

exhibition guide

Magnetic North



Imagining Canada in
Painting 1910-1940

INDEX

INTRODUCTION

TANGLED WOODS

EMILY CARR

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

LAND VS. LANDSCAPE

GROUP OF SEVEN

TRIP INTO THE WILD

TOM THOMSON – SKETCHES

MINING

LOGGING

NORTHERN LIGHTS

LAWREN HARRIS

GLOSSERY

COLOPHON

Magnetic North



INTRODUCTION

Wide open spaces, dark forests, snowy mountains and the magical northern lights. In short: the myth that is Canada. The paintings in this exhibition are a representation of this imaginary Canada.

A group of artists – consisting of Franklin Carmichael, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. MacDonald, and Frederick Varley – was interested in creating a new visual language for landscape painting. They wanted to declare themselves independent from European painting. They gathered in Toronto and founded the *Group of Seven* in 1920.

Magnetic North

Because artists such as Yvonne McKague Housser, Emily Carr, and Tom Thomson were also driven by a newly awakened interest in creating a new visual language for landscape painting, they have also been associated with the group. Their landscapes are also on show in this exhibition.

The artists around the *Group of Seven* left the cities for what they were and opted for the vastness of the landscape. Their motto was “less of a studio, more of the forest.” From about 1910 to the late 1930s, they created paintings that were seen as the epitome of Canada: a country with endless nature.

The paintings in this exhibition have been admired for decades for their depiction of that endless nature. More recently, however, the artists have become the subject of growing criticism for the way in which they portrayed Canada. With paintings of untouched nature, the group created a romantic image that ignored the Indigenous* population and their cultures, which were under pressure as a result of colonisation.

Prior to the arrival of the first settlers from Europe in the sixteenth century, the land had already been inhabited by Indigenous peoples for thousands of years. The group of artists may have created gorgeous landscapes, but by excluding Indigenous peoples from their paintings, they avoided engaging with the social reality. Their works are therefore not only a product of, but also a testimony to cultural oppression and *whitewashing**.

Magnetic North

At the heart of the exhibition are four films that offer insight into the changing perspectives throughout time: on the one hand the historical films of the white photographer Edward S. Curtis and the white anthropologist Robert Gardner, and on the other the videos of the Algonquin-French artist Caroline Monnet and the Anishinaabe filmmaker Lisa Jackson.

* Glossary

The exhibition texts contain many concepts related to the Indigenous cultures and colonial history of Canada. Please use this glossary for more explanation about the Indigenous cultures and colonial history of Canada. In the exhibition texts, the terms that are explained in the glossary are indicated with an *.



TANGLED WOODS

The artists around the *Group of Seven* spent a lot of time in the woods. During extensive camping trips, they produced countless sketches in the rather inaccessible terrain.

The paintings in this area reveal a collective search for new ways to depict a connection with a particular place. With their enthusiasm for simplified forms and vibrant colours, the artists focused their attention the mesmerising beauty of Ontario's seemingly impenetrable forests with their characteristic play of light, and the changing colours of the seasons.

Magnetic North

In the woods the group experimented with form, creating a unique visual language that proved essential to the broader development of Canadian painting in the twentieth century. A visual language that was instilled in the Canadian imagination, and was mythologised in the Canadian art that followed.

Magnetic North



EMILY CARR

Emily Carr spent the early decades of her career painting First Nations* villages on Canada's west coast, including villages of the Kwakwaka'wakw, Haida, Gitkan and Tsimshian peoples. In the 1910s, Carr painted in the palette of postimpressionism and fauvism, the colourful styles also present in Vincent van Gogh's work, for example. The paintings in this exhibition bear witness to a style of her own that she later developed, with sharply-defined shapes and cool colours.

The artists around the Group of Seven avoided any suggestion of the presence of Indigenous* inhabitants in their landscapes. Because of Carr's preoccupation with Indigenous art and people, her paintings are radically different from the other landscapes in this exhibition.

Magnetic North

Yet, Carr's attitude towards Indigenous cultures was shaped by her Victorian upbringing. Her paintings reflect the then popular Euro-Canadian belief that Indigenous cultures were vanishing.

* see glossary



CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Even though she admired Indigenous* art and culture, today Carr's paintings are considered indicative of colonial thinking. This criticism focuses on cultural appropriation: taking elements from another culture and using them for one's own ends.

Although culture is always in flux, and forms a great source of inspiration for art, appropriation is hurtful. Especially when there is an unequal balance of power between two groups, for instance when the appropriating party belongs to a majority group and is therefore more powerful than the group to which the cultural expressions belong.

Magnetic North

For example, many find it painful that Carr, as an outsider, became known for imagining Indigenous culture at a time when that culture was under pressure from the Indian Act*. Furthermore, Carr's paintings are seen as simplifications of the complexity and great variety of Indigenous cultures and peoples, and these simplifications can in turn lead to bad misconceptions about the Indigenous peoples of Canada.

The opposite of cultural appropriation is cultural appreciation. For many Indigenous communities, appreciation is about establishing lasting, reciprocal relationships, for instance by recognizing traditional territories, respecting the meaning of regalia, and supporting Indigenous culture through actions like purchasing traditional art, or booking an Indigenous guide.

* see glossary



LAND VS. LANDSCAPE

The *Group of Seven's* search for a visual representation of Canada was a process of exclusion. The artists around the group were all white, had similar socio-cultural backgrounds, and most of them were educated in Europe.

Critics object to the portrayal of Canada, or as Anishinaabe filmmaker Lisa Jackson puts it “the territories now called Canada”, as an uninhabited wilderness. The aesthetically ordered ‘landscape’ is essentially a European concept. So too is the notion of owning or ruling over land.

Magnetic North

This is countered by the Indigenous* worldview of inseparable attachment and kinship with the land and all nonhuman forms of life. The land is “at the root of all our relations”, said Algonquin-French artist Caroline Monnet.

With their Indigenous presence, the films in this exhibition contrast with the empty landscapes, and offer insight into the changing perspectives throughout time. Those by Jackson and Monnet offer a contemporary Indigenous perspective on the paintings in the exhibition. The films by two white men, the photographer Edward S. Curtis, a contemporary of the Group of Seven, and the anthropologist Robert Gardner offer two different, historical perspectives on the life of the Kwakwaka'wakw, a people from northern Vancouver Island.

* see glossary

Magnetic North



GROUP OF SEVEN

The aim of the *Group of Seven* was to find an authentic perspective on Canadian landscape painting. Their art arose from the belief that direct contact with nature provided a source of inspiration. Elements of European movements such as art nouveau and post-impressionism can be recognized in the paintings. The spontaneous-looking brushstrokes and expressive colours distinguish the works of the Group of Seven from the traditional style that was popular in Toronto at the time.

Three of the Group's founders were born and had studied in England: Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. McDonald and Frederick Varley. The other four, Franklin Carmichael, Lawren S. Harris, A.Y. Jackson and Frank Johnston, were born in Canada.

Magnetic North

Membership changed over the years, with A.J. Casson, Edwin Holgate, and Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald joining the artists' association, while numerous other artists were invited to participate in joint exhibitions.

The response of the public was mixed from the beginning. At first, quite a few people were offended by the modernity of the paintings. Today the artists are extremely popular in Canada, despite their colonial perspective.

Magnetic North

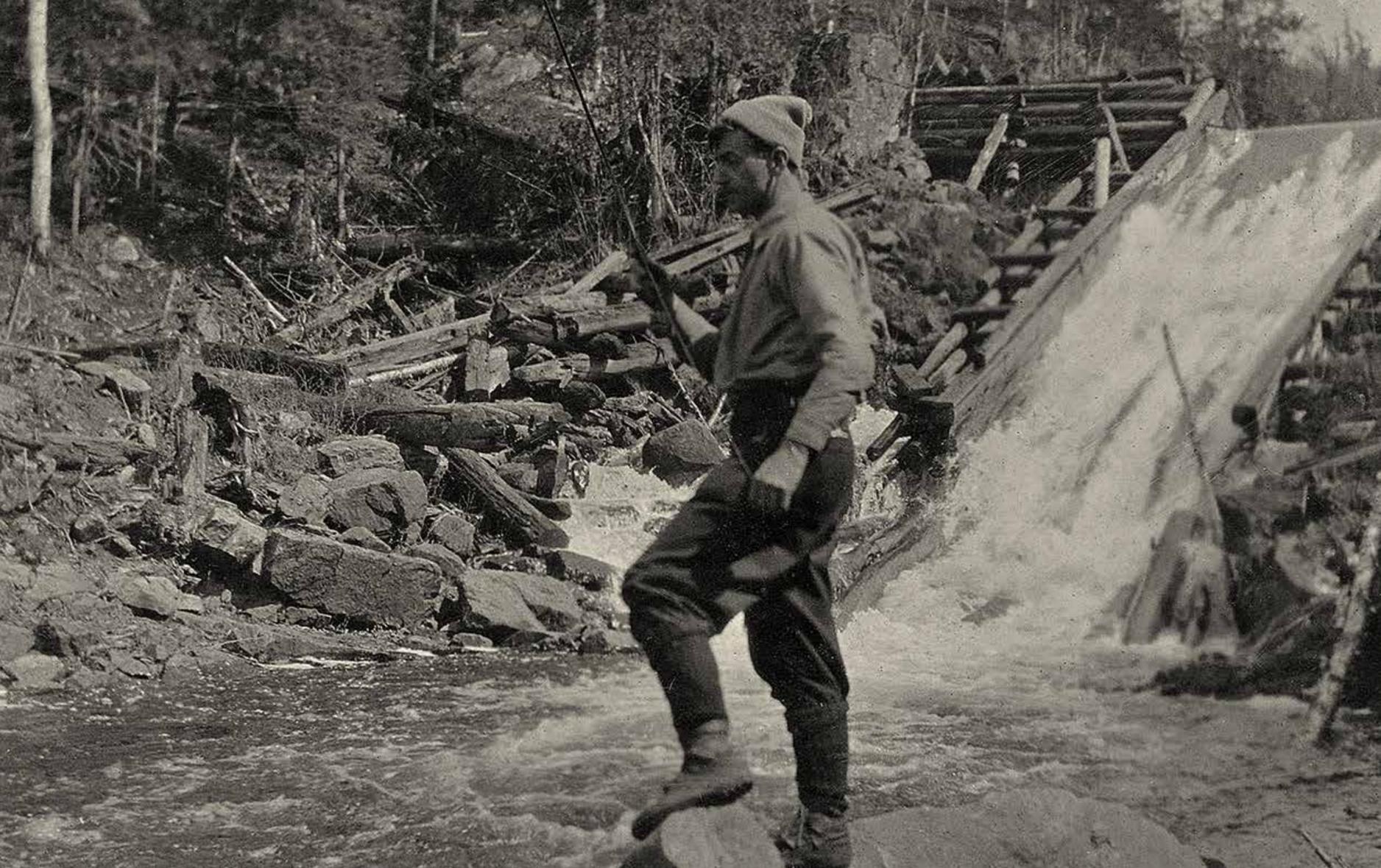


TRIP INTO THE WILD

Lakes and rivers have traditionally been the primary routes for people to move through the vast land and dense forests of Northern Ontario. Many artists around the Group of Seven regularly used these waterways. While traveling by canoe, the landscape would open up to the adventurers.

They explored the vistas, rivers, mountains and forests – from the Great Lakes regions in the east to the Rocky Mountains in the west. Braving the inaccessible terrain and bad weather conditions became an essential part of their artistic identity. The image of the artist as a ‘heroic explorer’ still lives

Magnetic North



TOM THOMSON – SKETCHES

A passionate nature lover, Thomson was devoted to the Ontario landscape. As a matter of principle, Thomson would sketch outdoors. He was able to do so with the help of a wooden box which he could use as an easel, palette and drying rack. Due to its practical size, he could carry it in his backpack or, on longer trips, in his canoe.

Over a period of only five years (1912-17), Thomson produced more than three hundred oil sketches. By his peers he was regarded as the pioneer of a new, unconventional kind of landscape painting, which is most apparent in his sketches. In sharp contrast to his paintings, which are controlled and structured, these sketches are direct and playful.

Magnetic North

Because of this approach, the sketches almost appear to be abstract, and therefore astonishingly modern.

His creativity peaked in 1917, shortly before he drowned that same year in Canoe Lake in the Algonquin Park nature reserve, where he had also worked as a fire ranger and guide. After his death, his work was lauded as an expression of patriotism.

Magnetic North



MINING

Canada's industrialisation boomed at the end of the nineteenth century. The mining of raw materials in particular was becoming increasingly popular. Mining therefore guaranteed prosperity in Euro-Canadian society. But it also meant a shift from an agricultural to an industrial nation, often at the expense of Indigenous* communities who are still suffering the consequences.

The images of the changed landscape, with mines and mining towns, initially seems to contradict the image of the pristine Canadian wilderness. The real irony, however, lies in the mythical nature of this image, for the 'pristine wilderness' and modern capitalist Canada actually go hand in hand.

Magnetic North

A number of paintings reflect this contradiction between the myths of wilderness and industrialisation. Yvonne McKague Housser, for example, captured the gloom of the cobalt mines that were abandoned after the silver rush. And in *A Northern Silver Mine*, Franklin Carmichael painted an almost cheerful scene with a silver mine, with cold-blooded precision and in clear lines.

There is one aspect that connects the different images: just like in the images of nature, there is no place for humans in these industrialised landscapes.

* see glossary



LOGGING

Melting ice caps, the burning Amazon, and lonely orangutans in a barren forest: our perspective on the landscape is partly shaped by images of the climate crisis. Perhaps that is why we look at the seemingly untouched landscapes of the Group of Seven, originally founded out of a shared love for nature, with great sense of longing.

The vastness of the Canadian landscape is impressive, and it is one of the most densely forested countries in the world. However, the timber industry has long been relentlessly cutting down trees to meet the demands of paper and cardboard production. That industry is still a major source of income for Canada.

Magnetic North

The promotional film *Big Timber* (1935), commissioned by the Canadian government, enthusiastically shows the progress and prosperity promised by this branch of industry.

In 1854, the writer, philosopher, and social critic Henry David Thoreau – another important source of inspiration for the group – already showed his concern: “It is remarkable what a value is still put upon wood even in this age and in this new country, a value more permanent and universal than that of gold”. He favoured a life in harmony with nature.

The works in this area reveal traces of the exploitation of nature.

Magnetic North



NORTHERN LIGHTS

The idea of 'the North' has shaped the perception of the Canadian identity, which historically has been based on a fascination with the remote regions of the country. This fascination is expressed not least in images of the northern lights, the *aurora borealis*.

Related scientific theories were developed in the nineteenth century, but while the phenomenon can take on a wide range of forms, it had never been rigorously examined until recently. This lack of information contributed to the near mythical appeal of the northern lights as the subject of countless legends.

Magnetic North

Some Inuit* believe them to be the spirits of the dead playing ball with the skull of a walrus. According to others, they are the lanterns of demons on the hunt for lost souls, or luminous divine beings watching over the welfare of their people. The northern lights are also sometimes seen as a bridge to the afterlife. The paintings in this area reveal the legendary qualities of the northern lights.

* see glossary

Magnetic North



LAWREN HARRIS

Harris's paintings are a bold imagination of the North. His search for a new visual language for Canadian painting expressed itself in reduced forms and a use of colour that suggests little depth.

In his articles and essays, he often wrote about his desire to develop a specifically Canadian artform in order to strengthen the national identity. Recognised for his paintings, Harris significantly shaped Canadian landscape painting in the early twentieth century. He also fuelled debates about abstraction and the creation of a national artistic identity.

Magnetic North

Today, Harris's nationalism, which is inextricably linked to his ideas, has become the subject of much criticism. Not in the least because his 'empty' landscapes reinforce the colonial narrative of a *terra nullius* – a completely uninhabited area.

Magnetic North

GLOSSARY

INDIGENOUS

Here, the term Indigenous refers to the first inhabitants of the territories now known as Canada. Indigenous groups include First Nations, Inuit and Métis.

FIRST NATIONS, INUIT AND METIS

These are umbrella terms for groups of Indigenous people.

First Nations refers to the ethnicity of First Nations peoples in the territories now known as Canada. First Nations people started using this term in the 1970s to avoid the colonial term 'Indians'. The singular 'First Nation' refers to a specific band, reservation-based community, or larger group of people living on a reserve. For example, Anishinaabe is the name of a First Nation, and this Nation is in turn divided into different peoples, each with its own name.

Inuit refers to groups of Indigenous people that are native to Greenland, Alaska, and northern Canada. Inuk is the singular of Inuit and refers to a single person. The Inuit are also subdivided into different peoples with their own names.

In the territories now known as Canada, *Métis* refers to a collective of cultures and ethnic identities resulting from ties between Indigenous peoples and Europeans. The term is generally used in regions formerly colonised by France, and can also be defined more broadly as 'mixed-race'. The term has general and specific uses, and the differences between them are often controversial.

INDIAN ACT

Introduced in 1876, *the Indian Act* includes colonial laws aimed at eradicating First Nations culture in favour of Euro-Canadian society. The law has since been amended several times. It is a paradoxical document that is, nowadays, being adjusted at the request of both First Nations and the Canadian government.

Today, the document is used by the Canadian government to manage First Nations governments and reserve land. The government's duties to the First Nations are also set out in the document.

Although the Indian Act historically only concerned (a part of) the First Nations, today the law also applies to Inuit and Métis in specific cases.

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

A school system developed under the Indian Act. For attending the Residential Schools, Indigenous children were taken from their families. Their aim was to destroy their culture, and to subject them to the dominant Euro-Canadian culture.

Over the course of the system's more than 100 years of existence, approximately 150,000 children were placed in these schools.

Many children did not survive the Residential School system. The discovery of anonymous mass graves at Residential Schools has been widely reported in the international media over the past months. Although they are referred to as recent discoveries, both Indigenous communities and the Canadian government have known about the graves' existence for decades. The exact number of deaths remains unclear due to false records. The last Residential School closed in 1996.

WHITEWASHING

In this context, to whitewash is to alter in a way that favours, features, or caters to white people.

POTLATCH

The potlatch is a ceremony practiced by several First Nation peoples. It primarily serves to redistribute wealth, to grant status and rank to individuals and related groups, and to claim rights to hunting and fishing grounds.

While the practice and formality of the ceremony differs among First Nation peoples, it is often held on the occasion of important social events, such as weddings, births, and funerals. A large potlatch can last for several days and involves partying, dancing, singing and theatre.

The federal Canadian government banned the potlatch between 1884 and 1951 under the Indian Act. When the ban was lifted, many traditional identities were damaged and social relationships disrupted. Today, however, there are still several First Nation peoples who proudly continue to practice the potlatch.

REGALIA

Regalia are traditional and often sacred garments and accessories that are worn and used during various ceremonies, such as the potlatch.

Please note

Language is always in motion. A lot of research is being done into Canada's colonial past, how that past affects the present, and how we as a society can best deal with it. These concepts and their meaning are therefore not cast in concrete.

Warning to readers: this text discusses Residential Schools.

COVER – Lawren S. Harris, Icebergs, Davis Strait, 1930

Gift of Mr. en Mrs. H. Spencer Clark McMichael Canadian Art Collection 1971.17

© Family of Lawren S. Harris

INTRODUCTION – Franklin Carmichael Autumn Hillside, 1920

Gift from the J.S. McLean Collection, Toronto, 1969, donated by

the Ontario Heritage Foundation, 1988 © Art Gallery of Ontario L69.16

TANGLED WOODS – A.Y. Jackson Lake Superior Country, 1924

Gift of mr. S. Walter Stewart McMichael Canadian Art Collection 1968.8.26 c/o

Pictoright Amsterdam 2021

EMILY CARR – Emily Carr Trees in the Sky, 1939

Gift of Richard M. Ivey, 2008 Photo © Art Gallery of Ontario 2008/224

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION – Tom Henderson Hereditary Chief, 'Nakwaxda'xw

First Nation Filmstill, How A People Live, Lisa Jackson (Dir.) © Gwa'sala and

'Nakwaxda'xw First Nations 2013

LAND VS. LANDSCAPE – Caroline Monnet Mobilize, 2015

Filmstill, National film board of Canada © Caroline Monnet

GROUP OF SEVEN – J.E.H. MacDonald, Falls, Montreal River, 1920

Purchase, 1933 Photo © Art Gallery of Ontario 2109

TRIP INTO THE WILD – J.E.H. MacDonald The Beaver Dam,

Art Gallery of Ontario Gift from the Reuben and Kate Leonard Canadian Fund,

1926 Photo © Art Gallery of Ontario, 840

TOM THOMSON – Tom Thomson, Tea Dam Lake, Documentary

MINING – A.Y. Jackson, Terre Sauvage, 1913

Purchase 1936 National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa Photo: NGC

LOGGING – Tom Thomson Abandoned Logs, 1915

Purchase 1974 McMichael Canadian Art Collection 1974.3

NORTHERN LIGHTS – Tom Thomson, Claremont, Northern Lights,

About 1916-1917

The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts purchase A. Sidney Dawes Fund Photo MMFA,

Jean-François Brière

LAWREN HARRIS – Lawren S. Harris Mt. Lefroy, 1930

Purchase 1975, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 1975.7 © Family of

Lawren S. Harris

Magnetic North

COLOFON

MAGNETIC NORTH

An exhibition organized by the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario and the SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT.

CURATORS

Katerina Atanassova, National Gallery of Canada, Geogiana Uhlyarik, Art Gallery of Ontario, Martina Weinhart, SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

CURATORS KUNSTHAL ROTTERDAM

Eva van Diggelen, Veerle Driessen

SPATIAL DESIGN

Ontwerpstudio Claus Wiersma

GRAPHIC DESIGN

bregsch Bregje Schoffelen

TRANSLATION

Marie Louise Schoondergang

TEXT ADVISOR

Manon Portos Minetti

REGISTRAR

Klaas Witsen Elias

PROJECT ASSISTANT

David Snels

TECHNICAL COORDINATION-REALISATION

Waldemar Galama, Ron Barneveld,
Bart Cuppens tentoonstellingsbouw

AV & LIGHTING

Jan van Vliet

COMMUNICATION

Daniëlle de Jongh, Anna Kerkhoff, Sabine Parmentier

DEVELOPMENT

Jeroen van Breugel, Sabiha Taner, Michelle Verhaak

EDUCATION AND PUBLIC

Frieda Baldewsing, Ninelotte Dijk

GRAPHIC REALISATION

Riwi ColloType, Amsterdam
Rocka, Rotterdam

Thanks to the team of Art Gallery of Ontario en Schirn
Kunsthalle Frankfurt for the wonderful collaboration.

We would like to thank all
the institutions, galleries, and collectors who
have enriched the exhibition by loaning artworks:

Art Gallery of Ontario

Documentary Educational Resources

Art Museum at the University of Toronto

Judith & Norman ALIX Art Gallery

Library & Archives Canada

McMichael Canadian Art Collection

Milestone Film & Video

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

Moving Images Distribution

National Film Board of Canada

National Gallery of Canada

Ottawa Art Gallery

Robert McLaughlin Gallery

Vancouver Art Gallery

Victoria University, University of Toronto

tentoonstellingspartners



AGO

SCHIRN
KUNSTHALLE
FRANKFURT



Canada

Volkscracht

Eline Mathilde



subsidiegever



Gemeente
Rotterdam

begunstiger

VRIENDENLOTERIJ
- SINDS 1989 -
WIN MEER, BELEEF MEER

met steun van

KUNSTV1
VRIENDEN

hoofdsponsor

ING