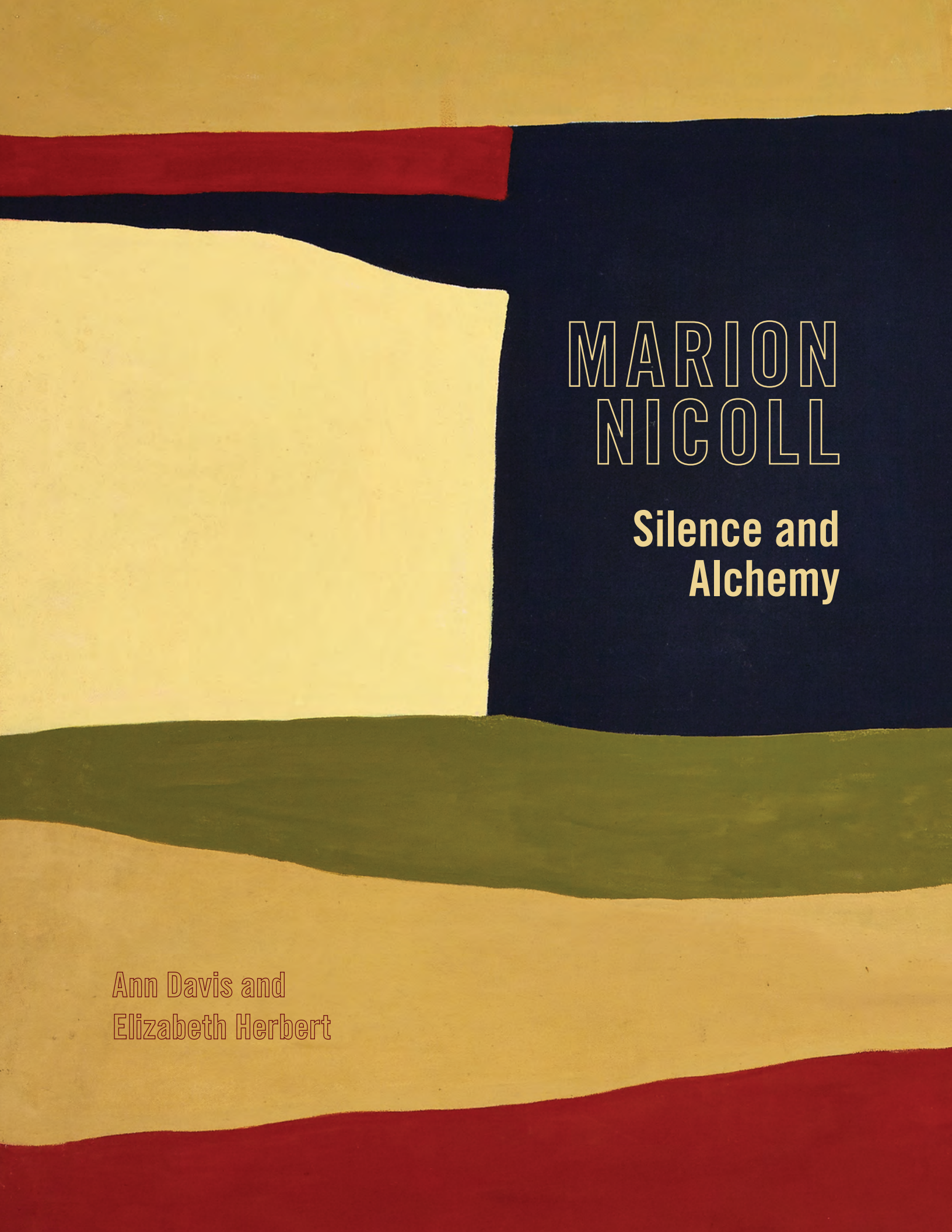
MARION
NICOLL
Silence and
Alchemy
Ann Davis and
Elizabeth Herbert

2013

# Marion Nicoll: Silence and Alchemy

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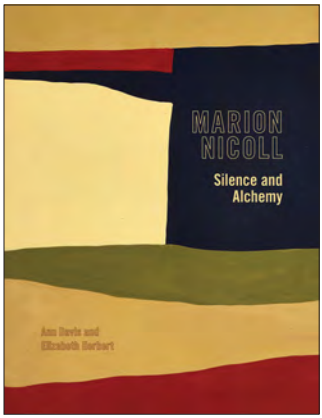


## MARION NICOLL: SILENCE AND ALCHEMY
by Ann Davis and Elizabeth Herbert

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MARION
NICOLL

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# MARION NICOLL

## Silence and Alchemy

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Ann Davis and
Elizabeth Herbert

with contributions from Jennifer Salahub and Christine Sowiak

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Marion Nicoll
*Sicilia #5 The House of Padrone*, 1959
Oil on canvas
90.0 × 105.5 cm
Collection of Nickle Galleries

# INTRODUCTION

> Painting variations on Alberta's landscape and character, she abstracted the mountains, winter mornings, and Bowness Road, where she lived, exposing the skeleton beneath Alberta's physical beauty. At the time, Calgary was not exactly welcoming to modernism and at least one private buyer who had commissioned a painting bailed out when he saw the work. Still, with each new style and challenge, her art gained in finesse. Her strongest work was marked by abstraction, line, colour and form – and not least by her powerful determination.
>
> Aritha van Herk
> *Audacious and Adamant: The Story of Maverick Alberta*
> (Calgary: The Glenbow Museum, 2007)

As Aritha van Herk captures in her catalogue for the Glenbow Museum, Marion Nicoll is revered within the art history of this province for the power of her work as much as for her personality. Certainly, Nicoll's steady purpose in her practice was unwavering despite the noise surrounding her – the rather late acceptance of modernism in Alberta, the opposition to female art teachers at the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art,

her own fragile health. Her legacy is an absolutely stunning body of work that has been celebrated in exhibitions, represented in public collections, and sought after by private collectors, and it is also understood as representing a shift in Alberta toward an embrace of modernism and abstraction.

Marion Nicoll (1909–1985) is an important founding artist in the history of Alberta art and certainly one of a dedicated few who brought abstraction into practice and acceptance in the province. Introduced to 'automatic' ways of working by J.W.G. (Jock) Macdonald during their time teaching together at the Banff School, Nicoll also studied with Will Barnet at Emma Lake in 1957 and later followed him to New York, where she continued to work with him and study at the Art Students League. Upon her return from New York, Nicoll became the first woman instructor hired full-time at what is now the Alberta College of Art and Design – and although limited to teaching craft and design, she became a significant mentor for generations of artists. One of only a very few in the region fully committed to abstraction, Nicoll was also the first woman on the prairies to become a member of the Royal Canadian Academy. There is no assessment of Alberta art that does not in some manner acknowledge Marion Nicoll, whether exhibitions such as *Alberta Mistresses of the Modern* (Art Gallery of Alberta, 2012) and *Made in Calgary: The 1960s* (Glenbow Museum, 2013) or written histories such as *A History of Art in Alberta 1905–1970* (Nancy Townshend, 2005) and *Alberta Art and Artists: An Overview* (Mary-Beth Laviolette and Patricia Ainslie, 2008). Nicoll's place in the history of abstraction in Canada is also undisputed, evidenced by her inclusion in works such as Roald Nasgaard's *Abstract Painting in Canada* (Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 2007) and *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s* (Denise Leclerc, National Gallery of Canada, 1992).

In early 2013, nearly forty years after her retrospective in Edmonton (*Marion Nicoll: A Retrospective, 1959–1971*, Edmonton Art Gallery, 1975) and thirty since her death, the Nickle Galleries at the University of Calgary staged a sweeping retrospective of her work. The exhibition brought together not only major paintings from the expanse of her career but also her early representational work and her explorations of automatic drawing. It afforded the opportunity to see connections between her prints and her paintings, and also for the first time brought her craft work – batiks and jewellery – into the same space as her art. By the public and by the art community in Alberta, the retrospective was acknowledged as being a long overdue salute to the work and impact of Marion Nicoll. However, because of the gap of more than a generation between Nicoll's time as an active artist and the exhibition, this audience was divided into two distinct groups – those who had known, worked with, or studied under Nicoll and were revisiting much loved works and those who knew her by name only, by her reputation and legacy, and were seeing her work for the first time.

It is a telling distinction, one that gives subtle evidence of the importance of such retrospective exhibitions and one that is also the impetus for this book: there is a vast difference between somewhat blindly accepting the place of an artist such as Marion Nicoll within the pantheon of significant Canadian artists and understanding through exhibition and examination just *why* they are there. In this book, Ann Davis, Elizabeth Herbert, and Jennifer Salahub provide the *why*. They offer strikingly different interpretations of the life and work of Marion Nicoll that, when taken together, reveal a full portrait of the artist and her context.

Ann Davis laces the work of Marion Nicoll together with the history of abstraction in a national and international context, one that reveals its deeply rooted connection to

the spiritual, from the early writings of Wassily Kandinsky, through to the surrealism of Jock MacDonald and Grace Palinthorpe, the perspectives of Will Barnet and on to Donald Kuspit's analysis of the spiritual in art. Davis positions Nicoll's work between abstraction, what she terms "silence," and realism, or "alchemy."

Elizabeth Herbert provides an essential and very sensitive interpretation of Nicoll's work throughout the trajectory of her career, evidencing the biography of the artist in a careful analysis of her art works. In doing so, Herbert reiterates a sanctioned or official view of Marion Nicoll, yet also gives voice to what would be the artist's own highly independent and rather irreverent response to such a history.

Finally, Jennifer Salahub offers a revision of the history of Nicoll's work in craft and design. Through her deep knowledge of the history of craft in its association with women's work, and its relationship to "fine" art, Salahub articulates their different roles within Nicoll's work, allowing a porous relationship between the two aspects of her practice. She suggests that Nicoll used craft as a strategy to support her own career.

Perhaps unwittingly, the essays and perspectives of Davis, Herbert, and Salahub reveal a broader truth of what it means to interpret the life and work of an artist from a vantage point removed by decades – a distance that offers a much broader historical perspective for interpretation, yet also removes the subject from their environment of time and place. The first removal, that of time, has a very specific impact on the writers, driving their research not to first-hand knowledge of the artist's framework or personal interviews but to primary sources found in the archives of the Glenbow Museum, the National Gallery of Canada, and the like. While they are as fulsome as possible, these are erratic sources that plague researchers with incomplete indexes, missing exhibition catalogues, or loose clippings that have no associated dates or locations. Very few unchallenged sources survive. From such a finite pool of references, it is small wonder that those

same sources and even quotations appear in the essays of Davis, Herbert, and Salahub. That they are put into much different service by each author shows the divergent approaches of the writers and the value of constructing an understanding of Marion Nicoll from a merging of perspectives.

The second removal – that of place – should also be understood as the role of regionalism in any account of Canadian art and in this particular chronicling of Marion Nicoll. Written in 1963, Clement Greenberg's seminal "Painting and Sculpture in Prairie Canada"[1] begins with an assessment of regionalism not only in prairie Canada but throughout the art world. He acknowledges that those in the major art centres – New York and Paris – cared little for work that was going on in other art scenes. Artists working in Canada outside of its major centres were wrapped in a sort of "double obscurity," held in disdain for their provincialism by Toronto and Montreal, centres that were themselves condemned for their outpost status. The significance of this understanding of regionalism in considering Marion Nicoll's work is that she and other Canadian abstract artists combatted their sense of isolation not by looking to Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, or even Vancouver but by forging relationships directly with the New York scene and its players. Consequently, every community of abstract artists that formed on the prairies developed its own history – connected not to each other, but to New York – and any appreciation of their work necessitates a simultaneous understanding of a specific regional context and the global trajectory of abstraction.

By concentrating on the spiritual aspects of abstraction, Ann Davis begins with a broad analysis of abstraction and positions Nicoll within it. Elizabeth Herbert, concentrating on a biographical approach to Nicoll, reveals the ways in which the artist sought out personal connections to abstraction and how those associations are evidenced in her art. Jennifer Salahub offers further perceptions on regionalism – that between art and

craft and that facing women artists at work in the mid-twentieth century – and traces Nicoll's strategies for working against that isolation. The lens of history is multifaceted. It is by splicing together divergent views and interpretations that a full, inclusive portrait can be formed, one that only becomes possible across the distance of time and space.

Christine Sowiak

NOTE

1 Clement Greenberg, "Paintings and Sculpture in Prairie Canada," *Canadian Art* (March/April 1963); reprinted in George Fetherling, *Documents in Canadian Art* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1987).

CHAPTER ONE

# SILENCE AND ALCHEMY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF MARION NICOLL

by Ann Davis

## Introduction

1957 was a momentous year for Marion Nicoll. That summer she spent two concentrated weeks studying with Will Barnet at the Emma Lake Artists' Workshop. Later she remembered this as a "hard, driving course. I mean, there was something electric.… The whole place just quivered.… And I just took off!"[1] Her artistic departure was from competent watercolour landscapes and still lifes to challenging abstract oils, acrylics, and prints. This radical change in her art was not well received by many in quiet Calgary, where abstraction was only practised by a very few. Marion's erstwhile teacher, A. C. Leighton, was so upset that, according to his wife Barbara, he walked the floor for three days.[2] 1957 was also a year in which an important American art critic, Meyer Schapiro, and the same American artist who conducted the Saskatchewan workshop that Nicoll attended, Will Barnet, published challenging, diagnostic articles about abstract painting. These articles

reveal contemporary thinking about this style of art, still a new if not a rare phenomenon in North America, and illuminate some of the influences that affected Marion Nicoll.

Meyer Schapiro started his article "Recent Abstract Painting" by declaring that "in comparing the arts of our time with those of a hundred years ago, we observe that the arts have become more deeply personal, more intimate, more concerned with experiences of a subtle kind." As his title suggests, Schapiro was interested in painters who "freed themselves from the necessity of representation" and, in so doing, "discovered whole new fields of form-construction and expression."[3] He identified two universal requirements for this new art: "every work of art has an individual order or coherence, a quality of unity and necessity in its structure" and, secondly, "that the forms and colors chosen have a decided expressive physiognomy, that they speak to us as a feeling-charged whole, through the intrinsic power of colors and lines, rather than through the imaging of facial expressions, gestures and bodily movements."[4] This concentration on the expressive encouraged Schapiro to give new emphasis to different kinds of art, not simply European representationalism. He promoted "the appreciation of many kinds of old art and the arts of distant peoples – primitive, historic, colonial, Asiatic and African – as well as European."[5] Returning time and again to the importance of ordered individuality and intuitive feeling, the author reminded his readers: "The object of art is, therefore, more passionately than ever before, the occasion of spontaneity or intense feeling. The painting symbolizes an individual who realizes freedom and deep engagement of the self within his work."[6] The formal result of such freedom and individuality is often evident on the canvas as "an order which retains a decided quality of randomness."[7] Perhaps Schapiro's most important, most provocative, argument in this perceptive essay is his assertion that modern abstract painting is opposed to communication. He goes on to note that "Painting, by becoming abstract and giving up its representational function, has achieved

a state in which communication seems to be deliberately prevented."[8] The extricated communication has now been replaced with "communion and contemplation," what Schapiro called the "equivalent of what is regarded as part of religious life: a sincere and humble submission to a spiritual object."[9] Intuition, individual expressive order and a contemplation verging on the spiritual all mark the best painting of mid-century North America.

In "Aspects of American Abstract Painting," published in 1957, Will Barnet, a painter and instructor rather than a writer and analyst, built his personal interpretation in parallel with some of the themes Schapiro identified. Barnet was particularly interested in what he called "structural quality," "painting that has clear form and clear color."[10] This is a much narrower focus than Schapiro's structural, individual order and coherence. Riling against "surface seduction and tentative form," as seen in the works of Abstract Expressionists, Barnet praised the creator who "develops the painting through an exactitude and allows the observer to see his vision clearly." In particular, he lauded the work of those he called "primitive" artists, and Gaugin, Kandinsky, Miró, and Klee. But he saved his highest esteem for Mondrian, who, he wrote, made "an absolute of form, … [made] the pictorial structure of the picture both subject and content."[11] For this reason, he admired Robert Motherwell as a purist. While lauding intuition and discipline, Barnet, both more prescriptive and less tolerant than Schapiro, determined that

> The inspired independent painter searches today for the meaning that lies hidden beneath things seen and felt. His vision is to find the concrete shapes that express and communicate his feelings and to state them in fresh and vital painting terms. This explains the conspicuous elimination of the subject and its replacement by symbolic imagery.[12]

Yet he found persistence of the subject in that object symbol; for him the symbol came to contain the character of the subject. The example he used was an "abstract landscape … where landscape forms have now become shorthand symbols often able to convey with poetic feeling the love for and joyousness of nature in its changing moods."[13] Barnet concluded his article by re-emphasizing his firm belief in the overwhelming value of "the language of form, intensely considered, something beyond and beneath the personal statement of the artist."[14]

In considering the work of Marion Nicoll, it is helpful to turn to these two essays to grasp some contemporary art theory and language. Both Schapiro and Barnet were convinced of the importance of individual, intuitive abstract painting. Both emphasized the centrality of feelings, what Schapiro called expressive physiognomy, and both wanted ordered, considered unity, or, in Barnet's language, structure. The best results then would expose the freedom and deep engagement of self that Schapiro identified. Marion Nicoll would agree with all of these requirements. But after that, Schapiro and Barnet differed because Schapiro valued the decided quality of randomness while Barnet might categorize that as tentative form. For Barnet a great sin was murky, suggestive form, which allowed the observer to read into the painting. Rather, Barnet wanted the painter very much in control, and that control meant clean forms. Marion Nicoll would probably side with Barnet here. Then comes the matter of communication, something Schapiro rejected for abstract painting, while Barnet did not, talking disparagingly about the non-communicative approach of abstract expressionism. Rejecting communication, Schapiro turned to the softer communion or quasi-religious spirituality. Accepting communication, Barnet emphasized symbolic imagery. Interestingly, Nicoll took both approaches and blended them.

A third author artist is key to understanding both contemporary abstract painting and Marion Nicoll's art: Wassily Kandinsky. His 1912 book, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, translated as *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, was widely read among artists interested in abstraction, for Kandinsky was one of the first painters to create completely abstract pictures. Schapiro knew Kandinsky's writings well and quoted him frequently. Barnet was probably also familiar with his concepts, while not accepting them as readily as Schapiro. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky speaks of two diametrically opposed possible directions of art forms: the external, the materialistic, a work of art which is a mere imitation of nature, and the internal, containing the seed of the future, capable of awakening "lofty emotions beyond the reach of words."[15] Recognizing that all art was of its time and place, Kandinsky drew on interests parallel to his own in occultism, theosophy, the cult of the primitive and synesthesia. By 1931 he noted "man has developed a new faculty which permits him to go beneath the skin of nature and touch its essence, its content.… The painter needs discreet, silent, almost insignificant objects.… How silent is an apple beside Laocoon. A circle is even more silent."[16] Silence is central to Marion Nicoll's best work, as is alchemy.

Donald Kuspit, in his important essay in the exhibition catalogue for *The Spiritual in Abstract Painting*, an essay entitled "Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art," posits that the means by which the best abstract painters achieve spiritual integrity are those Kandinsky identified but are now of greater importance: silence and alchemy. Kuspit noted that both silence and alchemy were already evident in Kandinsky's writing and converged in his idea of "total abstraction" and "total realism," different paths to the same goal. For Kuspit, with Kandinsky, "Total abstraction is a kind of silence: 'the diverting support of reality has been removed from the abstract.' Total realism is a kind of alchemy: 'the diverting idealization of the abstract (the artistic element) has been

removed from the objective.'" "Total abstraction (complete silence about the world) and total realism (alchemical transmutation of the worldly object) involve the same process of reducing the 'artistic' to a minimum. Art … no longer represents but 'presents.'"[17] Schapiro noted that Kandinsky was aware of the difficulty of achieving silence in art, which explains in part why he moved from gesture to geometry, as that seemed less noisy. In removing the diverting outer, the worldly object, alchemical transmutation allows inner necessity to be visible. The alchemical approach is a different way of using abstraction to articulate the spiritual. This approach emphasizes art's transformative power, the conversion of the physical to the metaphysical. Kuspit proclaimed: "Both silence and alchemy are spiritual in import, but where silence is an articulation of the immaterial, alchemy is a demonstration of the unity of the immaterial and the material."[18] Silence and alchemy were very much a part of Marion Nicoll's search for spiritual artistic validity.

## Surrealism and Grace Pailthorpe

Marion Nicoll's art changed radically after she attended Will Barnet's workshop in 1957 and subsequently went to New York to study with him. But her transformation was not all due to Barnet. Nicoll openly acknowledged that she was prepared artistically for a change before attending that workshop. In discussing this Emma Lake session, Nicoll explained: "It was Barnet of course who influenced me but I don't think it was so much so as that I was ready for it." Nicoll goes on:

> The thing that actually prepared me for this was J.N.G. Macdonald [*sic*] – Jock Macdonald. He in Vancouver had been working with Dr. Pailthorpe, a woman psychiatrist, psychologist in London who was writing a book on the

> creative forces and she was using automatic drawing and she had Jock doing it.… [F]or seven or eight years I did automatic drawing.[19]
>
> Jock started me off.… All the knowledge that you have, even the most trivial things, is stored. And when you put your pencil on the paper, and you let your hand move.… It's almost as though the pencil were pulling me.… And the funny thing is that having been trained, you simply cannot make a bad composition.… You keep on doing this every day for an hour.… This led to what I was doing with Barnet because I did it constantly.[20]

Grace W. Pailthorpe, a controversial Freudian Surrealist, was immensely influential in Canada, although she only lived here for a few years.[21] Arriving in Vancouver in the summer of 1942, she was employed at the Provincial Mental Hospital and there formed the Association for the Scientific Treatment of Delinquency. Jock Macdonald, painter and art teacher in Vancouver, describing her as "the person who liberated the prisoners from their prison and studied the brain of the cannibals in New Guinea," emphasized her considerable stature by declaring that she was in her profession what Hans Hofmann was in his.[22] The Vancouver Art Gallery Bulletin, calling her a brilliant Surrealist artist, recorded that the noted French Surrealist painter André Breton considered her to be one of the great representatives of English Surrealism.[23]

In the spring and early summer of 1944, Pailthorpe gave three talks on Surrealism, each of which attracted considerable attention. The first, sponsored by the Vancouver Ladies' Auxiliary, was held at the Vancouver Art Gallery on Friday, 14 April. Here Pailthorpe stated that "surrealist art is purely psychic and automatic, intended to express the real process of thought … the expression of the subconscious."[24] The second talk was given in association with an exhibition, also at the Vancouver Art Gallery, of her art

work and that of her colleague Reuben Mednikoff, and the third was a ten-minute radio broadcast on the Canadian Broadcasting Commission for a program called "Mirror for Women," presented on July 10, 1944.[25] The press and public reacted favourably: on the day of the opening of the exhibition people queued in the rain and not everyone could get in to hear her lecture on automatism. The *Vancouver Sun* considered the eighty works on exhibition to be a most strange mixture of "the bizarre, the fantastic, the humourous, the grotesque, the fantasmatic, the nightmarish and the beautiful."[26] Pailthorpe's radio talk, titled the "hieroglyphic inscriptions of memories," described how the French father of Surrealism, André Breton, valued his scribblings while on the telephone and called them automatic drawings. She ended her explanation of the function of the subconscious by saying that "surrealism has opened the aesthetic horizon by establishing a new concept of art," one based on "the beauty of irrational thought and creation."[27]

Pailthorpe was certainly not alone in linking Surrealist concepts and art. In New York, Surrealism was a major influence on post-war American painting. In Montreal in 1942, Paul-Emile Borduas held a solo exhibition entitled *Peintures surréalists*. And, in Vancouver, Jock Macdonald came under her thrall. He later wrote that he had found in her a "spiritual awareness … and quality of consciousness of true value to humanity."[28] When asked by Macdonald to criticize his paintings, Pailthorpe found them tight and too linear and suggested he try automatic drawings, her approach.[29] Under her tutelage, Macdonald began his experiments in automatic art in 1943. Later, Calgary artist Maxwell Bates detailed the resulting change in Macdonald's art: "What Macdonald wanted to express could not be expressed in naturalistic or objective terms.… Automatic painting opened up unsuspected ways of showing his feelings."[30]

Marion Nicoll was introduced by Jock Macdonald to automatic drawing either in the summer of 1945, when he taught at the Banff School of Fine Arts, or in 1946, when

he moved to Calgary to teach at the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art, now called the Alberta College of Art and Design. Since Marion was also teaching at "the Tech," as the school was colloquially known, she had lots of opportunity to be instructed by Macdonald on this new approach and begin a daily regime. When Macdonald left the Tech after only a year, moving to Toronto, he and Marion, already firm friends, stayed in touch through correspondence, discussing their art as well as their mutual artist friends. Marion was an enthusiastic convert, quickly filling sketchbooks with automatic exercises inserted between other drawings and notes. Soon she ceased to paint anything else.[31] Macdonald, a gentle teacher, enthusiastic about this form of artistic expression, was always encouraging: "Ha! Ha! This is interesting news about what is happening in your automatic paintings. Things are beginning to move. They will continue to move as long as you work continuously – sometimes every day or nearly every day. One cannot account for what comes forth and in truth it doesn't matter."[32]

At first, Marion's automatics were telephone doodles, unconnected traces of a wandering pencil. Unlike Macdonald, who had been instructed by Pailthorpe to work in watercolour, Nicoll started in pencil, perhaps for ease or perhaps because much of her more formal production at the time was in watercolour. Only later did she move to colour. The automatics were generally linear, covering the whole page and with few or no recognizable images. Marion saw archetypes in her work. As things progressed, she commented: "You get to using color [*sic*] … inks … and you get to … human form, both male and female organs … all sorts of peculiar looking things … a catbird … an amoebic shape … the rooster."[33] These automatics, unlike Macdonald's, tended not to have a defined centre and not to suggest specific content. *Untitled* (1960), for example, might be read as an exotic, coloured landscape, with an odd, multi-headed creature on the right, but even that is questionable. More typical is *Untitled Drawing/Automatic* (1948) with

Marion Nicoll
*Untitled (Automatic)*, 1948
Watercolour on paper
29.2 × 22.9 cm
Art Gallery of Alberta Collection,
purchased with funds donated by Gulf Oil Canada Ltd.

Jock Macdonald
*Crimson and Black*, 1946
Watercolour with pen and black ink on wove paper
17.8 × 25.5 cm
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
Photo © NGC


Marion Nicoll
*Untitled (Automatic Drawing)*, 1948
Watercolour on paper
30.0 × 22.5 cm
Art Gallery of Alberta Collection,
purchased with funds donated by Gulf Oil Canada Ltd., 1981

Marion Nicoll
*Chinook*, 1945
Tempera on board
37.00 × 50.00 cm
Collection of Nickle Galleries

Marion Nicoll
*Graveyard and Hoodoos*, 1955
Oil on canvas board
50.7 × 40.5 cm
Collection of Alberta Foundation for the Arts

its limited colour and all-over graphics flowing off the page. *Untitled* of the same year is more dense, more worked with linear details. Some of these drawings, never intended as art or even to be shown, get too busy, too packed with small elements and tend toward the decorative, something Marion hated. The best are free and gestural.

## Nature and Jock Macdonald

The automatics loosened Nicoll's hand and her eye and prepared her to accept Barnet's abstraction. Barnet, at times, also practised automatic drawing. Under Macdonald's tutelage, with the automatics Nicoll experienced a new freedom and a new connection to her inner self. But Macdonald supported and prepared her in another important way. He not only loved nature, as she did, but incorporated that belief into his philosophy, into his understanding of the basis of art. In this respect, Barnet was similar, for he too always returned to nature as a strong fundamental in his practice.

Before embarking on the automatics, which became Marion's prime artistic product for much of the mid-1940s to late 1950s, she produced competent watercolours and somewhat more experimental landscapes. *Pansies* (1934) is built from a dark blue ground offsetting the pale flowers. Filled with light, it is unsentimental and quiet. More atmospheric is a series of landscapes done in the 1940s and 1950s. *Chinook* (1945) and especially *Graveyard and Hoodoos* (1955), with very low point of view and carefully controlled recession, are somewhat disquieting. Land masses fill the image, cutting off escape upward. Another small landscape, *Bright Day* (1947), is softer, enlivened by a sky of short dabs of paint and a palette rich with strong colour harmonies. This work is reminiscent of one of Macdonald's contemporary pieces, *Kelowna Landscape* (1944), in both its subject matter and its range of hues.

Macdonald believed passionately in the importance of nature for an artist. As early as 1927, when he was an instructor in design at the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts, he wrote in the school's bulletin: "Nature is after all the only and ever open book in matters of Design [*sic*].… Glory in the beauty of your country for all the big forces of Nature [*sic*] are around you."[34] A decade later, in conjunction with his new semi-abstract modalities painted in Nootka, Macdonald explained: "In my new art experiments I have to live with nature, be in constant touch with its life forces."[35] A few years later, he reinforced this point of view: "Nature is still my medium for study and I believe as definitely as ever that there can be no art with aesthetic values which has no contact with nature."[36] But with his automatics Macdonald shifted his emphasis to internal sources, convinced that nature's hidden laws emerged best when they were no longer interpreted simply through external objects.[37] Yet he was adamant that the visual world had a great deal to teach the artist. In a 1957 article on Macdonald, Maxwell Bates quotes his friend: "It is from the visual world that an artist derives his vocabulary of form and colour. It is necessary to observe continually, to memorize and attune oneself to the forces in nature."[38]

Macdonald went further. As a general practitioner of transcendentalism, following Ralph Waldo Emerson, he believed it necessary to have an attitude of wonder before nature and he was convinced that every object is a symbol of God. His 1934 canvas, *Pacific Ocean Experience*, depicts a diminutive man rowing a very small boat, seen from above. This perspective lays out for us the cosmos in its unity and breadth, such that we have a new conception of our position, a new sense of our identity, our self, our soul.[39] In his 1940 lecture on nature, he defined "art in its fullest expression" as "knowledge, made concrete, of the inner truths of nature, or creation – all being."[40] These ideas parallel those of Walt Whitman, who aimed to improve and transform life, to identify

and expose its miraculousness. Furthermore, Whitman was particularly interested in the special quality of identity that attended variety and freedom in nature.[41] It is little wonder that Macdonald encouraged Marion Nicoll to be just as serious as he was in her study of nature. Commenting on her automatics, he delighted in her progress: "now that you find things definitely suggestive of nature forms you can be sure that the door is now open – Excellent!"[42] Will Barnet also taught the centrality of the form in nature. Stressing the importance of structural design, he explained: "When I say to my students be true to nature, I mean be true to the structural meaning of nature rather than its appearance."[43] To form, Marion soon added colour.

Much of Marion's post–New York work is based on nature, more specifically on landscape. Starting with her simple, arresting *Alberta VI Prairie* (1960), she divided a long canvas horizontally in two, each section delineated by differing grounds, the top brown and the bottom black, thus creating the suggestion of a horizon line. Onto these she posed irregular coloured rectangles and, in the upper section, one white near circle. The edges of forms are hard, such that one area of unmodulated colour never penetrates or spills into another. The forms themselves are somewhat softer, always just slightly irregular, hand-drawn, not strictly geometric. Similar in construction – a long work – is the coloured woodblock *Prairie Sun* (1961). This time, however, the upper rectangles surrounding the circle have been replaced by active gestural lines. In another important painting of the same year, *East from the Mountains*, she eliminated the suggested horizon, placing her quasi-geometric forms on a pale ground. Obviously pleased with the result, a few years later she made a clay print of the same subject. Later paintings might retain the concept of a canvas divided into various areas or sections, but, usually through colour, now prevented a reading suggestive of a literal landscape. In *End of Summer* (1963), for example, she isolated four sections, two larger and two smaller, but interrupted the


Marion Nicoll
*East From the Mountains*, 1964
Clay print, 3/20
27.9 × 33.0 cm
Private Collection, Calgary

Marion Nicoll
*End of Summer*, 1963
Oil on linen
137.2 × 114.3 cm
Collection of Roxanne McCaig, Calgary

Marion Nicoll
*Prairie Railway Siding*, 1967
Acrylic on canvas
92.0 × 107.0 cm
Collection of Alberta Foundation for the Arts

horizontal division by breaking the colour of the ground, such that the hues in the upper left and lower right segment matched, as did those in the upper right and lower left. Here the circle has been split, a format she returned to often, as John Snow noticed: "She told me once that she was doing a painting and cut it down the centre and moved one up and the other down and that started her doing abstracts."[44] More evocative is *Chinook IV*, of the same year, wonderfully pared-down in both form and colour. This simplification and reduction of both form and colour continued, apparent very clearly in *Foothills No. 1* (1965), *La Paz, Red Rock, Black Rock* (1967), and *Prairie Railway Siding* (1967), some of her very best work. Nature observed and interpreted intuitively was clearly at the very base of these paintings, for, like Macdonald, Nicoll sought in nature the underlying structure, the "universal truth of all-relating harmony."[45]

## Spiritualism and Silence

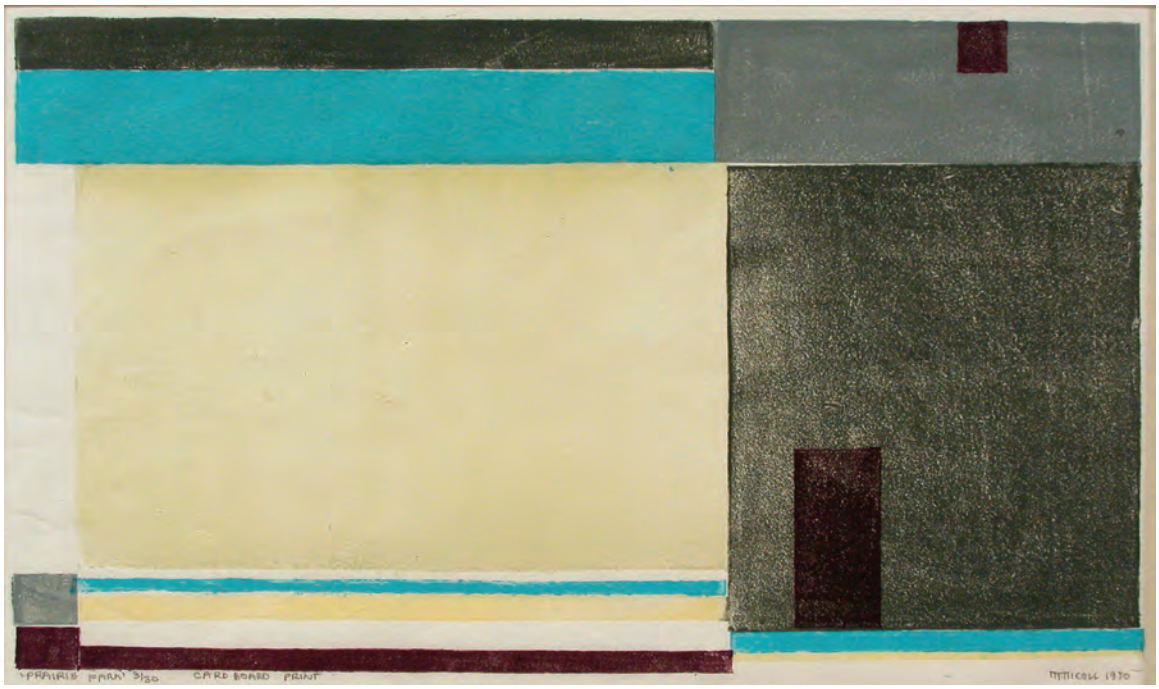
Macdonald also communicated to Nicoll his abiding belief in the spiritual, something she in turn developed. For Macdonald, Thomas Mann's words in *The Beloved Returns* had considerable importance: "the creative … binds together nature & spirit, and in it they are one,"[46] for Macdonald, like Lawren Harris, Emily Carr, and Fred Varley, was a deeply spiritual painter.[47] Ron (Gyo-Zo) Spickett, a contemporary Calgary painter and a Buddhist lay-priest, recognized this spiritual aspect to both Macdonald and Nicoll. To Spickett, "Jock Macdonald … was what you would call in a philosophic sense an inner-directed man. He believed that it was the inner person that counted. Marion was a very intuitive person, and it would have rung a bell with her, and it rang a bell with me." "[I]t was his religio-philosophical basis of paining … a way of seeing" which was so very important in "forming that oneness with the world around you."[48] For Marion, Spickett

felt, painting "was not just making an image, but a process, an action, that identified you with the harmonic process."[49] When asked if Marion was a religious or spiritual person, Spickett replied, "I believe so." She "was capable of seeing in depth the spiritual truth that exists."[50] Katie Ohe, a sculptor and student of Nicoll's, agreed: "I think she was spiritual. I think she could relate in a very spiritual way, and had a spiritual connection to her creative world. Not on a religious level, but on a soulful level."[51]

This interest among artists in the spiritual was of considerable contemporary concern, as Schapiro noted. Abstract art is often an effort by artists not to deny meaning but rather to find ways to create deeper and more varied levels of meaning. The large exhibition in the United States of America, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*,[52] and a less ambitious, more focussed one in Canada, *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting 1920–1940*,[53] have delineated the breadth and depth of this important phenomenon. Kandinsky's ground-breaking 1912 *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* was certainly known to Jock Macdonald and probably to Marion Nicoll as well. For Kandinsky, the spiritual was "the search for the abstract in art," which existed in opposition to "the nightmare of materialism."[54] Franz Marc called this artistic spiritual necessity "a mystical inner construction."[55] William James, in his pioneering study *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), identified four marks of the mystic state: ineffability, noetic quality, transciency, and passivity. Feeling these marks were not sufficiently helpful, the English author Evelyn Underhill delineated four other rules in her vastly successful 1911 book *Mysticism*. These are: 1) mysticism is active and practical, 2) its aims are wholly transcendental and spiritual, 3) the business and method of mysticism is love, and 4) mysticism involves a definite psychological experience. All of this, then, is a constant search for the "changeless One."[56]

In her painting, Marion Nicoll struggled to work through the empirically given to the spiritually articulate. Departing from the appearance of nature, supported in this way in by both Macdonald and Barnet, she then sought a unified symbol of the supernatural. Having gained confidence in intuition and personal experience through her automatics, and accepting this strong emphasis on nature, Marion Nicoll now had both the sensitivity and the tools to attempt to paint spiritual abstracts, not that she would have labelled her work as such. From Will Barnet's classes at Emma Lake, Nicoll learnt to simplify and block out her forms in areas of uniform, unmodulated colour. Subject was of little consequence and only served as a vehicle for individual interpretation and clarity of form. *Little Indian Girl* (1977), probably done in the Saskatchewan workshop, shows this development, where the background is now hardly distinguishable from the central object. Such blending of figure and ground, the flattening of the field, becomes the norm once Nicoll went to New York. *Bridge* (1959) is one of her first successful canvases to employ these means, what Barnet called the "language of form." Here forms are solid and impenetrable; their shapes, both curvilinear and geometric, are active, for they clearly march from left to right. With *Sicilia #5 the House of Padrone* of the same year as *Bridge*, Nicoll is finding her own voice, a strong plastic order and great clarity. There are no voids, no atmosphere, no positive and negative, just as Barnet required. The movement in the earlier piece has been replaced by stillness, a silence almost palpable, achieved through a reliance on horizontals and verticals and finely chosen colours. The self-loss required to produce automatic drawings, the total self-surrender necessary for a full integration into a spiritual human life, and the example of Barnet's favour of spirit and intuition over intellect and objective fact, supported Nicoll's reintegration of unity and reality in this masterful work.

Marion Nicoll
*Little Indian Girl II*, 1977
Cardboard print on paper, 11/60
55.6 × 25.9 cm
Art Gallery of Alberta Collection, purchased with funds from the Soper Endowment



Marion Nicoll
*Prairie Farm*, 1970
Collograph, ink on paper.
28 × 48.3 cm
Collection of Art Gallery of Alberta

Nicoll's later work continued this trend towards geometry and silence. *Calgary III – 4am* (1966), as befits the hour, is dark, meditative and very still. Now the more organic curvilinear has been virtually eliminated, to be replaced by quasi-straight lines. But these lines always reveal the hand of the painter, always veer away from the harshness and coldness of ruler-straight. Composed of a medley of rich brown, grey, and almost black rectangles, enlivened by lighter corners, the painting projects a timelessness, an affirmation of faith and a deep humanism. Similarly sympathetic, similarly quiet, is the collagraph *Prairie Farm* of 1970. More rectangular in shape – while *Calgary III – 4am* is almost square – *Prairie Farm*, restrained in colour and form, speaks to that individual, psychological search for the One, for unity, thought in search of the essential. Equally arresting is *February* (1970), two irregular rectangles divided by a pair of horizontal lines, a transcendental piece.

## Native Art and Alchemy

Returning to Kandinsky's total realism, alchemy, we must go back to Will Barnet. Barnet was among the contemporary artists in the United States who had a particular interest in the shamanistic and symbolic qualities of Native American art. He was a key figure in the New York movement called Indian Space Painting, although he did not exhibit with the group in the one exhibition they held in the spring of 1946. This show, entitled Semeiology or 8 and a Totem Pole, contained abstract paintings that on the one hand displayed two-dimensionality and all-over composition, but, on the other hand, based their referents on what they called real structures evident in the physical and anthropological sciences. The gallery owner, Kenneth Beaudoin, defined the premise for the show as the desire to paint "a new magic out of old star-driven symbols rooted in an understanding of American Indian Art." He named the group semeiologists "connoting

the roots of the method to be in ancient runic Amer-indian art … and rooted in an understanding of human and visual realities."[57] To underline the links between the work of the eight on exhibition and Indian art, Beaudoin exhibited, as part of the show, a small Haida house pole, resembling one on display in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art. The artists represented here, as well as many others, believed that "the art of early cultures exhibited formal power and profound insights, both psychological and conceptual, which modern artists would do well to study."[58] To Barnet, "The use of formal symbol in primitive culture aimed, not at expressionism, but at giving order and meaning to life."[59] In his classes he emphasized the successful integration by the Northwest Coast cultures of shapes whose positive and negative identities were ambiguous, or rather "all positive."[60] In working with "concrete shapes that express … feelings," Barnet sought the "conspicuous elimination of the subject and its replacement by symbolic imagery."[61]

Artists in the United States have long been interested in primitivism, tribal art, and the "exotic." As early as 1902, Arthur Wesley Dow, who had painted with Gaugin in Pont-Aven, taught a new language of art based on Japanese aesthetics and also suggested to his students that they "bring into play the primitive springs of thought, impulse and action."[62] Others, including Max Weber, Marsden Hartley, and Alexander Calder, followed. What is important is that these artists gravitated not just to the aesthetics of non-Western artifacts but also to the philosophies and beliefs of their makers. Two books were especially influential: anthropologist Franz Boas's *Primitive Art*, first published in the United States in 1928, and painter John Graham's *System and Dialectics of Art*, published in New York and Paris in 1937. Here was an emphasis not just on the outer life but specifically on the inner life, for, with Kandinsky, to these artists the nightmare of materialism drove an effort to counteract a sense of alienation and sterility in modern society.[63] By the early 1940s, artists such as Adolph Gottlieb, Jackson Pollock,[64] Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko all looked to the prehistoric, primitive, or archaic, often


Marion Nicoll
*One Minor Deity*, 1962
Oil on canvas
106.7 × 81.3 cm
Private Collection, Calgary

Marion Nicoll
*Ritual II*, 1963
Oil on canvas
128 × 152.8 cm
Collection of Alberta Foundation for the Arts

accessed through European Surrealism, as a non-representational form having spiritual meaning. Interestingly, while European Surrealism was often tied to Freudian concerns, as was Grace Pailthorpe, Americans more frequently invoked the Jungian notion of archetypes, characteristically associated with a "collective unconsciousness."[65] These archetypes were of two natures: culturally nonspecific linguistic signs, on the one hand, and biological and natural images, on the other hand, or the "primal sign inscribed upon the surface and the natural record embedded in the earth." As Kirk Varnedoe asserts, "Newman looked to the Primitive artist as a model of purified spirituality, creator of abstractions that embodied the basic underlying order of nature."[66]

Marion Nicoll was also interested in native art and in the principles she found inherent in such art. Starting with her great affection for the work of Emily Carr[67] and supported by Barnet's frequent use of symbolic imagery, she too looked to the archaic as an avenue for expressing her developing spirituality and her sense of the ordered primacy of nature. Iconographically she was following Will Barnet, as she did so often,[68] especially in his lasting emphasis on structural form. Spiritually she was following both Macdonald and Barnet with their emotional psychic energy, as well as their firm emphasis on the elemental spirits of the natural world. Nicoll's magnificent *One Minor Deity* (1962)[69] is made up of two sections, an upper portion, built of concentric "C" or "E" without the middle bar shapes, and containing an off-centre similar shape. The lower portion incorporates an atavistic form, perhaps a headless figure, delineated against a two-toned dark ground. The whole is bracketed and contained by white lines of differing widths on the right and left framing edges, such that the gaze is concentrated and not allowed to wander beyond the picture.

*Ritual II*, also know as *Birth Ritual*, of 1963, follows, simplifies, and clarifies both the forms and the imagery of *One Minor Deity*. In the later piece, the archaic symbol in


Marion Nicoll
*Runes "B"*, 1972
Cardboard print on paper, 4/18
60.0 × 55 cm
Art Gallery of Alberta Collection, donated by the Alberta Art Foundation

the lower section is now clearly a figure, and the upper open "E" shapes have been turned ninety degrees so that they sit directly above the figure, adding power and weight to the symbol. The forms and colours have been simplified, sharpened, and balanced. Now nothing is off-centre; everything is static, silent and strong, redolent of alchemical transformation. A third piece, *Runes "B"* (1972) contains a pair of archaic signs, graphic images isolated on a lower rectangular ground and an upper semicircular one. A strong black form marks the left framing edge. The whole is mysterious and intriguing, conjuring atavistic and unknowable hieroglyphs, perhaps Pailthorpe's "hieroglyphic inscriptions of memories." Like Schapiro and Barnet, Nicoll was searching for abstract subject matter evocative of concerns of universal importance. Lost languages, secret runes, Kandinsky's alchemy, all forms of cultural making that tried to keep ties to significant content.

Marion Nicoll's path to silent, alchemical abstracts started with the tutoring she received from Jock Macdonald. Through Macdonald and automatic drawing, she built a deeply personal approach to getting in touch with her inner spiritual self. Again supported by Macdonald, she retained her own conviction of the great truths of nature. From Will Barnet, in turn, she built on these two features, intuition and respect for nature, adding a heavy dose of discipline, planning, and "structural quality." In her art, as opposed to her private automatic exercises, Nicoll put aside the gestural in favour of all-over somewhat geometric forms of unmodulated colour, the way Barnet worked. Using Kandinsky's language, Nicoll, in her best pieces, achieved the silence of total abstraction and the alchemy of total realism, which engendered the spiritual communion and contemplation Schapiro so admired. She found lofty emotion beyond the reach of words. Her art no longer represented but presented.

**Ann Davis** is former Director of The Nickle Arts Museum at the University of Calgary and a prominent curator, teacher, and art critic. She is the author of *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting 1920–1940* and of numerous articles and essays on twentieth-century Canadian art.

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1 Interview with Marion Nicoll, conducted by Helen K. Wright and Ingrid Mercer, January 29, 1973, partial transcription of tapes, n.p., Glenbow Archives, Marion Nicoll Papers.

2 Ibid.

3 Meyer Schapiro, "Recent Abstract Painting," in *Modern Art 19th and 20th Centuries Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 215.

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8 Ibid., 223.

9 Ibid., 224.

10 Will Barnet, "Aspects of American Abstract Painting," in The American Abstract Artists, ed., *The World of Abstract Art* (New York: George Wittenborn, 1957), 105–6.

11 Ibid., 109.

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13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 112.

15 *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Dover, 1977), 2.

16 *Cahiers d'Art*, vol. 6, 1931, 351.

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19 Actually she did automatic drawings for much of her subsequent career.

20 Nicoll interview, 1973, n.p. Macdonald's initials are J.W.G. for James Williamson Galloway, not J.N.G.

21 See Joyce Zemans, *Jock Macdonald: The Inner Landscape* (exhibition catalogue, Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1982), 109–13. Yves M. J. Larocque, *Le surréalisme et le Canada : histoire de l'idée du surréalisme au Canada Anglophone entre 1927 et 1984*, Thèse de Doctorat en Histoire de l'art, Université de Paris, Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1995, records her stay as being two years, 215.

22 Jock Macdonald to Margaret McLaughlin, 19 December 1954, Robert McLaughlin Gallery.

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30 Maxell Bates, "Jock Macdonald Painter-Explorer," *Canadian Art* 14, no. 4 (1957): 151–53.

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33 Interview.

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43 "Aims in Teaching," Will Barnet Papers, Archives of American Art, Microfilm N68-35, frame 43, quoted in Gail Stavitsky, *Will Barnet: A Timeless World* (exhibition catalogue, Montclair Art Museum, 2000), 16.

44 Mark Joslin interview with John Snow, October 1987, typescript, 6, kindness of Nancy Townsend.

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46 Macdonald's notes on "The Beloved Returns (Lotte in Weimar) Thomas Mann," with Marilyn Westlake Kuczer.

47 See Davis, *Logic of Ecstasy*.

48 Interview conducted by Helena (Hansha) Hadala with (Ron) Gyo-Zo Spickett, 13 November 2000 and reproduced in Geoffrey Simmins, *Spirit Matters: Ron (Gyo-Zo) Spickett, Artist, Poet, Lay-Priest* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2009), 203.

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57 Kenneth Beaudoin, *Iconograph* (New York, 1946), quoted in Ann Gibson, "Painting Outside the Paradigm: Indian Space," in *Arts Magazine* 57 (February 1983): 98.

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62 An account of the 1902 session of the Ispwich Summer School of Art, by Sylvester Baxter, quoted in Gail Levin, "American Art," in William Rubin, ed., *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), vol. 2, 453.

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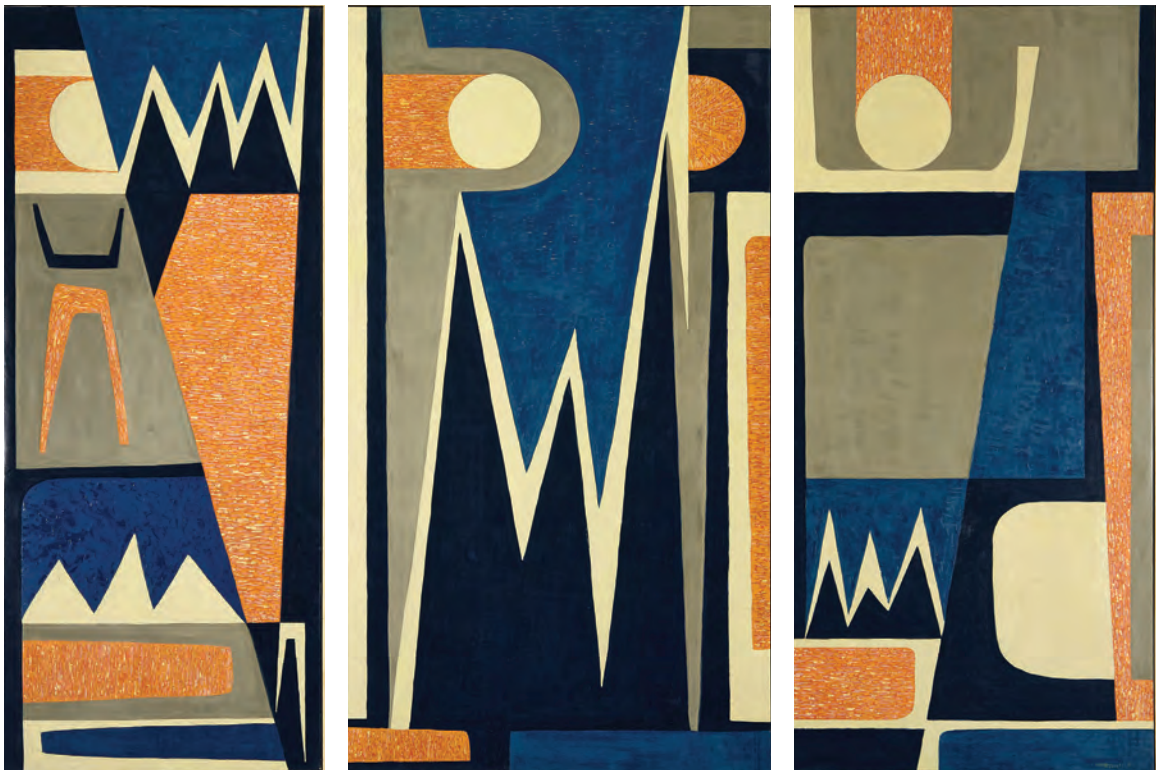
65 Kirk Varnedoe, "Abstract Expressionism," in William Rubin, ed., *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), vol. 2, 616.

66 Ibid., 636.

67 Nicoll interview.

68 At times her signature even looked like Barnet's.

69 She probably reworked this piece to some extent in 1973.



Marion Nicoll
*Journey to the Mountains: Approach, The Mountains, Return*, 1968
Oil on canvas
*Approach* 274.3 × 114.3 cm; *The Mountains* 274.3 × 152.4 cm; *Return* 274.3 × 129.5 cm
Collection of Nickle Galleries

CHAPTER TWO

# MARION NICOLL AND THE SUBLIME

by Elizabeth Herbert

Around 1945, the artist J.W.G. (Jock) Macdonald introduced a younger colleague to the practice of automatic drawing. The idea that by allowing her hand to wander around an empty page, she could express her dormant creativity captivated Marion Nicoll. She said later,

> He really roused things up. In Jungian theory you forget absolutely nothing … sight … sound … it's all stored in your subconscious. It is stored there in its true form, not colored by personal bias of any kind. It is a source of information; you put your hand down, you watch, and you wait. Look, look! there it goes! I've made things that would make your hair stand up – birds, forked tongues, and male and female mixtures. I don't think I ever would have been an abstract painter if I hadn't gone through 1946–57 with automatic drawing.[1]

Nicoll's assertion of a causal relationship between her automatic drawing and abstraction is well documented, central to her art, yet largely unexamined by critics. Marion Nicoll was more than merely the sum of her influences, but until they are added together her achievement cannot be counted. Her art unified themes from disparate sources in unique ways. This study will parse these stylistic and iconographic themes and integrate them, just as she did as an artist.

Jock Macdonald's automatic drawing, characterized by a profusion of zoomorphic forms that he called "my pollywogs," stemmed from his connections to British Surrealism.[2] His automatics exemplify what the critic Lawrence Alloway called "The biomorphic 40s," in which "crowded, manic biomorphism is directly linked to automatism which was cultivated by surrealists as a means of direct access to the unconscious mind."[3] Nicoll's automatic drawings follow Macdonald's suit, encouraged by his assertions that the appearance of biomorphic forms in her drawing demonstrated a connection to her unconscious. "Ha! Ha! This is interesting news about what is happening in your automatic paintings. Things are beginning to move … now that you find things definitely suggestive of nature forms, you can be sure that the door is open – Excellent!"[4] Over the next decade, Marion Nicoll filled hundreds of sketch books following that advice, but kept all those images to herself.

In terms both of form and content, the automatics determined Macdonald's subsequent career as an abstract painter. For Nicoll, however, it was the method, not the material, of automatic drawing, that mattered. "It gave me assurance. I'm now absolutely sure that I have a place on which I stand, from which I can paint; that's what the automatic drawing did. It beat a path in and I know I'm not going to dry up."[5] This practice carried Nicoll into another art-historical stream, also originating from Surrealist automatism. As the American Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell argued: "What happened in

American painting after the war had its origins in automatism assimilated to the particular New York situation, that is, the Surrealist tone and literary qualities were dropped and the doodle transformed into something plastic, mysterious, and sublime."[6]

For Marion Nicoll, that transformation to the sublime involved inner urges and awe-inspiring scenery and culminated in the 1968–69 triptych *Journey to the Mountains*. Her descriptive titling of the three panels of her painting as: *Approach*, *The Mountains*, and *Return* (1968), demonstrates her awareness of the Jungian theories of Joseph Campbell, as presented in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).[7] This work, apparently so unusual in her oeuvre, integrated themes in her art and herself. Iconographically, the triptych reflects the formative years under her teacher A. C. Leighton, whose own art expresses a combination of gratification, excitement, and anxiety evoked by the sight of mountains. Her mountains call to mind Leighton's preoccupation with that same subject, and their gigantism can be understood as a visual metaphor for the catalytic power they exercised over his art. Leighton's response to the Rocky Mountains allied him to the venerable artistic tradition developed around the idea of the sublime. Another version of that idea resonated among the abstract artists of New York. Thus, Barnett Newman's well-known 1948 essay, "The Sublime is Now,"[8] placed the onus on the artist, focussed on the inner landscape of his imagination, rather than on the soaring peaks of the natural world, to create his own experience of the sublime. As befits these influences, Marion Nicoll turned the spare, large forms of the American Abstract Expressionists into objective correlatives for her own observed subjects. Here Nicoll used large forms to create dynamic structures liberated from distracting detail. These characteristics in her art stemmed from her experience with Will Barnet at Emma Lake, and subsequently in New York. Thereafter, she created increasingly larger arenas in which formal relationships between shapes abstracted from nature became the true subject of her work. With

fewer constituent elements, the structure of Nicoll's images became more cohesive and their effect more dramatic.

Nicoll arrived at Will Barnet's Emma Lake Workshop of 1957 with a background of academic art training and a fervent, private practice of automatic drawing. She was technically proficient, self-disciplined and creatively at a loss: "I wasn't satisfied but I didn't know what to do." Brush in hand, Nicoll contemplated the model, mirror, books, and other elements that Barnet set for the workshop to sketch.

> I drew a line … and there it was … once I saw what I was doing I was astonished. Barnet had a way of setting up a still life so it had an odd partial reflection of a figure. Your eye would stretch … all of a sudden, I was cut loose. I spent three weeks at Emma Lake.[9] This [abstraction] was for ME, believe you me … I felt like somebody had cut off a hundred pounds and given me wings.[10]

The psychological tension arising from self-imposed isolation, perhaps exacerbated by the largely monotonous proliferation of undulating lines and colour washes of the automatic drawings, had a rebound effect for Marion Nicoll. She was hungry for a means to express a formidable creative intelligence. Her wholehearted embrace of abstract art during two weeks spent at Emma Lake during the summer of 1957 was, for her, a vividly dramatic experience. However, it was predicated upon a body of knowledge about tone, an extreme sensitivity to line, and the habit of minute observation she had learned from "the best teacher I ever had," A. C. Leighton.[11] This knowledge lay dormant while she quietly filled her drawing notebooks, after hours of teaching crafts and design to students at the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art (known as "the Tech," and later the Alberta College of Art and Design). After her conversion to abstraction, it emerged

transformed when she began to create abstract paintings in New York, in 1958. Nicoll understood this connection, and she conveyed gratitude to her longstanding teacher and friend for his gift of knowledge and means that now, remarkably, sustained her new way of painting. She recalled that: "Leighton looked at the things I was doing when I came back from New York and he was upset .… But what I told him was what he had taught me about drawing was there … and his sense of expansion, of scale."[12]

Nicoll's conversion to abstraction was sudden. Facing the model at Emma Lake, she had a remarkably lucid experience of being in two different, but related, states of mind. One was the internally focussed and disinterested mode she cultivated over a decade-long practice of automatic drawing. The other was the outwardly focussed, task-oriented stand of an art student, looking intently at what she was about to paint. In a moment of intense self-consciousness, she witnessed her own creative transformation. Though British Surrealists explained automatic drawing by reference to the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Nicoll associated them with interpretations of these ideas by Carl Jung. According to Jung, the unconscious was a treasure house of universally shared mythic images whose contents must first be revealed, then integrated into conscious awareness, in order for an individual to achieve psychic wholeness, or individuation. Nicoll's recollections of her experience at Emma Lake are remarkably consistent with Jung's description of that process.

> The moment when this mythological situation reappears is always characterized by a peculiar emotional intensity; it is as though chords in us were struck that had never resounded before.… So it is not surprising that when an archetypal situation occurs we suddenly feel an extraordinary sense of release, as though transported, or caught up by an overwhelming power.[13]

Marion Nicoll
*The Model*, 1958
Watercolour on paper
26.5 × 20 cm
Collection of Alberta Foundation for the Arts

Marion Nicoll
*Sketchbook*, 1968
Pencil, ink, felt pen on paper
26.9 × 21 cm
Collection of Alberta Foundation for the Arts,
1978.048.001.A-O, Capital Arts M5-5

After Emma Lake, Nicoll rushed headlong toward the centre of contemporary art. "We're going to New York," she told her husband. She loved the city. "It stank, and there were all those crimes and everything, but that is a beautiful city. I've never worked as hard in my life as I did that year."[14] Mornings were spent at the Art Students League in Barnet's classes, and from noon until 11 p.m. she painted. Barnet took her to the galleries and introduced her around. She was taken seriously and was offered a teaching position at the Cooper Union. Nicoll's refusal of this offer and decision to return to Calgary marked a turning point in her life.

By 1957, avant-garde painters from the Canadian prairies were starting a fertile relationship with New York Abstract Expressionism, as exemplified by its artists and promoted by its critics. Nicoll's own creative itinerary, however, was not simply a microcosmic version of what Kirk Varnedoe has called "the Road to Flatness," the narrative of how non-objective, abstract painting allegedly evolved from modernism in Paris to mid-twentieth century New York Abstract Expressionism, "according to which pioneers like Matisse initiated a series of narrowing refinements that eventually led artists to distil the essence of being pictorial, in the absolute particulars of color and shape on a plane."[15] Granted, when Marion Nicoll came to artistic maturity, artists and critics in avant-garde New York accepted this narrative, exemplified by Clement Greenberg's well-known declarations about the nature of contemporary painting. Marion Nicoll, however, associated with New York painters who rejected that narrative. In 1960, Will Barnet wrote that: "I want every part of the canvas to be a constant image, with no passages, vaporous, obscure or left as ground.… I go beyond much of the current painting where forms float and the surface is still there as a foil, as something, somehow, plastically inexistent."[16]

As much as she admired the paintings of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Hans Hofmann, Nicoll, like Barnet, refused to emulate the amorphous and atmospheric

character of their work. To the question posed by Moppet and Hall: "Why are your shapes so clearly defined? Why do they have to be that way?" she responded:

> I hate a mushy line … an uncertain intermingling.… Painting for me is all on the picture plane, the actual surface of the canvas, with the power held in the horizontal and vertical movements of the expanding color shapes. There can be, for me, no overlapping transparencies or fuzzy edges – all these are a hangover from romantic, naturalistic painting.[17]

In Barnet's workshop at Emma Lake she began, not only to mine her subject for abstract, formal relationships on canvas but to see them in new ways: "Barnet had a way of setting up a still life with figure … your eye would stretch."[18] Nicoll consciously began to paint on the picture plane because she was now able to see such planar relationships between three-dimensional forms in the world. Barnet's comment about forms floating on the surface of paintings undoubtedly refers to the work of Mark Rothko, wherein the viewer perceives coloured forms hovering above the ground, instead of serving to establish that ground. Nicoll's rhetorical aversion to an "uncertain intermingling" makes the same point. She consciously painted on the picture plane in order to create forms on the canvas which sustain a particular set of visual relationships discovered in a subject, rather than simply pulled from her imagination or flowing off her brush. While in New York, she responded to some critical comments on her painting:

> What you describe is 'abstract expressionism' which is anathema to a 'classical abstractionist' such as myself. I start with something – the model – the street we live in, the newsstand at the corner and struggle with the thing, drawing it, trying to find the skeleton that is there.[19]

Nor, unlike many of her contemporaries, did she abandon her academic training. " I think you have to learn how to draw before you start expressing yourself.… Whether people like it or not there are rules … there are natural laws that can't be broken. Man, by nature, needs the enclosure of discipline, imposed by society, or built by himself."[20] Ron Moppet commented: "Calgary artists at that time always felt that they had to earn their abstraction" by proving their mastery of conventional techniques.[21] Nicoll paid the dues for that discipline during her earliest days as an art student. When Leighton was her instructor at the "Tech," he deemed a group of her landscape sketches "splashy work."[22] As a corrective exercise, he instructed her to draw careful copies of bootlaces. Nicoll, grateful to receive a framework for her practice, accepted his criticism good-naturedly. She incorporated Leighton's exacting technical standards into her own design curriculum. Echoing Leighton and Barnet, Nicoll declared that: "you have to be a craftsman if you're going to be a painter."[23]

Indeed, Marion Nicoll became an abstract painter in part because she shielded her art practice from the conventional methods and values of her peers. She saw continuity between Leighton's teaching and the methods of her abstract painting.

> He influenced me in tone. One thing I know is tone. Without thinking about it, I know the tone of every color I look at. What it is in relation to the next color as far as light and dark is concerned. This sounds trivial but I use that today in abstract painting.… For the whole winter, we used two colors; he'd set up a still-life group (and) burnt sienna and ultramarine blue. We had to get every degree of light/dark, warm/cold that there was … not matching the color but matching the warmth or coldness and the light or dark, and we did this for one whole school year.[24]

In the later 1950s, within this disciplined framework of traditional education and technical expertise, Nicoll began to unleash very big, strong forms. An analysis of them reveals a vital continuity between historically distant and contemporary ideas of the sublime, her breakthrough to abstraction, and the influence of Jung's concept of individuation. Connections between these ideas and Nicoll's art were forged at different times and places.

To find an artistic voice, Nicoll turned to her subconscious and learned to combine the creative energy arising from within herself with that aroused by her teachers. Her epiphany at Emma Lake, an intuitive leap, preceded by thousands of privately rehearsed steps, was a vivid demonstration of the Jungian theory in which "you forget absolutely nothing."[25] Then, in New York, Nicoll was surrounded by painting on a grand scale and by painters who asserted themselves though the use of bold forms and techniques. These passionate Americans taught her creative entitlement: that an artist's forms could, and should, match the scale of his vision. That gendered pronoun is significant; during the 1950s, entitlement in art was overwhelmingly a male experience. Nicoll's espousal of tough standards and arduously acquired technique was her way to establish unimpeachable credentials within a culture that assigned privilege according to sex.

Meanwhile, the focus on bold forms was consistent with her earlier experiences of Leighton's mountain subjects. Marion Nicoll enrolled as an art student at "the Tech" in 1928, with a nineteen-year-old's overweening confidence and experience: "I came from the Ontario College of Art with my nose in the air.... Leighton put me back where I belonged."[26] She entered Leighton's world of academic and technical discipline and the subjects that dominated his work: mountain range panoramas, crashing glacial falls, and gigantic silent skies where travelling clouds drift and gather among peaks and jagged snowfields. The familiar outdoors of Nicoll's Alberta girlhood was transformed by

Leighton into atmospheric watercolour and pastel sketches, rapidly executed and acutely observed, by an artist who recently had found himself in an unexpectedly exhilarating landscape. As he recalled,

> The grandeur of the scenery, the purity and beauty of the colouring being indescribable … the scale of the landscape was tremendous. I soon found that a fourteen inch by ten inch canvas was too small, even too rough in composition, and something much larger was necessary to portray the magnitude, the imposing force and dignity of those mountains.[27]

These statements invoke Edmund Burke's famous comparison of the merely beautiful to the awe-inspiring sublime. Burke cites mountains and their properties, like vastness and height, as natural sights apt to provoke heightened emotions.[28] Immanuel Kant developed similar ideas.[29] The association between the idea of the sublime and the experience of mountains culminated in the educational Grand Tour, when upper-class youths crossed the Alps in order to see Italy and the material remains of the Renaissance and Classical worlds. Terry Fenton emphasized the importance of this tradition in the 1989 catalogue for the exhibition *Alfred Crocker Leighton and The Canadian Rockies*:

> Huge, remote, and beautiful, the Canadian Rockies were Leighton's predestined subject. Chosen for him by a combination of circumstance, temperament, and tradition, they stimulated his genius as did nothing else. Circumstance was provided by his employer (the Canadian Pacific Railway), temperament was innate, tradition was quintessentially English. English sensibility had discovered the beauties and terrors of alpine scenery during the eighteenth century while en route to Italy on the Grand Tour.… By the

A. C. Leighton
*The Lake, Molar Mountain*, ca. 1948
Pencil and watercolour on paper
29.2 × 29.5 cm
Art Gallery of Alberta Collection,
purchased with funds donated by Dr. Brian Hitchon, 81.20

A. C. Leighton
*Valley of the Giants, Banff*, ca. 1950
Oil on canvas
45.72 × 55.88 cm
Leighton Art Centre, Calgary, Alberta
Leighton Foundation Collection

> mid-nineteenth century, alpine scenery was so highly regarded in England that John Ruskin devoted several chapters to the subject in his study Modern Painters. By Leighton's time, the tradition was entrenched in British Art.[30]

Leighton had more than just a traveller's interest in the mountains. Armed with paints and brushes, he climbed right into them and felt an obsessive need for a bigger canvas to carry the weight of his subject. He strove to make art worthy of the mountains: "At Christmas break, rather than relaxing, Leighton spent eight days sketching in the mountains. Often waist-deep in snow, with his easel buried almost out of sight, the cold stiffened the pigments on his palette and caused him to suffer from frostbite."[31]

Marion Nicoll's earliest work reveals the influence of her physical environment and her teacher's passionate devotion to it. After 1945, the habit of automatic drawing loosened her brushstrokes and emboldened her view. Leighton's *The Lake, Molar Mountain* (ca. 1948) and Nicoll's *Bright Day* (1947) were painted at about the same time. The iconographical influence is obvious. Though Leighton's watercolour is more subdued and conventional than Nicoll's oil, both images are constructed with painterly, impressionistic brushstrokes that convey the movement of light on the ground. Leighton's background mountains are punctuated by a huge snowfield, cupped between adjoining peaks by a necklace of abstracted grey nuggets. In Nicoll's *Bright Day*, abstracted forms come vividly to the surface, creating a strong impression of transient cloud cover and a blustery spring wind.

Despite his penchant for academic propriety and the colour grey, Leighton was fascinated by the dramatic, expressive potential of mountain scenery. His *Valley of the Giants, Banff*, an oil painting from about 1950, is as sublime a scene as any eighteenth-century Romantic writers could have imagined. Joseph Addison wrote, "In order to produce these peculiar impressions of sublimity on the human mind, certain degrees of material

largeness are absolutely necessary.… No beauty of design … will entirely take the place of what might be called brute largeness."[32]

Leighton's enthusiasm for mountains and the sublime led him to found the Banff School of Fine Arts in 1935. With a small group of devotees, Leighton and Nicoll embarked on regular sketching trips to Canmore, in a vehicle dubbed "The Maroon Mariah."[33] These transcendent mountain images and her first teacher acquired a personal significance for her. Nicoll continued to admire the exemplary academicism of his methodology, both as artist and teacher: "Leighton was the best teacher I ever had. He was a complete influence, and I trusted him completely," she declared in a late interview.[34] Never did she record resentment toward the repetitious drawing exercises, the narrow boundaries of practice, or the exclusive emphasis on the importance of tone, versus colour, in Leighton's art program. In fact, these characteristics resonated with an important aspect of her personality, which favoured a systematic approach to creativity.

Unlike the model of the modernist painter of art history, Marion Nicoll did not "reject" academic art teaching; she absorbed it like nutrients. When Will Barnet encouraged her to paint in an abstract style, Nicoll was already equipped, through her years with Leighton, with a profound and practised understanding of tonal and colour relationships and mastery of line. As Leighton arranged white porcelain tableware and old boots, Barnet assigned drawing exercises from the model, as a matter of course. On a page of teaching notes, from 1956, he wrote: "How to think and feel the forces of a figure – leaning on an object."[35] Like Leighton, Barnet engaged the structure of his subject and admired form above colour: "form is the very essence of painting and color the final binder."[36]

Barnet saw in Marion Nicoll's work at Emma Lake a formidable ability to comprehend relationships between the "forces," or structural dynamics, of her subject and to

transform their living presence onto a flat surface. With initial guidance from Barnet, Nicoll learned to paint shapes on canvas that suggest the figure's substance, vigour, and potential for movement, whatever her actual subject might be. Her increasing confidence began to be expressed in larger paintings, with wider and increasingly elevated views of her home landscape.

Again, landscape as a subject and the sublime as a theme characterized not just Leighton but the avant garde. Robert Rosenblum noted in his influential article "The Abstract Sublime": "As imprecise and irrational as the feelings it tried to name, the sublime could be extended to art as well as to nature. One of its major expressions, in fact, was the painting of sublime landscapes."[37]

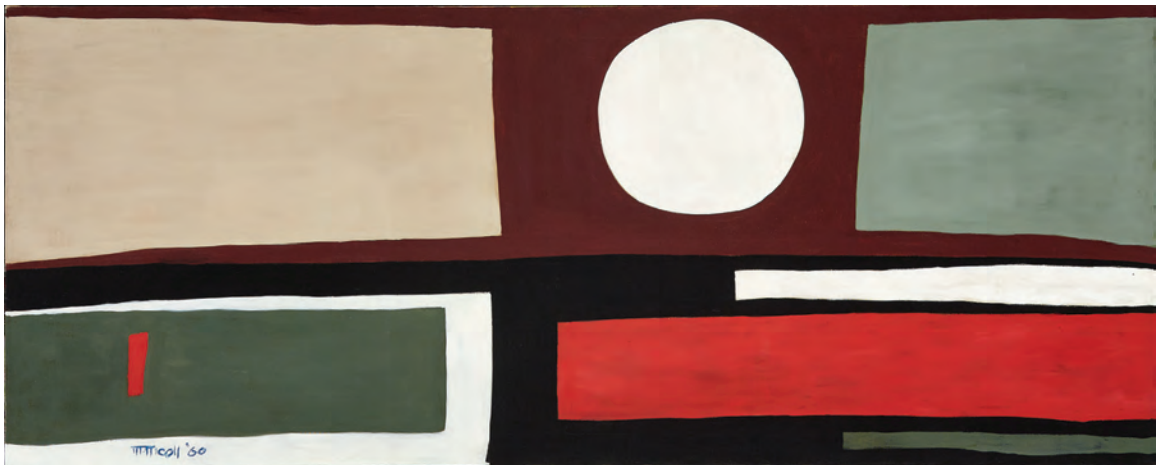
Following her year in New York, Nicoll and her husband Jim travelled to Sicily. There she painted her first mature abstract painting. *Sicilia II, The House of the Padrone* (1959) is a masterpiece of exquisitely subtle and dynamic spatial relationships, close luminous tones, and animated planar forms. Its dynamic power derives from the deliberate visual instability of its parts. That is, spatial relationships between forms may be read alternately, but not simultaneously, in two antithetical ways. For example, the large black shape in the middle of the picture looks like a lateral view of a cube surmounting the roof of the house. This subtle illusion stems from the slight downward slant of the narrow strip that points toward the right edge of the canvas, which the viewer's eye interprets as a corner. Equally, this black shape can be read as a perfectly two-dimensional part of an abstract design, which is abutted on the left side by a square-shaped form of luminous beige with an irregular top edge. The black, tail-shaped form above this beige square tapers toward the left edge of the image. Or, is this form only a fragment of that large black shape that would be visible, were it not obstructed by the beige square? In other words, is this picture the "dynamics of the horizontal and vertical elements" Nicoll describes, or the

"skeleton" she started with: the massive old bones of a Sicilian stone house? It is neither of these things at once, but both of them in sequence. Comparable dynamics of colour and shape recur throughout *The House of the Padrone*. The flatness of the picture plane is emphasized by the visual relationship between the taupe-coloured shape below the top black "corner" and the corresponding black form at the bottom right of the painting. The central taupe protuberance points toward the sharp corner of beige on the right, which turns the eye toward the finger of black at the bottom. This finger points to the terracotta corner on the lower left, drawing the viewer's gaze down along its sloping irregular top land and back into the middle of the painting, to make the visual circuit once again, without ever once entering an illusory space "into" the picture, somewhere beyond its literal canvas plane. Nicoll had struggled to transform her analytical grasp of subjects into forms whose relationships are sound and complex enough to sustain many visual meanings. Here in Sicily in 1959, on a canvas three feet high and three and a half feet wide, she found a vehicle to express the monumentality of her vision.

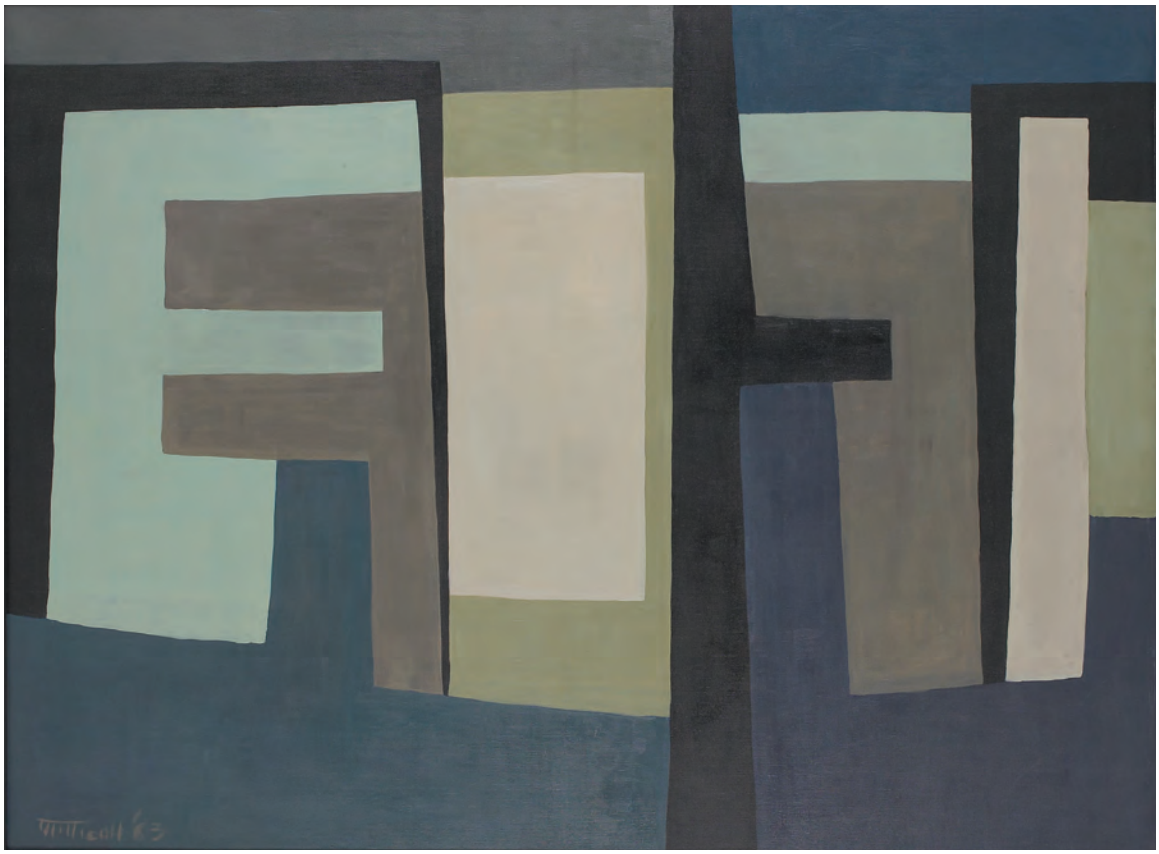
Nicoll's antipathy toward "overlapping transparencies and fuzzy edges" is a metaphorical way to communicate her precise intentions and muscular resolve to make art with big, strong forms. She rejected the taped, artificial exactitude of painted lines exemplified in the work of hard-edge Abstract Expressionists like Frank Stella, in favour of the organic outlines and contours of Will Barnet's painting of the 1950s. The hypersensitive quality of the edges of Nicoll's forms is a crucial formal device in her mature abstract painting. Despite her rhetorical disavowal of painterly romanticism and fuzzy edges, her forms are fluid, mobile, and variously animated by their surroundings. The painter Sean Scully's comments on the work of Mark Rothko applies equally to the art of Marion Nicoll: "[Rothko discovered] … these beautiful in-between colors and the way they are

allowed to breathe, the notion of the sensitive edge, so you have the minimalist spirit and the romantic spirit in one person."[38]

Over the course of the 1960s, as her work becomes larger and more spare, the slightly irregular edges become increasingly significant. They record the minute movements of her arm and hand, subtly animating simple, large areas of flat paint so that the visual relationships between them become charged and dynamic. Although persistently naturalistic colour references anchor her images to the world outside, Nicoll becomes, as her close friend Ron (Gyo-Zo) Spickett said, "one with the object of thought."[39] When Geoffrey Simmins posed the question "Marion made the comment that she 'was drawing on both sides of the line.' "What do you think she meant?," Spickett replied: "That's seeing the space, if you're drawing a line oblivious to where you are, then you're seeing form and you are not seeing relationships."[40] Thus, in *Alberta VI*, *Prairie* (1960), the long, rectangular expanses of a varied group of prairie fields and roads and the incandescent pallor of a full moon on a darkening horizon are displayed like captured territory, while elements of the notoriously challenging panorama of Alberta landscape point us toward the centre stage of the painting. The jutting red stripe at the lower right is halted by the short but visually alarming stroke of the same colour on the left, directing our gaze back toward the black T-junction of the horizon. This red stroke signals the existence of the picture plane, lest we read the white enclosure beyond simply as open air. A bluish-green square drifts gently within the confines of upper-right corner of the painting, rising slightly toward the beckoning white disk. This small but crucial movement creates a widening aperture of luminous brown night sky underneath, which is neither simply an illusion of depth nor an unambiguous strip of painted canvas. In *Alberta VI, Prairie*, the familiar sensation of a prairie horizon diminishing at the periphery of sight is transformed into a vision of the dark earth rising under the light of an ancient moon.

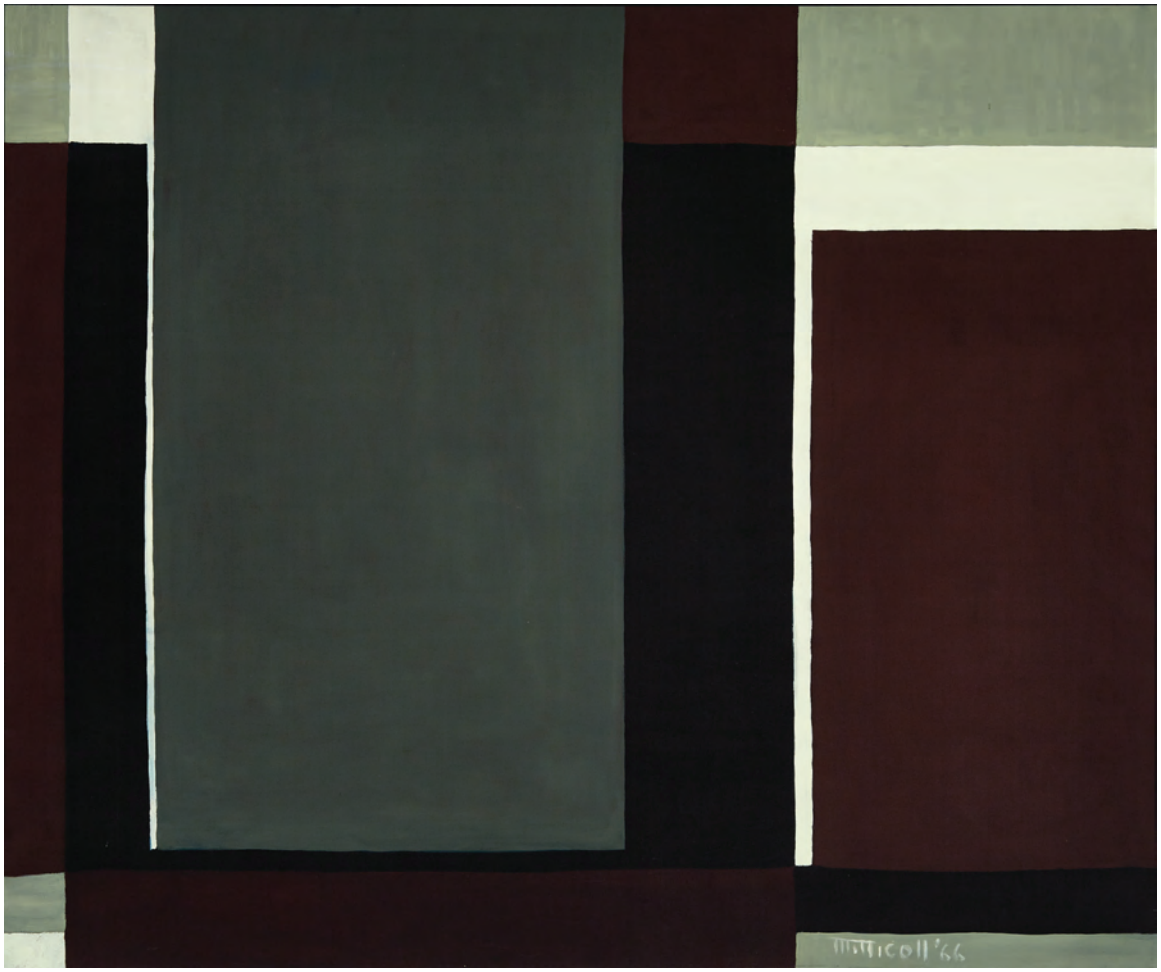



Marion Nicoll
*Alberta VI, Prairie*, 1960
Oil on canvas
60.9 × 152.4 cm
Private Collection, Calgary



Marion Nicoll
*Bowness Road, 2 am*, 1963
Oil on canvas
136.0 × 186.0 cm
Collection of Glenbow Museum

Marion Nicoll
*Foothills No. 1*, 1965
Oil and lucite 44 on canvas
136.0 × 186.0 cm
Collection of Glenbow Museum, gift of Don and Shirley Grace, 1995




Marion Nicoll
*Calgary III – 4 a.m.*, 1966
Oil on canvas
113.5 × 136.2 cm
Collection of Nickle Galleries

Through the 1960s, Nicoll's forms become heavier and more declarative, her angles sharper, and her canvases larger. At the same time, her life-long surroundings, the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, the prairie, the city of Calgary, and "the street she lives on," in Bowness, become her chosen subjects. *Bowness Road, 2 am* (1963), *Foothills I* (1965), and *Calgary III–4 a.m*. (1966) are evidence that she is taking stock of a world in which she alone is the centre. These were hard years. She yearned for New York, where, she lamented to a *Calgary Herald* interviewer: "I'm twice as alive.… New York is a friendlier place than Calgary … to me, it's the most beautiful city in the world." At home, she said, "I cannot sell my work."[41] In 1965, a short feature about Nicoll, titled *Life and Painting Synonymous for Calgary Artist-Teacher*, commented that "Mrs. Nicoll's abstract paintings are accepted and sold in Edmonton, Vancouver, Winnipeg and Eastern Canada but not in Calgary. Why is the artist's hometown exceptional?" Nicoll replied: "I wish I knew. Many of the local artists are acknowledged throughout Canada and even in the United States but not by Calgarians."[42]

Her concentration was undiminished by lack of recognition and financial success. *Bowness Road, 2:00 a.m*. is a huge and ambitious mural-sized view of her neighbourhood, in the silent half-light of the wee hours. Nicoll has created a series of interlocking irregular geometric shapes in subtle variations on a grey scale. They suggest the proliferation of acute angles and variously proximate planes of built structures assembled along a panoramic view of the suburban street. The black band with an abrupt unilateral extension on the viewer's right splits the scene into two unequal portions. On the other side of this band, which is Bowness Road itself, are the solid forms, intermittent illuminated patches, and unordered angled spaces of the neighbourhood. The viewer is drawn into a compelling and continuous assessment of their literal and implied relationships. For example, the dark grey and pale blue interlocked "F" shapes are simultaneously

cantilevered away from both the left edge of the painting and the enclosed lighted rectangle bordering the road. As a result, this composite shape appears to detach itself from its black frame and to obliquely approach the adjacent lighted rectangle. The narrow, black space between the composite "F" form and the rectangle thus alternately appears on the verge of both closing and opening. The dynamism created by such ambiguities informs the entire painting. Nicoll's forms, though basically geometrical, resist exactitude. In this way, they call to mind the changeable nature of appearances themselves: like footprints in the snow that are filled with violet shadows in late afternoon, a neighbour's windows that are transformed into sheets of gold by the setting sun, or a receding highway that unravels like a black ribbon in the rearview mirror of a speeding car.

In Nicoll's work, relationships between forms and spaces are inherently unstable. This leads to a continuous reassessment of these shapes whose contours have multiple functions or formal identities. We are tantalized by an empty space that turns out to be a plane, or a corner that is a crooked line on a flat surface. The way we see things, the nature of vision itself, is a subject in the art of Marion Nicoll. As a product of her "struggle" to decipher and represent the "skeleton" of things, her work embodies both the character of the subject and the method of its capture. Nicoll repeated to a journalist this same year (1963) the credo of her own, personal abstraction: "When I use the word 'abstract,' I do so in the strict meaning of the word as given in the dictionary 'to take from.' All my work is soundly based on natural forms and experiences."[43] She was not casting aside the incidental, subjective aspects of her subject in order to extract from it a group of universal forms like the triangles of the Theosophists. Nor did she share the Abstract Expressionists' disassociation of form and process from content. Instead, she sought to incorporate the experience of seeing, as well as the subject, into her art. Picasso's comments on the nature of this sort of creative process remain the most profoundly insightful:

> There is no abstract art. You must always start with something. Afterward you can remove all traces of reality. There's no danger then, anyway, because the idea of the object will have left an indelible mark.… They [ideas and emotions] form an integral part of it, even when their presence is no longer discernible.[44]

*Calgary III – 4 a.m.* was painted three years later at the brink of daybreak. Panels of grey-mauve, purple, and violet are painted sparingly so as to reveal amorphous areas of light-coloured canvas in their centres. These fading panels of the night's end are punctuated by narrow white stripes of emerging morning light. The big, black enclosure of night around the centre is now slightly awry, like a mat slipped away from the focal point of a properly framed picture. Nicoll's subject is a particular set of relationships in space and in time; at night on the prairie or at 2:00 a.m. and 4:00 a.m. in the city.

Three years later, she was commissioned by an Edmonton collector to paint a mountain scene. This extraordinary work, called *Journey to the Mountains*, is a triptych that measures 12 feet high and 9 feet long. The scale alone suggests that *Journey* was destined for an interior wall of an ambitious architectural project. Certainly, the mathematical precision of measurements and proportions of the preparatory drawings indicate that it was intended for a specific space. For unknown reasons, the collector reneged on their agreement, inflicting serious financial and psychological damage. With no hope of selling the massive painting, Nicoll donated it to the University of Calgary, where it was installed in the lobby of the library. This overwhelming work, unlike anything else she ever painted, literally overfilled the visual field of any viewer less than twenty feet away. For this reason, it is strikingly reminiscent of Addison's description of the qualities inherent in a sublime view: "By greatness I don't mean bulk of any single object … but

largeness of a whole view considered as one entire piece … huge heaps of mountains.… Our imagination loves to be filled with an object, or to grasp at anything that is too big for its capacity."[45]

Nicoll called the work *Journey to the Mountains* and titled each of the three panels. From the left they are: *Approach*, *The Mountains*, and *Return*. By the logic of the panel titles, the work should be read like the narrative in a text, left to right. Yet, unlike a textual narrative, it presents differentiated times, not sequentially, but simultaneously. The *Approach*, *The Mountains*, and *Return* are represented not from our point of view but from that of the artist. Mountains are visible in the distance, then up close, then disappearing into the distance as if seen when looking back, from a car window, perhaps reflecting past experiences of travelling there and back again, in "The Maroon Mariah." This vehicular perspective is suggested by the rearview-mirror-like white shape near the bottom left in the first panel. This is not a "view" of a mountain panorama; the degree of schematization of natural elements, mountains, sky, sun, and moon precludes classification as landscape.

*Journey to the Mountains* is an outcome of Nicoll's experience of A. C. Leighton's Banff School of Art and her longstanding familiarity with his devotion to Rocky Mountain iconography. The question now arises: is a particular idea expressed by Nicoll's *Journey*? The answer lies in the creative history of the artist herself. The *Journey to the Mountains* is the journey of the hero, as revealed in its immense diversity and singular thematic content by the Jungian scholar Joseph Campbell. The second edition of his seminal work *The Hero with the Thousand Faces* was released in 1968, the same year Nicoll was working on the triptych. Campbell's "Journey of the Hero" has three stages, which are captured in the first three chapter headings: Departure, Initiation, and Return.[46] The

journey, metaphorically, is an exploration of the self, which culminates in psychological awareness, individuation, and achievement.

The union of the conscious with the unconscious through automatic drawing prepared Nicoll for the revelatory experience at Emma Lake. From that moment on, she knew she must be a painter. Her relationships with A. C. Leighton, Jock Macdonald, and Will Barnet were instrumental to her life as an artist. Her resolution of these influences is apparent in her work from 1959 until her death. The three panels of *Journey to the Mountains—Approach*, *The Mountains*, and *Return*—correspond to the three stages of the hero's journey; Departure, Initiation, and Return.

For Marion Nicoll, the Rocky Mountains resonated with a deep, personal symbolism. She witnessed, through Leighton, the dramatic, formative power of the mountain sublime. In New York, discussion of the subject continued in Barnett Newman's essay "The Sublime is Now," which asserted that the sublime could reside in non-objective forms, rather than "outmoded legends."[47] In this context, *Journey to the Mountains* is an allegory of her growth into artistic maturity. The work is forbidding, intimidating in its scale. To carry the weight of her history, she needed the biggest boat she could pilot. The images are severe and cerebral rather than sensuous, cold despite large areas of textured orange, and symbolic rather than expressive. It is a scene of arduous exertion, measured endurance, and piercing topography.

It is also, like *Alberta VI, Prairie*, and many of Marion Nicoll's other works, a declaration of ownership over a chosen motif. Mountains, of all the subjects in the history of Canadian art, are the most resonant and symbolic. Historical ideas of the sublime were

subsumed into the personal and spiritual mountain images of members of the Group of Seven who visited the west and discovered in the Rocky Mountains a geometrical correlative to their spiritual strivings. They are the subject *par excellence* of Lawren Harris himself, whose abstracted mountain paintings became emblems of the central Canadian art establishment. For Marion Nicoll, these mountains were of deeper and more personal significance. They were witnesses to all stages of her life's journey – amid them she lived though many movements of the planets, and many changes of perspective. In 1969, the immobilizing pain from severe rheumatoid arthritis dictated an end to the boldest and most creative part of her life. *Journey to the Mountains* is Marion Nicoll's final large project. These sharp, vivid peaks and pointed skies are a modernist's vision of the self, within the panorama of home.

**Elizabeth Herbert** has a BA from the University of Toronto, an MA from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London (UK) and an MA from the Courtauld Institute of Art (University of London, UK). She teaches at the University of Calgary and is the author of *The Art of John Snow* (University of Calgary Press, 2010).

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Harry Palmer
Jim and Marion Nicoll, 1983
Silver print
22.0 × 31.5 cm
Collection of Nickle Galleries

CHAPTER THREE

# "MINE HAD A RIPPLE IN IT"

by Jennifer Salahub[1]

The year 1916 may not seem an auspicious one in the history of the city of Calgary. The "War to End All Wars" was in progress and the Herald was regularly reporting the losses incurred by the Alberta Regiment of the Canadian Infantry. And, for better or for worse, 1916 was the year that prohibition was introduced to Alberta. On the other hand, the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art ("the Tech") opened its doors to its first students, and Alberta women were finally given the vote. And, in a grade one class, the young Marion Florence Mackay [Nicoll] (1909–1985) received public recognition for her art – because she did not do what was expected. "We were all supposed to draw the Union Jack. Mine had a ripple in it."[2] – arguably the first step on a long and creative journey that would always be anchored by Calgary and "the Tech." 1916 was indeed a remarkable year.

In that same year, the American poet Robert Frost (1874–1963) published "The Road Not Taken," speaking to the fact that on the journey of life one must make choices, that we cannot travel both paths and while our intentions may be good, they remain just that – intentions. Art historians have been offered a variety of methods and approaches

to the study of art, and for many this has meant embracing the revisionist art histories of the 1970s and travelling down unexplored paths that have proven to be, one hopes, ground-breaking. Nevertheless, historians of visual culture must remain ever vigilant, not only forging new paths but also retracing the trails that others have followed and re-examining the milestones that others have identified as noteworthy. For, even within the carefully considered and re-considered art histories, much remains obscure, ripe for recuperation. This essay is a case in point, for it considers an overlooked path – one defined by craft – travelled by Marion Nicoll.

Devotees of Canadian art know something about Marion Nicoll, her iconic paintings and prints are found in most public collections, she is mentioned in almost every Canadian art history text, she is recognized as a successful woman artist, and she is identified as one of the few women teaching at a post-secondary art institution in the mid-twentieth century. Her work was singled out by the influential art critic Clement Greenberg as "among the best both in oil and in water colour"[3] and she has recently been described as "the most determined, the most inventive and today, the most recognized female artist in the emergence of abstract art in the province."[4] Given this familiarity with her paintings and her long association with an art college, it is disconcerting to discover that, with one exception, she never taught painting.[5] She was, in fact, an instructor in craft and design, teaching jewellery, leather, ceramics, batik, and printing on fabric at the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art, "the Tech," what is now the Alberta College of Art and Design, for almost three decades.

At first reading, one might consider Marion Mackay Nicoll to be an exemplary model of a Canadian woman artist, as she appears to have sauntered by many of the hurdles her contemporaries faced. Nevertheless, it will be shown that hers was a life and career defined by mid-century conventions and expectations regarding women, art,

craft, teaching, and the *writing* of art history. If I was fascinated by what I read in the contemporary literature, it was the caveats and what I didn't find that intrigued me more. Marion Nicoll was recognized as a significant *artist*, but this was always framed by mid-century language and cautionary warnings – she was above all else a *woman* and a *teacher*, especially in her hometown. A year before her retirement, a review of "Mrs. *James* (Marion) Nicoll's two week one-man show" reminds us of contemporary mores and the stereotypes that characterized the life of middle-aged women in a conservative Western Canada. The article entitled "Life and Painting Synonymous for Calgary Artist-Teacher" describes the "art and craft teacher" as – "a wife, housekeeper, full-time and night school teacher."[6]

There were obstacles, but the strategies that she employed were well considered – sins of omission perhaps? Here was a woman, born in Calgary just before the Great War, who set up an art studio in her parents' basement at the age of thirteen, and only dismantled it in 1940 when she married. Although her parents were cautious of her choosing a life in art, they enrolled her in extracurricular painting classes at St. Joseph's Convent, Red Deer, Alberta (1925–26) and in 1927 the then eighteen-year-old travelled from Alberta to attend the Ontario College of Art (OCA) in Toronto. There she studied painting, design, batik arts, and landscape, the latter under the tutelage of the Group of Seven's J.E.H. Macdonald (1873–1982).

After only two years (of a four-year diploma), ill health brought her back to Calgary where she continued her education, as a third-year student, at "the Tech" under the eye of the school's director, British landscape artist Alfred Crocker Leighton (1901–1965).[7] Leighton considered her studies in Toronto lacking, and he sent her back into first year for "more colour theory" and she began an "exhaustive academic training in water colours."[8] She quickly completed the expanded course load and successfully "prepared for


Marion Nicoll
*Batik*, ca. 1967
Textile
193.0 × 134.6 cm
Leighton Art Centre, Calgary, Alberta
Leighton Foundation Collection

the Royal Drawing Society of London Examinations," receiving five honours.[9] Upon graduating from the Tech in 1933 she was invited to work as a student-instructor (1933–35) and then an instructor (1935–37) teaching day classes alongside Leighton.

Encouraged by Leighton, Nicoll embarked on the next stage of her education, travelling in 1937 to England, six weeks by boat through the Panama Canal, to attend the Central School of Arts and Crafts (now Central St. Martins) in London. This was a school renowned for a faculty made up of successful craft practitioners and a curriculum innovative in both its educational objectives and its teaching methods. Given the political tensions in Europe, it is not surprising that she returned to Calgary, and the Provincial Institute's 1939/1940 calendar confirms that "Miss Marion Mackay A.S.A. has recently returned after a year's study at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London, England." It lists her as a member of the art staff, indicating that she was teaching "Arts and Crafts" in the Evening Session. From this point, Marion is often identified in the literature as the only female instructor at "the Tech." In fact, there were other women on the Art Department staff – albeit not permanent hires.[10]

In 1940, at the age of thirty-one, Marion Mackay married James "Jim" McLaren Nicoll (1892–1986), an engineer by training and by avocation a painter. They had met at the Calgary Sketch Club in 1931, the same year the Alberta Society of Artists was formed. Somewhat surprisingly, given her commitment to her career, she left her position and spent the war years moving about[11] with her husband – who was supervising construction jobs for the Commonwealth Air Training Programme. She continued to paint landscapes in the style in which she had been trained and taught extension courses offered by the University of Alberta in various communities. 1943 found her teaching art and craft as occupational therapy at the Central Alberta Sanatorium in Bowness. During the 1930s, the hospitals and sanatoria were inundated with victims of tuberculosis and

child polio, and the aftermath of World War II saw a growing respect and need for occupational therapy and in particular craft. In an advertisement for job opportunities in the May 1945 edition of *Craft Horizon*, readers would have read that: "One of the most valuable contributions made by WACs (Women's Army Corp) with the Medical Department is the return to health and self-confidence she makes possible for wounded and disabled soldiers by occupational therapy." The accompanying image was of men weaving. Referring to this period in a later autobiographical essay, Marion Nicoll would tersely write: "the writer married in 1940 and left the school."[12]

In 1945 the couple bought a tiny house in Bowness, then a western suburb of Calgary, and in 1947 Marion Nicoll resumed teaching at the art department of "the Tech" as a permanent instructor. Even as she was stepping into a permanent position, her husband Jim was removing himself from the work force, and it would be her income that would support them. Besides her well-attended design classes, she taught modelling, ceramics, mosaics, jewellery, leather tooling, batik, silk-screen, and wood-block printing on fabrics.

Historians are in agreement about the early steps that defined Marion's career path, although the serious discussion of her work begins only with her move towards the unexpected – automatic drawing and abstraction. It is generally agreed that the tipping point came after 1945 when J.W.G. "Jock" Macdonald (1897–1960) introduced her to automatic drawing, a practice that would inform much of her later work and life. Catharine Mastin suggests that Nicoll "kept her interests inside the private world of her sketchbooks [even as she] continued building her reputation at the Art Institute teaching in the craft and design fields."[13] Macdonald's support and Nicoll's innumerable sketchbooks segue into the mid-1950s anecdotes about the Emma Lake Workshops (1957), where she met and worked with the American artist Will Barnet (1911–2012).

Marion Nicoll
*Untitled (Automatic)*, 1960
Watercolour on paper
35.0 × 22.7 cm
Art Gallery of Alberta Collection,
purchased in 1982 with funds from the Miss Bowman Endowment

Marion Nicoll
*Untitled (wall hanging)*, 1956
Fabric dye on silk
50.8 × 116.8 cm
Collection of Glenbow Museum

Like other figures populating the mid-century art mythology, Nicoll has been positioned as a maverick – one who followed her own path, "Never wanted to be anything else,"[14] and is often presented in opposition to mainstream ideology. Rejection or grudging acceptance is integral to this mid-century fine art persona, and, what is more, not everyone *was* pleased with Nicoll's enthusiasm for abstraction and her path was neither easy nor profitable. Upon hearing of her obsession, Leighton is said to have walked the floors unable to sleep,[15] and a journalist writing in 1963 lamented, "Mrs. Nicoll's abstract paintings are accepted and sold in Edmonton, Vancouver, Winnipeg and Eastern Canada but not in Calgary. Why is the artist's hometown exceptional? [Nicoll's response] 'I wish I knew.'"[16]

From this point, the milestones are well marked in the history of Canadian Art. In 1958 she received the first of two Canada Council grants that allowed her to travel to the Mecca of Modern Art – New York City – where she attended Barnet's classes at the Art Students League. The decision to return to Calgary was made with some reluctance.[17] This was, in part, due to contemporary attitudes towards craft and women. Writing from New York she told a friend:

> In Calgary I'm considered a craftsman and a woman and after a while you lose that strong belief in yourself. You must have it to be a real painter. Of course Buck [Illingworth Kerr] would have me right back to what he considers normal and fitting to my lowly position in ten minutes. That's one reason I don't want to go back.[18]

Before returning to Calgary, she and Jim travelled to Europe to study major art collections. It is at this time we begin to find critical reviews of her work and, in 1959, when she was fifty, Marion Nicoll had her first solo exhibition, *Abstract Paintings by Marion*

Installation view of the 1971 exhibition *Jim and Marion Nicoll: Paintings at Glenbow Museum*. At right is *Batik*, ca. 1967, now in the Leighton Foundation Collection. Glenbow Archives, D769-13.

Marion Nicoll, ca. 1971, with *Batik*, ca. 1967. Glenbow Archives, D769-9.

*Nicoll*.[19] In 1963 she stated: "I am an abstract painter naturally and through conviction. A Painter must move into new expressions.… When I use the word abstract I do so in the strict meaning of the word as given in the dictionary – 'to take from' – all my work is soundly based on natural forms and experiences."[20]

It would be recognition from south of the border that would mark her entry into the heady world of modern art discourse. In the oft-cited 1963 article "View of Art on the Prairies," Clement Greenberg wrote: "Among the best both in oil and in water colour was Marion Nicoll, who revealed the helpful influence of Will Barnet."[21] Despite Nicoll's response to the article, describing Greenberg's assessment as "a lot of heifer-dust," there is no doubt that this was a remarkable signpost on her career path.[22] Yet six months later a Calgary critic would proffer the view that "Mrs. Nicoll, a contributor to the 'hard edge school' produces a type of geometric abstraction.… She is a prolific painter, at one time overly influenced by New Yorker Will Barnet, but now refining her own imagery to a point where she is making an original contribution."[23] Nicoll's painting was acknowledged nationally, and she was one of the few Prairie artists to be included in the 1963 and 1965 National Gallery of Canada Biennial exhibitions.

At her retirement in January 1966, Nicoll was still the only permanent female instructor – and often said it took four men to replace her.[24] She had seen the institution through several incarnations. In 1960 the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art had been renamed the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) and the Art Department, although still part of SAIT, became the Alberta College of Art (ACA). In 1971 ACA moved to its present location, the Nellie McClung Building on the SAIT campus, and in 1985 it finally gained autonomy. In 1995 ACA became the Alberta College of Art and Design (ACAD) and began to grant degrees. Although debilitating arthritis defined her later years, Marion Nicoll cast a long shadow, her former students

remember her fondly, the student gallery at ACAD bears her name, and she set the standard, becoming the first woman from the prairies to be elected to the Royal Canadian Academy (1976).[25]

In his tribute to Nicoll at her retirement in 1966, the head of ACA, Illingworth "Buck" Kerr, clearly distinguished between the value of Nicoll's "feminine mind and temperament" and her "good work in support of crafts" as distinct from her "creative work as a painter."[26] Of Kerr, Nicoll would later say: "At the art school when Kerr was there I felt he didn't approve too much of women in positions of any responsibility.… It didn't worry me, just leave me alone and I'll do my work."[27] In his memoirs, Kerr's praise remains faint, writing that "Marion Nicoll, who in *due course* became noted for her splendid abstract paintings, taught Design and Crafts. She always battled to have the crafts recognized as equal to *any other form* of expression [emphasis added]."[28] Kerr's comments reflect the prevalent gender and media biases – biases that continue to underpin craft rhetoric in Canada. Even a recent web description reads that "as well as painting and printmaking, she *experimented* with fabric, batik and jewellery design. In fact, early in her career she was known as a craft teacher rather than an art teacher [emphasis added]."[29] Nicoll self-identified as an artist, a craftsperson, an educator, and a proponent of crafts but realized that different contexts called for different strategies.[30] Besides the required gloves (it was after all the mid-1950s), she was also sporting numerous hats. In many situations, she simply kept a low profile; in others, her humour served her well. Once when asked how it felt to be the only woman on staff, her apocryphal reply was: "almost outnumbered." Nonetheless, she was always serious about her worth as an art educator, believing that "inadequately trained instructors do more harm than good" and that a good instructor "is responsible for releasing and developing the innate design sense

of each student and leading the way into the adventure of new ideas, resulting in deep personal development."[31]

Others, in their descriptions of Nicoll's role in Canadian art history, are less generous, and on innumerable occasions the designation *teacher* is proffered as a means of modifying, even diminishing, her status as an artist. In *A Concise History of Canadian Painting* (1973), Dennis Reid states: "When Jock Macdonald taught in Calgary … he was most impressed with two painters: a *teacher* at the institute, Marion Nicoll [and] a local *architect-painter*, Maxwell Bates."[32] Even her success as a teacher-artist was interpreted as an ability to nurture rather than inspire. Writing in 1966, J. Russell Harper states "with Marion Nicoll's encouragement," William Panko [1892–1948] began to paint.[33] Along the same lines, in 1974, Barry Lord writes that Marion Nicoll was "the Calgary artist who showed Panko how to mix watercolours but was otherwise careful not to influence him."[34] Alex Janvier (b. 1935), a student of Marion's in the late 1950s, suggests that Nicoll's support for him arose from the shared experience of facing systemic barriers of sexism and racism – she was "fighting for her status as a woman and she was getting a lot of static at the time."[35]

While most of the first or second generation of Canadian art historians are happy to describe Nicoll as a teacher of craft and design, none have shown any interest in pursuing this path further. Rather, they imply that Nicoll's progress was defined solely by her male mentors and these relationships are the milestones marking her path. This view is not surprising, given that the craft narrative had no place in the mythology of fine art in the mid-century.[36] It did not garner critical acclaim, it was seldom seen in art galleries or art journals, and public institutions did not actively collect craft. It was tainted with the hints of domesticity and functionality, or, perhaps even more damning, it was seen to be anti-modern. It is only within the last two decades that we have we begun to witness a

reassessment not only of Canadian craft but also of the role craft played within the history of Canadian visual culture. In his chapter "Moments in Canadian Art History" (2001), Robert Belton points out that in the 1960s "Crafts and traditional handiwork enjoy[ed] a resurgence of popularity with the expansion of many community colleges,"[37] suggesting that this familiarity informed Pop Art and later the postmodern appropriation of, and even enthusiasm for, craft media. In *A History of Alberta Art* (2005), Nancy Townshend allocates a chapter to the artist and suggests that Nicoll's perspective on the economic importance of craft within the province was a driving force in the Alberta Government's initiatives to develop the craft industries in the mid-century.[38] A year later, in her chapter "Feminist Influences in Post-70s Art," another Albertan, Mary-Beth Laviolette, considers the significance of a series of Nicoll's batik hangings from 1956 that were displayed in *Women's Work: Art by Women in Glenbow's Collections* (1996). Laviolette comments that "it is no small irony that while Nicoll devotes herself to teaching the 'lesser' arts of craft and design at the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art (later the Alberta College of Art and Design), the recognition she later receives is for her abstract oils on canvas."[39]

The British craft historian Tanya Harrod is not alone in pointing out that women in craft seem to mysteriously disappear from history, and Marion Nicoll proves to be an interesting case in point. Even as she remains a prominent figure in the history of art, she has been written out of the history of craft in Alberta. Even when craft began to be seen as a subject of academic discourse in the 1970s, Nicoll's contributions were seldom recognized, or, at best, mentioned furtively. In a review of a retrospective exhibition organized by the Edmonton Art Gallery in 1975, Carol Hogg speaks to this lacuna, writing that she is disappointed on two counts: first, the forty-three paintings and ten prints reflect "only 12 years of a career that spans almost half a century"; and, secondly, "It is also


Marion Nicoll
*Fishes*, 1955
Silk-rayon velvet batik
157 × 94 cm
Collectionof Alberta Foundation for the Arts
1981.155.270, Capital Arts 2-3-T8

regrettable that the show includes none of the crafts – batik and leatherwork – by which Nicoll made her living for many years."[40]

With Suzanne Devonshire Baker's exhibition catalogue, *The Fine Art of Alberta Craft*, written in 1978,[41] the focus has shifted and the hierarchical relationship between art and craft is voiced. The *new* maker is described as: "The individual given to learning and continually developing a broad base of disciplines and channelling that aesthetic development into the making of objects, functional or otherwise. [There is a] strong commitment to advance 'the study of Art.'" It is worth noting that, although many of Nicoll's students are featured in this text, Marion is not. Rather she has a dedicated chapter in Devonshire Baker's next book, *Artists of Alberta* (1980).[42] Moving beyond Linda Nochlin's "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971)[43] and given the importance of craft within women's creative production, many recent feminist scholars have argued that the writing of women back into the art-historical narrative necessitates a re-evaluation of its medium-based hierarchies.[44] Sadly, in *By a Lady: Celebrating Three Centuries of Art by Canadian Women* (1992), Maria Tippett chose to examine Nicoll's relationship with abstract painting and in particular the influence of her male mentors. "Barnett Newman's instruction at the Art Students League in New York was particularly rigorous; it helped Alberta painter Marion Nicoll to learn to release form and colour from their natural limitations" and "It was Macdonald [who] helped her break down all the rules she had learned as a student."[45] Tippett's only reference to craft is in a throw-away line written to prove women artists were becoming "active propagandists for the new mode of painting." She writes that "for thirty years, Marion Nicoll instructed her craft and design students at Calgary's Provincial Institute of Technology and Art in the rudiments of modernism."[46]

Throughout her career, Nicoll would reiterate that her design work served all areas of her practice, and she was extremely proud of her craft production. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that there are few documented instances where she exhibited her craft and art together, and we know that she chose not to include craft in either the 1959 or the 1963 solo exhibitions. This was, in part, due to contemporary attitudes towards women and craft. However, after her retirement, we do see some relaxation, for in 1967 she showed a batik amongst her paintings at a solo exhibition in a Toronto gallery and, on the advice of her dealer, raised the asking price to $700.00 for the wall hanging.[47] Barbara Macdonald, wife of Jock Macdonald, wrote to Marion about the Toronto exhibition and the hanging:

> I went to the opening of your show and thought it looked darned good. … The show looked wonderful. Bonli has the judgement to put the right things together and I must say I enjoyed it very much. Your batik was there facing the door as you come in. I was quite impressed with it. I don't think that rod arrangement is quite up to the batik. It should be on something elegant. These miserable details are so important to the buying public. It looked terrific but doesn't hang well on that rod thing. I hope I haven't depressed you – but that's how I felt and I seem to remember you were not too happy about it yourself.[48]

Although no mention of it appears in the available documentation, at least one batik was also exhibited in the joint exhibition *Jim and Marion Nicoll: Paintings* (1971) held at the Glenbow Museum – it appears in a photograph of the installation. Catharine Mastin has argued that, in the exhibition system of the mid-century, Nicoll intentionally maintained separate sex-craft-gendered identities to accommodate the breadth of her art practice.

Such compartmentalization was not unusual, and perhaps not even unwarranted – after all, the path Marion walked was rife with pitfalls – but she walked with purpose.

As those who have read Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (1550) know, if the life of an artist is to follow the expected trajectory, there must be an anecdotal story that throws a shining light on the first milestone on the path to fame. Well before either Leighton or Greenberg recognized her as "among the best," the young Marion Florence Mackay was forging a path that would see her inclusion in the mythology of Canadian art. When asked about her early years, Nicoll replied that she first "drew at the age of 5, my first public recognition came in grade 1. We were all supposed to draw the Union Jack. Mine had a ripple in it."[49]

Should we simply note that, yes, Marion Mackay was an observant child – destined to be an artist – or could this be a telling milestone in the history of *craft* research – the *Aha!* craft moment. What followed in the interview, and is seldom quoted, was her comment "took after my devoted mother who embroidered pillow slips."[50] And, not only had she a mother who embroidered, she had a father who, as a young man, was a leather craftsman for Riley & McCormick of Calgary.[51]

In fact, craft served Marion well – as a student she made "extra" money during her studies at the Ontario College of Art (OCA) through a friend, who "was engaged in making tapestries [possibly batik wall hangings] for hotels in New York City."[52] Craft was an integral part of the OCA curriculum in 1929 – including practical work in stained glass, metalwork, woodwork, pottery and ceramics.[53] In Toronto she witnessed first hand the tension between craft and the ideology of modernity. Student enthusiasm is reflected in an essay featured in *The Tangent*, the OCA Annual of 1929. Entitled "Modern Crafts," it was written by a fellow Albertan, Annora Brown (1899–1987) and begins:


Marion Nicoll
*Zoomorphic Figure*, 1957
Rayon satin batik
123.5 × 51.5 cm
Collection of Alberta Foundation for the Arts
1981.155.271, Capital Arts 1-4

> Our privilege is to live in an age when an entirely new art is being developed. No matter how prejudiced we are, it is difficult to get away from its influence. The new art is no longer a feature of galleries, where people gaze at it and make conjectures as to the mental state of the artist. It is an actual fact, and surrounds us in our everyday life.… Thus the crafts and so-called minor arts find themselves playing an extremely prominent part in artistic circles.… This new art movement though originated by the people of older countries has taken a firm hold of our imaginations and promises great scope and freedom to the craftsman who is willing to devote his energies to any of its various agents.[54]

Certainly Marion incorporated the "new art movement" into her everyday life, for after returning from Ontario "she was able to earn money by producing batik scarves and other items to a city merchant."[55] Any extra income would have been welcomed during the Great Depression, and she continued to design and print textiles, making distinctive clothes (and curtains) throughout her life. She is remembered as "a woman who wore scarves (and muumuus) well."[56] Everyone agrees that she was a remarkable presence, a large woman – big-boned and often uncomfortable in her body, one whose dress, large abstract jewellery and ever-present cigarillo or cigarette were part of a self-defined bohemian artistic-persona.[57] Hers was a life as much defined by craft as it was by art.

Re-examining her long association with "the Tech" has led to the conclusion that craft underpinned her career choices and informed a carefully orchestrated path and eventual hire, one well considered and sanctioned by Leighton. And despite what has been inferred, her study in London was, from its conception, the study of *craft*. Here was a pragmatic young woman who wanted a viable career – she was indeed an emerging

artist but knew the chances of making a successful career as a woman painter in Western Canada were almost nonexistent. Thus she set out to be trained as *an educator*, a maker, a mentor, and a proponent of modern craft. And, Nicoll was cognizant of the responsibility and enormous influence *teachers* had over an artist's development and after retirement made her feelings evident:

> You can teach people by words to handle different things … this is the history of art and colour and the whole rest of it.… You can teach people technically but you can't teach them anything in their mind.… Which is why I think the art school should be a technical school. This business of the philosophy of art and expressing your dear little souls is an absolute waste of time. Which is why I would go back to apprenticing people to practicing artists. Universities turn out artists, so called, with degrees, who are fine when it comes to criticism, to writing articles about art, to running galleries, but not the actual being, the actual doing.… If I were running an art school there wouldn't be one person with a degree. Not one.[58]

When referring to her studies in London, the general consensus in the mainstream literature is that she went to study art. There is no consideration that she may have actually wanted to learn to teach, nor is there interest in the skill sets she deliberately set out to develop. At best, historians acknowledge that she took some craft and design courses, but the focus quickly turns to her lessons with Duncan Grant (1885–1978). In a 1972 interview, Nicoll cited two major influences during her time in London: Duncan Grant and Bernard Adeney.[59] Given Nicoll's success as a painter, the assumption appears that painting must have been the goal of her studies, and Grant was a prolific artist known equally for his bold and colourful portraits, landscapes and still-lifes. Even Sandra Flood

Marion Nicoll
*Batik*, ca. 1950
Aniline dye on silk
100 × 92.5 cm
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
Gift of Joyce and Fred Zemans, Toronto, 2008
Photo © NGC

Jock Macdonald
*Batik*, 1951
Aniline dye on cotton
95.5 × 96.5 cm
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
Gift of Joyce and Fred Zemans, Toronto, 2008
Photo © NGC

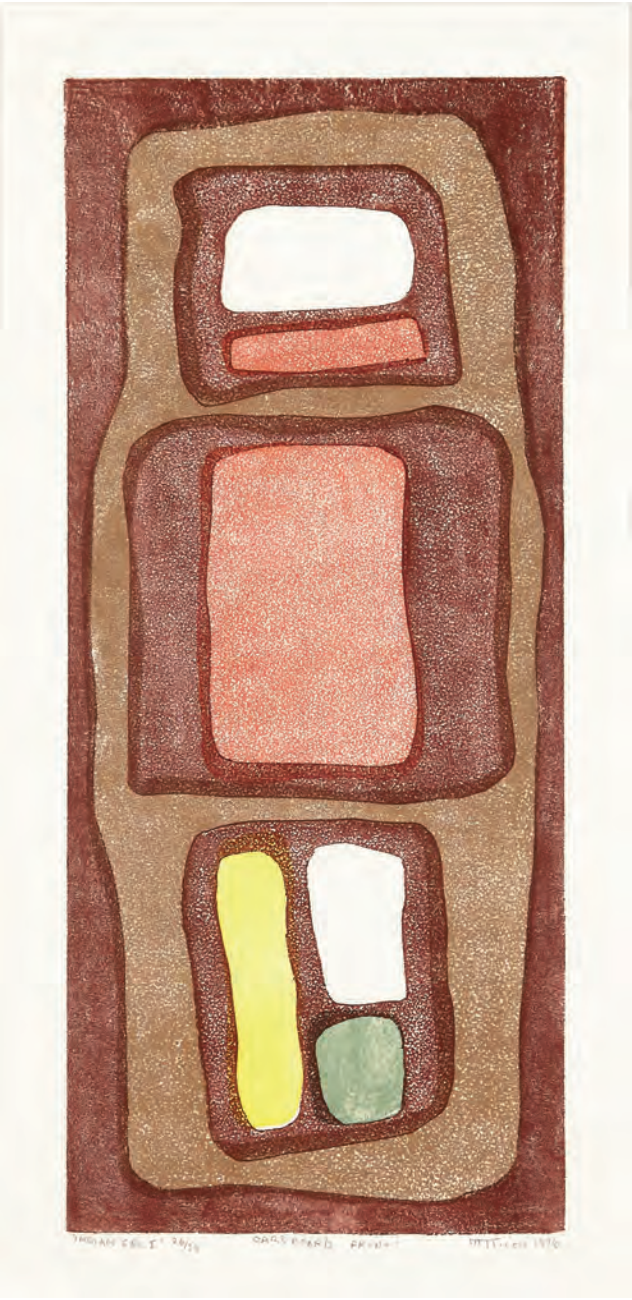
in her overview of Canadian craft concludes that Nicoll "went to London to study at the Central School of Arts and Crafts under Duncan Grant and was undoubtedly introduced to the very different style of the Bloomsbury group in ceramics and other materials."[60] Invariably the class is generically described as either portraiture or figure painting,[61] although her sketchbook, "England, Central School of Arts and Crafts, 1937–38," indicates that most of her time was spent studying bookbinding, publishing, architectural decorations, mosaic, weaving, and pottery.[62]

Further, she *was* studying with prominent British artists, including the potter Dora Billington, RCA, (1890–1968), herself a strong role model whose popularity was due, in part, to her willingness to break with the Bernard Leach (1887–1979) "cult" and whose classic *The Art of the Potter* had been published that year.[63] Marion even added an evening course in glaze chemistry to her program of study. She also took textile classes with Bernard Adeney (1878–1966), a textile artist and head of the Textile School (1930–47) who had introduced textile block cutting and printing to the prospectus in the early 1930s. Such textiles were at the time seen as "a radical and unanswerable [craft] challenge to the dogma of modernism" and were highly graphic in content "full of man-made and increasingly abstracted objects (or people)."[64] Why haven't historians seen this work with textiles as relevant to her future practice? The integrity of the material and the relationship between figure and ground were major tenets of the Arts and Crafts Movement and Nicoll herself said that "Painting for me is all on the picture plane, the actual surface of the canvas, with the power held in the horizontal and vertical movements of the expanding colour shapes."[65]

Marion's studies with Grant must also be re-examined, not only in light of the importance he placed on the employment of colour, pattern, and decoration in the textiles, potteries, and furniture he had designed for the Omega Group (1913–19), but

in relation to his later activities. For during the mid-1930s, Grant, along with Vanessa Bell, Keith Baynes, and Bernard Adeney, was working with, amongst others, Allan Walton Textiles (1892–1948) to create designs for textiles.[66] In his review of the resulting exhibition, British artist Paul Nash (1889–1946) questions the fallacy that "artists with reputations as painters will not condescend to undertake commissions except for paintings."[67] Modern craft appeared to offer a viable alternative for an emerging artist. Arguably, it was at the Central School of Arts and Crafts where Marion Nicoll found the models that would underpin her work ethic and teaching methodology that would serve her well when she returned to Calgary. It was in London that she would begin to articulate her position with regard to craft and the visual language of modernity.[68]

While the studio craft movement had taken form in England and was finding a voice in the United States, the craft discourse in Alberta remained more about tradition and building community rather than about the individual's concept or intentions. Marion had returned to a country whose institutions believed in the societal worth of craft, and craft makers and educators were being lauded and actively sought. Hiring a woman art instructor was certainly unusual; nonetheless, it was unlikely to be challenged by her male colleagues, for during this period crafts were not, as Garth Clark would say, "in envy of fine art" and were directed at a different audience.[69] Typically craft was being promoted in community forums such as *The Great West Folk-dance, Folk-song, Handicrafts Festival* (Calgary 1930).[70] Cultural outreach programs, including the Canadian Handicrafts Guild, the University of Alberta, and the Alberta Government, supported the role of traditional crafts. Nicoll's position at "the Tech" would have been seen as *supporting* the art department and the normal school, providing essential elements of the "sound technical training for a professional career."[71] She was hired as an educator of makers – after all, did not the promotional literature state that "the useful



Marion Nicoll
*Indian Girl I*, 1976
Cardboard print on paper, 26/50
19.7 × 45.7 cm
Collection of Masters Gallery Ltd., Calgary

arts are not only handy but sometimes essential to progress."[72] It was not a job to be taken lightly. And, this social imperative is seen on the editorial page of *Craft Horizons* in May 1945, where, despite its "strictly American" policy, it declared:

> One task faces the world. One task more important than any other. The task of building from the wreck of war a world of peace.…
>
> Craftsmen and artists are particularly fortunate, for they speak a language which is universal. The arts were the spearhead which broke down the darkness of the Middle Ages. They have been the spearheads of international commerce and learning. Perhaps they can again help to bring about understanding between the peoples.… As its contribution to this end, the American Craftsmen's Educational Council held an exhibition of Canadian Handicrafts in March called "Hands Across the Border."[73]

By 1946, Nicoll had turned a corner in her art – she was doing automatic drawings daily – and her return to "the Tech" provided entry into a world where women were not normally invited. It allowed her to play with the "big boys" – although she may have discovered her association with craft was also a way in which she was kept in her place. Nevertheless, it was also during this time that she began to build the craft department and her own craft practice. Her commitment to her students and her role as a mentor helped establish their careers and ACAD's position as a centre for the teaching and making of craft.[74] From her course outlines, we know that "design was considered a primary need in all the crafts and was [therefore] given a proportionately large amount of teaching time." Further, on the handout "Design and Handicrafts" she makes a link

to abstraction, confidently stating "It is now accepted that the aesthetic quality of functional form is essentially abstract."[75]

In her words, "A craftsman is an artist who conceives of an object, designs and completes it, himself,"[76] and indeed her work must be seen as intersecting practices informed by the same strong design sense. Consider for example a painting on silk, *Batik*, which makes obvious references to earlier automatic watercolours with their curvilinear and expressive flow of line and use of dream-like imagery. These dripping amoeba and cellular shapes are found not only in *her* batiks, printed textiles, and her jewellery but are familiar elements found in much mid-century art and design. It is sobering to reconsider what is actually being dismissed when a Calgary journalist in 1963 commented, "Thus until recently, much of her work was hindered by the inclusion of irrelevant little shapes. But evidence … is that she has overcome this handicap."[77]

In 1957, the *same* year she attended the Emma Lake Workshop, Nicoll the respected maker and educator was asked to organize *Alberta Craft*, a craft show that would represent the southern half of the province in the most modern of Calgary's showcases – the Jubilee Auditorium. As well as judging the exhibitions, she took on the job of creating and implementing an adjudication process for what would become an annual exhibition. She also participated in the National Gallery of Canada's *First National Fine Crafts Exhibition* in June 1957, exhibiting the sterling silver pin, *Plateau*.[78] *Plateau* was also shown in the Canadian Pavilion in the Universal and International Exhibition in Brussels in 1958.

In 1958, she helped found "The Old Cabin Crafts," a shop that she described as "formed on a co-operative basis, run by local craftsmen, with a standards committee to insure [*sic*] quality crafts."[79] It was one of the first outlets for local craft and is still remembered by Calgarians and visitors alike.[80] She also served as a judge for the Alberta

Visual Arts Board's scholarship awards and advised the Canadian Handicrafts Guild. Nicoll wrote about craft, the role of the artist, and the continued importance of craftsmanship in the modern world. She contributed articles to various publications and wrote instructional booklets on various craft processes, including *Batik* (ca. 1957).[81]

Of particular interest is a description of her contribution to *Alberta Craft '62*, where she exhibited metal work and, for the first time, included at least one of her abstract paintings, *First Snow*. Each of the wearable works, like her iconic paintings, was given a poetic title: *Snow Fence*, *Grass and Reflected Sun*, *Wintersun*, *The Audience, Janus*, etc.[82] By providing titles, Nicoll intended that her audience recognize the connections that existed between her works: that the visual language is the same and design basic to both her craft and her painting. In these pins, rings, pendants, and earrings – just as in her paintings and prints – colour, form, and shape play important roles. These are wearable abstract sculptures. In the collection of the Glenbow, there is an undated photograph of an invitation or display panel that reads, *M. Nicoll, Sculpture to Wear: Gold, Silver, Bronze*. Hers was an art practice for the body – a familiar trope of the modern jewellery movement.[83]

In "Replacing the Myth of Modernism," Bruce Metcalfe referenced the eureka moment in Tom Wolfe's *The Painted Word* when he realizes that "nobody sees art unless it comes with a text."[84] While Metcalfe was arguing for a re-examination of art, craft, modernity, and the writing of craft theory, he might well have been arguing for the desperate need for documentation – in particular the documentation of craft. Although Nicoll worked prolifically, very little of her craft work remains in the public realm and documentation is rare. Even the better-known craft works, for which she received local, national, and international (U.S.) attention, are not in evidence.[85] Catharine Mastin considers that Nicoll's "most significant works in the design field were her batik paintings

on silk," yet even these were reviewed only in the popular press, and we are reminded once again of the mid-century mores regarding women, art, and craft.[86] To date the only reference to a 1965 group exhibition of recognized textile artists that took place in Spokane, Washington, is a newspaper clipping. Marion Nicoll was one of three artists mentioned, another being the Hungarian-born American embroiderer Mariska Karasz (1898–1960), who is linked to both the American Studio Craft Movement and Abstract Expressionism. As is the case for many of the reviews featuring craft, the journalist appears out of her depth when writing about art. This article is ambiguously titled "Art Today Has Many Forms" and we know the objects *must* be art, for "Today it takes something different to create a stir in the art world.… The treatments are new; so are the conceptions and many of them are quite expensive ($3,000 to $900 [*sic*]). Original work is combined with conventional methods." Here too we learn more about the contemporary attitudes towards women, art, and craft than we do about the art itself. "One of these wall tapestries could create a great splash or focal point on a wall – or at least a sharp conversation topic!" Each artist is represented by a single photograph with a short, vague caption. "'Young Rooster' is the title of this batik wall-hanging by Marion Nicoll and the subject is very obvious – or is it? Colors are brown, white and cockscomb red. It is a long hanging in abstract pattern."[87]

There are numerous newspaper clippings in the various artists' files and all indicate that there is much more to be found. For instance, in the Glenbow Archives, an anonymous newspaper article (ca. 1958) includes two photographs of Nicoll "at work" in her studio. The excitement about the medium is real but its significance in the history of art is again unknown to the author. "Batik, an ancient craft, takes on meaning when seen through the eyes of Calgary's – and possibly western Canada's – only teacher and hobbyist of the art." The author enthuses that it was "20 years ago the former Marion


Marion Nicoll
*Prophet*, 1960
Oil on canvas
106.7 × 82.6 cm
Collection of Glenbow Museum
Donated by Shirley and Peter Savage

Mackay, a recognized artist, became interested in Batik." Her readers are left to ponder the distinctions being made – an artist, a hobbyist, a creator, or simply an instructor? She goes on to describe Nicoll "who is, by the way left-handed" at work on a large batik scarf in "a landscape design." And she describes other works in the studio, including "a beautiful piece of silk-satin painted with a motif called 'Procession of Birds' which won for its creator a top prize at the provincial exhibition in Quebec City" (now in the Glenbow Collection). The article concludes with the obvious question, and Nicoll replies that anyone can do batik – then amends that to anyone "who is able to design and has some idea of color and is able to handle a brush"; further, "the motifs chosen must be original – not copied warns the experienced instructor."[88] Where did the article appear? When? Was it related to an ongoing exhibition or perhaps was it a promotion for the Cultural Affairs Branch (her instruction manual *Batik* was available through their office), or was it simply a half-page human-interest story?

As the interest in mid-century modernism continues to grow, as baby boomers' attics and basements are emptied, and as social media and archives make their arcane holdings accessible, it is to be expected that references to mid-century artists, works, exhibitions, and related ephemera will come to light. These findings will enrich the new art histories even as they aid factual investigation and historical recuperation. If history is the rewriting of facts, revisionist histories are the retelling of these tales from a variety of perspectives, including, in this case, craft. And we do have tales to tell. Perhaps today's historians of modern art in Canada should be reminded that in writing "View of Art on the Prairies" Clement Greenberg looked beyond painting, suggesting that the Alberta artist Clifford Robinson's (b. 1916) batik wall-hanging "betrayed some distinction."[89]

Marion Nicoll
Assorted bracelets and pair of earrings, n.d.
Sterling silver and amethyst cabochons
Private Collection

Already we are witnessing remarkable advances in situating Nicoll's practice within a broader Canadian social and cultural context. Besides the ongoing academic activity, conference papers, and exhibitions, we have seen the recent acquisition of two mid-century batiks by the National Gallery of Canada. These works were acquired together and date from the early 1950s – one created by Marion Nicoll (1950), the other by Jock Macdonald (1951). Both show the influence of automatic drawing, and one can only imagine this was a reciprocal teaching moment informed by an engaging debate.[90] It can only be hoped that as we learn more about Nicoll's studio practice more of her craft work will begin to surface and be collected by Canadian institutions.

Marion Mackay Nicoll forged a creative path not only in the history of Canadian abstract painting but also as an abstract artist in various craft media. To date, the historical focus has been on Nicoll's paintings and prints, yet a re-reading of contemporary documents reveals that she was also a passionate educator, maker, and proponent of modern craft in Alberta. We have only begun to understand the choices she made in her studies and the seminal role she played in the history of modern craft in Alberta. Indeed, much remains to be discovered as the focus inevitably shifts from the artist to her legacy – those students who were inspired by, and followed, her lead.[91] The path Marion Nicoll walked was neither straight nor was it smooth. Yet even in 1916 Calgary there were signs that hers would be a remarkable journey. Surely someone in that grade one class saw the "ripple" as a portent of what was to come.

"We were all *supposed* to draw the Union Jack. Mine had a ripple in it."

**Jennifer E. Salahub,** PhD, is an art and craft historian teaching at the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary. She is presently writing a history of craft at ACAD and it was this project that led her to consider Marion Nicoll as instrumental in bringing modern craft to the forefront in mid-century Alberta. Further, she believes that it was Nicoll's role as a maker and educator that continues to inform the teaching of craft at ACAD today. Salahub received her BFA and MA from Concordia University (Montreal) and her PhD from the Royal College of Art (London). She is active in a number of professional associations, is on the Board of the Alberta Craft Council, lectures nationally and internationally, and has been published in numerous journals including the *Journal of Design History*, *Fusion, Artichoke*, *Studio*, *Metalsmith, Textilekunst* (Germany), and *Fiberarts* (U.S.).

## NOTES

1 I would like to thank the Scholarly Research + Creativity Initiative at the Alberta College of Art and Design for their support in funding this research – JS.

2 Marion Nicoll, qtd. in *Environment '70*. Edmonton: Arts and Crafts Division, Cultural Development Branch, Province of Alberta and Edmonton Art Gallery. File 132, Marion and Jim Nicoll Fonds, Glenbow Library and Archives (hereafter Nicoll Fonds).

3 Clement Greenberg, "View of Art on the Prairies." *Canadian Art* 20, no. 2 (1963): 96.

4 Mary-Beth Laviolette, *Alberta Mistresses of the Modern 1935–1975* (Edmonton: Art Gallery of Alberta, 2012).

5 J.W.G. Macdonald, Letter to Donald Cameron, 7 July 1947. Files 21 and 25 (accession 78.17), Box 33, Banff School of Fine Arts Fonds. This was the *only* occasion that Nicoll was granted the opportunity to teach painting. Through J.W.G. Macdonald's support she became the Banff School's first female instructor.

6 Adeline Flaherty, "Life and Painting Synonymous for Calgary Artist-Teacher," *Calgary Herald*, 27 January 1965.

7 Christine Sammon and Mary-Beth Laviolette, *75 Years of Art: Alberta College of Art and Design: 1926–2001* (Calgary: Alberta College of Art and Design, 2001).

8 Colin S. Macdonald, "Marion Nicoll," *Dictionary of Canadian Artists*.

9 Annual Report, Provincial Institute of Technology and Art. Calgary: PITA: 1931–32 Annual Examinations of the Royal Drawing Society of London England, 1932–33 receiving Honours in Divisions 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 (and second Class in division 5).

10 The *Annual Announcement* identifies instructors, including various women. 1936/37, lists Miss Doris le Coeq as well as Miss M.F.S. Mackay. During the war, when the art school was located in the Coste house, Nicoll wrote that "crafts were taught bey (*sic*) Norma Jergens and Frances Morton." Marion Nicoll, "Crafts in Alberta," typescript, 6 January 1966, File 62, Nicoll Fonds.

11 "Between 1940 and 1942, Marion and Jim moved approximately 16 times." Natasha Pashak, *Almost Outnumbered: The Role of Alberta in the Life and Work of Marion Nicoll*. MA (Art History) Concordia University, Montreal, 2010.

12 Marion Nicoll, "Crafts in Alberta," typescript, 6 January 1966, File 62, Nicoll Fonds.

13 Catharine Mastin, *Beyond "the Artist's Wife": Women, Artist-Couple Marriage and the Exhibition Experience in Postwar Canada*. Diss., University of Alberta, Edmonton, 2012. 119–20.

14 Marion Nicoll, *Journal*, unpaginated, File 62, Nicoll Fonds.

15 Interview with Jim and Marion Nicoll, conducted by Helen K. Wright and Ingrid Mercer, 29 Jan 1973, File 78, Nicoll Fonds.

16 Adeleine Flaherty, "Life and Painting Synonymous for Calgary Artist-Teacher," *Calgary Herald*, 27 January 1965.

17 Nicoll was offered a teaching post at Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, and, in addition to Will Barnet, the painter Barnett Newman also encouraged her to stay; however, Jim is said to have "forced her hand" to return to Calgary. Marion Nicoll, qtd. in Chris Jackson, *Marion Nicoll: Art and Influences* (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 1986). 22. See also: Adeleine Flaherty, "Life and Painting Synonymous for Calgary Artist-Teacher," *Calgary Herald*. 27 January, 1965.

18 Marion Nicoll, Letter to Jean Johnson, 1959. Qtd. in Natasha Pashak, *Almost Outnumbered*.

19 The exhibition was held in the Institute's "East Block." A single folded sheet served as the catalogue: The cover image is *Thursday's Model* with her iconic signature "M Nicoll '59." Inside a hand-lettered list of twenty works under the headings: December 7th to 19th. PITA Art Gallery. Artist's File, Nicoll Fonds.

20 *Edmonton Journal*, Edmonton, Jan. 26, 1963, "Gallery Exhibition Thursday," Oct. 19, 1963.

21 Clement Greenberg, "View of Art on the Prairies." *Canadian Art* 20, no. 2 (1963): 96.

22 Marion Nicoll, "Letters to the Editor: South of the Borduas – Down Tenth Street Way," *Canadian Art* 85 (May–June 1963): 196.

23 Robin Neesham, "Art Show Features Boldness of Nicoll's Abstract Works," *Calgary Herald*, 10 December 1963.

24 Marion Nicoll, "Crafts in Alberta," typescript, 6 January 1966, File 62, Nicoll Fonds. Rolf Ungstad replaced her as chief instructor in design, Doug Motter was teaching weaving, Frank Phillips was teaching metals and jewellery, and Walt Drohan was teaching ceramics and pottery.

25 Stories told to the author of Marion Nicoll's home, studio, and art community by ACAD colleagues: Katie Ohe, Vera Gartley, Bill Austin, and Andrew Oko.

26 Illingworth Kerr to Marion Nicoll, 14 February 1966, File 117, Nicoll Fonds. See also: Christopher Jackson. Research Notes and Information, M7468, Glenbow.

27 Natasha Pashak, *Almost Outnumbered*, 43–44.

28 Illingworth Kerr, *Paint and Circumstance* (Calgary: Jules and Maureen Poscente, 1987). 108–9.

29 Alberta Foundation for the Arts. www.affta.ab.ca.

30 Jenni Mortin, "Marion Nicoll, Painter Teaches Craft Classes," *Calgary Herald*, 6 February 1963.

31 Marion Nicoll, "Crafts in the Community," *Leisure Cultural Activities Magazine* 2/3 (September 1960): 17–18.

32 Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973), 268.

33 J. Russell Harper, *Painting in Canada: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966), 320.

34 Barry Lord, *History of Painting in Canada: Towards a People's Art* (Toronto: New Canada Publications, 1974), 218.

35 Alex Janvier, "An interview 2007," qtd. in Pashak, *Almost Outnumbered*, 34.

36 Sandra Flood, *Canadian Craft and Museum Practice 1900–1950* (Hull: CMC, 2001), 167. In the literature, the "studio craftsman" is typically identified by "class, income generation and formal education." As well, the prefix *Studio* associates craft with the fine arts and suggests a stronger emphasis on aesthetic and concept rather than "function."

37 Robert Belton, *Sights of Resistance: Approaches to Canadian Visual Culture* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2001), 102.

38 Nancy Townshend, "Marion Nicoll: Art of Metaphor." *A History of Art in Alberta: 1905–1970* (Calgary: Bayeux Arts, 2005), 141–81.

39 Mary-Beth Laviolette, *An Alberta Art Chronicle: Adventures in Recent and Contemporary Art* (Canmore, AB: Altitude, 2006), 300.

40 Carol Hogg, "Nicoll Retrospective Focuses on Abstracts." *Calgary Herald?* 1975. undated clipping in artists file, Glenbow.

41 Suzanne Devonshire Baker, *The Fine Art of Alberta Craft* (Edmonton: Festival '78, Alberta Culture, 1978).

42 Suzanne Devonshire Baker, *Artists of Alberta* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1980).

43 Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists," in *Women, Art And*

*Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, Reprint Edition, 1989), 145–78.

44 Kristina Huneault and Janice Anderson, ed., *Rethinking Professionalism: Women and Art in Canada, 1850–1970* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012).

45 Maria Tippett, *By a Lady: Celebrating Three Centuries of Art by Canadian Women* (Toronto: Penguin, 1992), 128, 133.

46 Ibid., 130.

47 Henri Bonli, Letter to Marion Nicoll, 23 February 1967, Nicoll Fonds. File 117. See also: "Bonli Gallery," *Globe and Mail*, 29 April 1967.

48 Barbara Macdonald, Letter to Marion Nicoll. 28 April 1967. M6642-12 Nicoll Fonds.

49 Marion Nicoll, qtd. in *Environment '70*. File 132, Nicoll Fonds.

50 Ibid.

51 Marion taught leatherwork in her craft class – her student, the Alberta sculptor Katie Ohe, won a $250.00 scholarship for her leatherwork (1957–58).

52 Anonymous, *Amherstburg Echo*, 9 January 1958.

53 Sandra Flood, *Canadian Craft and Museum Practice 1900–1950* (Hull: CMC, 2001), 182.

54 Annora Brown, "Modern Crafts," *The Tangent* (Toronto: OCA Annual of 1929), 39–40.

55 Anonymous, *Calgary Albertan*, November 30, 1957. Artist's File, NGC Library and Archives, Ottawa. This article also appeared in: Anonymous, *Amherstburg Echo*, 9 January 1958.

56 Bill Austin, personal interview (Calgary: ACAD, 2011).

57 "Abstract Art with Cigarillo," *Calgary Albertan*, July 14, 1967.

58 AFA (Alberta Foundation for the Arts) Archive, Edmonton. Artist's file, Transcript: Marion and Jim Nicoll, an interview with the Arts & Crafts Division (9 June 1972), 16–17.

59 AFA (Alberta Foundation for the Arts) Archive, Edmonton. Artist's file, Transcript: Marion and Jim Nicoll an interview with the Arts & Crafts Division (9 June 1972), 6.

60 Sandra Flood, *Canadian Craft and Museum Practice 1900–1950* (Hull: CMC, 2001), 192.

61 Harry Kiyooka, *Paintings by Marion Nicoll – Biographical Notes*. Marion Nicoll, Western Canada Art Circuit. Artist's File. Nicoll Fonds.

62 Marion Nicoll, "England, Central School of Arts and Crafts, 1937–38," Sketch Book. It also documents her travels to museums and galleries in London, including the British Museum, the Tate Gallery, and the National Gallery. Chronicles trips within the UK and to Oslo, Norway. Nicoll Fonds, Accession 81.28.7.

63 Jill Trubshawe, personal interview. Plymouth, England. Studied at Camberwell Art College in London in the 1940s. Later painted and worked in mosaics, textiles, and ceramics.

64 Mary Schoeser, "Following the thread: textiles." in *Making Their Mark: Art, Craft and Design at the Central School 1896–1966*. ed. Sylvia Backemeyer (London: Herbert Press, 2000), 51.

65 Marion Nicoll, qtd. in Roald Nasgaard, *Abstract Painting in Canada* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2007), 144. See also: *Marion Nicoll, A Retrospective 1959–1971* (Edmonton: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1971), n.p.

66 For more information on contemporary pattern and textile design, see: H. G. Hayes Marshall, *British Textiles Designers Today* (Leigh-on-Sea: Frank Lewis, 1939) and Lesley Jackson, *Twentieth Century Pattern Design* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002).

67 Paul Nash, "Review," *The Listener*, 27 April 1932, cited in Andrew Causey, ed. *Paul Nash: Writings on Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001).

68 Tom Crook, "Craft and the Dialogics of Modernity: The Arts and Crafts Movement in Late-Victorian and Edwardian England,"

*Journal of Modern Craft* 2/1 (March 2009): 17–32. See also Sandra Alfoldy, *The Allied Arts: Architecture and Craft in Postwar Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012).

69 Garth Clark, "How Envy Killed the Crafts," in Glenn Adamson, *The Craft Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 445–53.

70 Sandra Flood, *Canadian Craft and Museum Practice 1900–1950* (Hull: CMC, 2001), 134.

71 Provincial Institute of Technology and Art, *Annual Report. 1936–7*. Calgary: PITA, 18.

72 Ibid.

73 Editorial, *Craft Horizons*, May 1945, 1.

74 From correspondence in the Glenbow Archives, we know she was in contact with colleagues and retailers across Canada on behalf of her students. She also continued to study and in 1958 travelled to Vancouver to do intensive courses in jewellery.

75 Marion Nicoll, "Course Syllabus: Design and Handicrafts-Munsell's *Colour Notation*," course 341, 3 pages, File 59, Nicoll Fonds.

76 Marion Nicoll, "Crafts in the Community," *Leisure*, Cultural Activities Magazine 2/3 (September 1960): 15–18.

77 Robin Neesham, "Art Show Features Boldness of Nicoll's Abstract Works," *Calgary Herald*, December 10, 1963.

78 First National Fine Crafts Exhibition (Ottawa; NGC, 1957), cat. 73. The exhibit also toured Canadian venues: Winnipeg Art Gallery; London Public Library and Museum; and Art Gallery of Hamilton. File 19, Nicoll Fonds.

79 Nicoll, Marion. "Crafts in Alberta," typescript, 6 January 1966, File 62, Nicoll Fonds.

80 Elizabeth Trubshawe Peterson, London, England, purchased two hand-crafted ceramic bead necklaces at the shop in 1967 on a visit to Canada. They are unfortunately unsigned.

81 Marion Nicoll, "Crafts in the Community," *Leisure*. Cultural Activities Magazine 2/3 (1960); *Batik*. ca. 1957.

82 Catharine Mastin, *Beyond "the Artist's Wife:" Women, Artist-Couple Marriage and the Exhibition Experience in Postwar Canada*. PhD diss., Edmonton, University of Alberta, notes 97 and 123. "The exhibited works: cat. 1. *Wintersun*, pin and earrings, gold on silver, moonstone and opals, $50; cat. 2. *Grass and Reflected Sun*, pin, gold on silver, pink tourmaline. $18.00; cat. 3. *The Wall*, silver on bronze pin, $20.00; cat. 4. *The City*, pin pendant, silver on bronze, $20.00; cat. 5. *First finger ring and earrings*, gold on silver, tourmalines, $60.00; cat. 6. *Pedestrian*, pin, silver on bronze, $10.00; cat. 7. *Winter Seed*, pin-pendant, gold on silver, aquamarines, $28.00; cat. 8. *Pine Needles*, silver on bronze pin $10.00; cat. 9. Thumb ring, silver and gold tourmaline, $35.00; cat. 10. *Snowfence*, pin-pendant and matched earrings, silver on bronze, pink tourmalines, $45.00; cat. 11. *Janus*, silver on bronze pin with tourmalines, $30.00; cat. 12. *The Audience*, pin-pendant, silver on bronze, $30.00; cat. 13. unknown; and cat. 14. *First Snow*, oil, 38′ 48″ $300.00."

83 Marbeth Schon, *Form & Function: American Modernist Jewelry, 1940–1970* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 2008). See also: Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts, *Messengers of Modernism: American Studio Jewelry 1940–1960* (New York: Flammarion, 1996).

84 Bruce Metcalfe, "Replacing the Myth of Modernism," *American Craft Magazine*, Feb./Mar. 1993.

85 Anonymous, "Calgary Woman Masters Ancient Wax-Painting Art," *Montreal Gazette*, 30 December 1957. Also: Mary Biner, "Ancient Wax Painting Form Being Taught at Art College," *Calgary Herald*, "World of Women," 8 January 1965.

86 Catharine Mastin, *Beyond "the Artist's Wife:" Women, Artist-Couple Marriage and the Exhibition Experience in Postwar Canada*. PhD diss., University of Alberta, Alberta, 2012. Further the artist states that: "Her prize-wining *Procession of Birds* (1956) in the Glenbow collection was chosen to display her command of this complex wax resist painting process on fabric," 123.

87 Harriet Conner, "Art Today Has Many Forms," *Daily Chronicle*, Spokane, WA, 8 December 1965. Held at the Cheney Cowles Memorial Museum, Spokane. The artists mentioned are Ranghild Lauglet, who studied design in Sweden, taught at the Art Institute in Chicago, and was professor in Decorative Arts at University of California, Berkeley ("painting in patch work"), the late Mariska Karasz (Embroidery in wool), and Marion Nicoll (Batik).

88 The journalist describes *Mermaid* (seen in the photograph and approximately 1.5 m in height) calling it a wall tapestry. Even with "the water markings, the human head and body and tail of fish are clearly seen. This *production* in rich midnight blue velvet, which was exhibited at Coste House presents a comprehensive picture of batiks technique." Either Amherstberg or *The Albertan*, 9 January 1958, Glenbow.

89 Given the assumption that that modern art was either painting or sculpture, it is interesting to note that Greenberg singled out a batik while in Alberta.

90 Jock Macdonald, *Batik,* 1951, aniline dye on cotton. 95.5 ′ 96.5 cm, National Gallery Canada, Accession Number 42514; Marion Nicoll, *Batik*, c. 1950/55, aniline dye on silk. 100 ′ 92.5 cm, National Gallery Canada Accession Number 42515.

91 Although this research sought to establish the importance of Marion Nicoll to the history of craft in Alberta, the next stage will focus on those directly influenced by her ideas – specifically her students and colleagues. For instance, how did Marion's life-long relationship with Barbara Mary Harvey Leighton (1908–1986), a fellow student at PITA and the wife of Marion's mentor, inform or support the latter's craft practice? We know that upon Barbara's marriage to her teacher, A. C. Leighton, in 1931 she put her own art career on hold in order to promote and support her husband's practice. Only after his death in 1965 did she return to ACA, graduating in 1969 with a diploma in fine craft and metalwork. (Marion had retired in 1968) Barbara Leighton's promotion of craft in Alberta has its own legacy for in 1970 she turned part of her home into a gallery dedicated to A. C. Leighton's art and she then began to teach arts and crafts to children and adults. The Leighton Centre soon included a weaving studio, pottery studio and woodworking shop. See: Kay Sanderson, *200 Remarkable Alberta Women* (Calgary: Famous Five Foundation, 1999), 81.

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Gift of Joyce and Fred Zemans, Toronto, 2008
Photo © NGC

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*"The essays in this book represent a major step forward in Nicoll scholarship. Davis and Herbert do a real service to our understanding of Nicoll's place in the larger context of abstract art during its development period. By extension, we begin to understand that there was a significant contribution from Alberta. This will definitely become a source, if not the source, for Nicoll in our century. The essays each cover a different aspect of Nicoll's work and development to provide a full picture of this important artist."* — Tony Luppino, Executive Director, Leighton Art Centre

Marion Nicoll (1909–1985) is a widely acknowledged and important founder of Alberta art and certainly one of a dedicated few that brought abstraction into practice in the province. Her life and career is a story of determination, of dedication to her vision regardless of professional or personal challenges. Nicoll became the first woman instructor hired at the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art (now the Alberta College of Art and Design) – and, although limited to teaching craft and design, she became a significant mentor for generations of artists.

ANN DAVIS is a prominent curator, teacher, and art critic.
ELIZABETH HERBERT is an independent curator and author.
JENNIFER SALAHUB is an art and craft historian teaching at the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary.
CHRISTINE SOWIAK is the curator of art at The Nickle Galleries at the University of Calgary.

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