgary and the MacKenzie Art Gallery, and is curated by Julia Krueger, Timothy Long and Michele Hardy. The project includes a forthcoming publication from the University of Calgary Press, and has been made possible in part by the Government of Canada