

# SUPERLATIVES

## Selections from the Collection

Guest Curated by Robert McKaskell,  
November 17, 2000 to January 7, 2001

**M**ost public art galleries in Canada have collections of works that the public seldom sees. For protection, the works are stored in carefully maintained and environmentally controlled vaults. In accordance with current museological practice, paintings, and especially drawings, are placed on display for limited periods of time and then returned to the storage area to "rest."

When works are shown to the public, it is usually in exhibitions based on specific topics. The number of possible topics is limitless—works by a single artist well-represented in the collection, for example, or works of a common medium, subject matter or compositional procedure, or perhaps works that are juxtaposed to highlight contrasting ideas or interpretations of culture. At their best, the exhibitions are carefully researched and offer a thoughtful presentation of the individual works within the context defined by the topic. The result is that certain works, ones that do not readily submit to contextualization within the collection, are rarely seen by the public, in whose trust the gallery holds them.

**W**hen I was invited to the Mendel Art Gallery to select works from the Collection for exhibition, the notion was that I would look for anomalies, those bits of flotsam and jetsam that accumulate over time and seldom leave the vault. As I looked through the Collection, it became clear to me that it had a certain consistency. Despite the number of directors and curators who have purchased and accepted donations of works over the years (each motivated by individual goals and taste) the Mendel has been very successful in its attempt to shape a collection that tells a story about the aspirations and accomplishments of the culture of Saskatoon.<sup>1</sup> It seemed to me that there were not enough truly eccentric objects to develop the exhibition I had been requested to produce.

Taking the lead from Komar and Melamid's *The People's Choice: Canada's Most Wanted and Most Unwanted Paintings*, I decided to select works that represented a quality or attribute that made them the "most" or, its opposite, the "least" when compared to other works in the Collection; hence, *Superlatives*. What was the first work acquired by the Mendel, I wondered. The most recent? The smallest and the largest? The most valuable? The oldest and the newest?

I realised with pleasure that by developing this type of exhibition I would be absolved of reliance on my own taste. The smallest work, for example, was the smallest, no matter what I thought about it, and had to be included. I have always been suspicious of taste.

Marcel Duchamp wrote, "Art may be bad, good or indifferent, but, whatever adjective is used, we must call it art, and bad art is still art in the same way as a bad emotion is still an emotion."<sup>2</sup> Certainly my interest in specific works of art has changed through the years. There are works that I thought were "good" twenty years ago that I now think are "bad". The works have not changed. Art remains constant even while taste changes.

To extend this idea, if one person loves Impressionist paintings and hates Modernist sculptures, or another person is fascinated by Conceptual art, but finds Italian Renaissance scenes of the Nativity boring, they are responding more to the dictates of their individual interests than to the art. Likewise, exhibitions based on topics reflect the interest of their organisers. By establishing "superlatives" as the topic for this exhibition, I thought I had escaped not only matters of taste, but also the responsibility of my own interests.

**P**roblems began to arise when less objective categories of the superlative than "the smallest" or "the first" declared themselves. How could I leave out the really thick painting, the very large duck, or the incredibly elegant weaving of bear grass? They, too, represented superlatives. Then it occurred to me that since every work of art is unique, each one has some quality that could be defined as "superlative." Or, remembering my original mandate, I thought that there is something intrinsically anomalous about every work of art when it is considered within the context of the other objects that constitute our material culture. If I were really to transcend my personal taste and interests, I would have had to include all of the 4,786 works owned by the Mendel.

Since that was impossible, I found that my sense of the range and history of the Collection was informing my selection of works for the exhibition. There is, therefore, a preponderance of works by artists from Saskatoon. The strong collection of Inuit art is represented, as are the masterpieces of earlier Canadian painting donated by the Mendel family, the Modernist artists of the 1960s, and the more recent Conceptualists. Without any real intention, as the exhibition developed it became something like a snapshot of the whole Collection.

**A**s I write this, the works that will be included in *Superlatives* are still in the vault, resting on shelves, hanging on racks or stored, unframed, in boxes. The exhibition exists only in my mind. There is a story that John Cage told about a large loft in New York city. There were large windows; the walls were painted white; the floor was covered with sisal. "The space was so wonderful", he said, "an old shoe would be beautiful in there."<sup>3</sup> That's the way it usually is in galleries. I would argue, however, that the old shoe would depend in part on its placement for its beauty to become apparent. If this exhibition succeeds, people will be prompted to see some of the works differently in this new context and to think differently about some artists whose works are well known. If it fails, it will simply be an eclectic assortment of works that seem mildly uncomfortable in one another's company. At the very least the public will see work that in some cases has not been previously exhibited.

**Robert McKaskell**

**Curator of Historical Art and the Collection**

**Art Gallery of Windsor**

**19 October, 2000**

---

1. As Matthew Teitelbaum wrote, "A public art collection can ... identify a place; it can take on its character and reflect its values." *The Mendel Art Gallery: Twenty-five Years of Collecting* (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery, 1989), p. 9. This seemed to me to be more the case with the Mendel's collection than with many others I have studied.

2. "The Creative Act," in Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds., *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp (Marchand du Sel)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 139.

3. The story is told on the recording *Indeterminacy*.

# List of Works

Cisele Marie Amantea, *Heaven (Antidotes for Madness)*, 1987  
(largest work and work with the most number of parts)

Bertram Richard Brooker, *The Finite Wrestling with the Infinite*,  
c. 1927  
(most extensive restoration)

Stanley E. Brunst, *Non-objective*, 1939  
(earliest non-objective work by a Prairie artist)

Reta Madeline Cowley, *Untitled (Still Life—Apple, Plant, Bottle Vase)*,  
c. 1957  
(still life by the female artist with the largest number of works in the collection)

Paterson Ewen, *Record Wave with Rocket Cloud*, 1988  
(most expensive purchase)

Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Self-Portrait with Raised Sabre*,  
1634  
(oldest work)

Charles Frederick Highfield, 1939, c. 1940-1944  
(most significant history painting not exhibited previously)

Robert Newton Hurley, *Untitled (fish)*, 1959  
(first work in collection)

Nellie Jacobsen, *Untitled (legend)*, c. 1939  
(most elegant bear grass weaving)

Augustus Frederick Lafosse Kenderdine, *Broadway Bridge, Saskatoon*,  
c. 1935  
(most impressive frame)

Grant Kernan, *Russell Yuristy's Duck This Summer*, 2000  
Russell Michael Yuristy, *Working Drawing for Duck Boat*, 1975  
Unknown, *Installation of Russell Yuristy's Duck at the Mendel Art  
Gallery*, c. 1981  
(largest duck)

Dorothy Elsie Knowles, *Reta Painting Near the Boskill Farm*, 1981  
(portrait of the female artist with the largest number of works in the collection)

Ernest F. Lindner, *Untitled (study of people and dogs)*,  
later than 1927, prior to 1962  
(largest number of people and dogs on a single sheet of paper)

James Edward Hervey MacDonald, *Logs on the Gatineau*, 1915  
(work with the second largest insurance value, included because the work  
with the highest insurance value is currently being shown elsewhere)

Michael Maranda, *The Three Critiques of Immanuel Kant*, 2000  
(most recent purchase [in progress]; most recently produced work)

William Pehudoff, *Untitled (two musicians)*, 1953  
(most in need of restoration)

15 Aboriginal sculptures from New Guinea, artists and dates unknown  
(largest collection of Aboriginal work not exhibited previously)

Unknown, *Kudlik*, c. 1950  
(most utilitarian Inuit sculpture)

Leslie Gale Saunders, *A and D*, c. 1947  
(still life by the male artist with the largest number of works in the collection)

Hilda Joyce Stewart, *Untitled (unidentified girl)*, c. 1916  
(smallest work)

Unknown, *Untitled (L.G. Saunders at tiller of boat)*, c. 1942  
(portrait of the male artist with the largest number of works in the collection)

James Walsh, *Gray Settle*, 1994  
(thickest painting)