



If Remembered

Watercolours
and Mixed Media Works
by Mary Abma

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February 1 to March 1, 2003

Sadie A. Knowles Gallery

Introduction

Gallery Lambton is pleased to present the work of Sarnia artist, Mary Abma. This new body of work of watercolour and collage, encompasses her recent investigations into her ancestors, particularly her maternal ancestors. This activity coincides with the current popularity of genealogy. So many people today are searching for information about the everyday lives of their forebears because they are discovering that the past is very much a part of the present. The exhibition, "If Remembered," the result of many years of research, is an obvious "labour of love." In fact, Mary began to think about this project five years ago, long before she had approached me about the possibility of exhibiting this work at Gallery Lambton. The theme originated when she realized that many of her paintings were automatically incorporating many of these genealogical elements. As a woman, she was interested primarily in the lives of the people who are all too often forgotten in genealogy: her female ancestors, and the important roles that they played in shaping our society. Although Mary's forebears may have originated from different countries other than Canada, their lives were not so different from our own ancestors. Therefore, we can all relate to the toils and joys of these people who lived in past generations all those years ago. Mary is fascinated most of all in the way that talents and character traits are passed on from generation to generation. For example, many of her ancestors revealed that they had artistic and musical talents which they passed down to Mary.

I would like to thank Mary Abma and her family for sharing this very personal statement with the art-going public, and for providing information about the individual women in her paintings who appear to have been quite remarkable in their own quiet way. Mary describes them with obvious respect, affection and warmth. Her descriptions help us to understand the lively images that she has presented for us to enjoy.

David G. Taylor, Curator
January 2003

Artist's Statement

This show is about convergence. When one considers the chain of events that leads to one's own birth, it can be mind-boggling. An amateur genealogy buff, I have always been interested in the lives that have been lived before mine. If only one person in my ancestry had made a decision not to emigrate from his or her homeland, I wouldn't be here today. My ancestors from France, England, Wales, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Quebec, and the deep south in the United States, all led lives that brought their descendants to the Detroit area, where I was born.

Although I find the lives of the men in my family history compelling, I chose to do this show about the women in my ancestry. I felt that I could relate to their experiences by virtue of the fact that I am a woman. Women's histories are less well documented than those of men. I know relatively little about the lives of the women in my family tree. However, this lack of knowledge provided me with more creative freedom than I might otherwise have had.

A major theme in this show is that of fabric. If we do retain any artifacts from the women in our histories, they tend to be domestic articles. In my family, these include lace, quilts, embroidery, etc. Therefore, I chose to represent the linkages from one woman to another through the use of threads. Each woman depicted in the show is represented by a single thread of a specific colour, which I have incorporated into my painting of her. Women whose ancestors are depicted in the show, also carry threads of their forebears in their portraits. If I were to do a self-portrait, the threads of all eighteen women would be in my painting.

This show is a series of portraits but not in the traditional sense. What I have tried to depict is one element of each woman's life that I feel has a universal quality. I do not claim to be accurate in my depictions, nor do I wish to gloss over or stand in judgement over my ancestors' beliefs or actions. They were who they were, and whether or not I am proud of the choices they made and the paths they walked, they are all a part of me.

Mary Abma, January 2003

Front Cover: Marie-Fille du Roi,
Watercolour and ink, 22 1/2 x 30"

Back Cover: Maldo, *Watercolour & Gesso, 11 1/8 x 15"*

List of Works

Sophie's Sampler, 2002

Sophia Tabernacle (born 1918)
Watercolour, gesso, and
photographic collage on rag paper
12 5/8 x 8 1/8"

We know little about Sophia except that the family still has her Sampler, which she embroidered at the age of ten.

Seeking Sarah, 1999

Sarah Ann Cook (1848-1929)
Watercolour on rag paper
22 1/4 x 15"

Like so many ancestors, we have little more than dates and photographs to tell us about Sarah. However, we do know that she operated a coffee shop and that she raised a family of musicians. She and her husband were active in the Salvation Army Church and were always concerned with the disadvantaged.

Grace, 2002

Grace Morgan (1886-1970)
Watercolour on rag paper
32 7/8 x 59"

Grace was from a large family in England. Aboard the ship that left port right after the *Titanic*, she travelled across the Atlantic in 1912 to visit her brother who had moved to Manitoba. There she met her future husband. Motivated by a desire to strike out on her own, she made the decision to remain in Canada. Grace and her husband were very musical, a gift which they would pass on to future generations.

Tabitha Sews, 2002

Tabitha Alcorn (born about 1741)
Watercolour and linen collage on rag paper
22 1/2 x 30"

Tabitha Alcorn married Isaac Eslick about 1758. One story about her has survived through time. Apparently, during the Revolutionary War, there were many colonial soldiers who were in dire need of clothing. Tabitha took up the cause and went among the colonists in Granville County, North Carolina, urging the women to make shirts for the soldiers from their sheets and tablecloths. It is said that General Nathaniel Green wrote a letter to General Washington in which he commended her for this service.



Catherine's Ways, 2002, Catherine Herbinne (1726-1789)
Watercolour on rag paper

Maldo, 2002

Maldo McClain (1856-1936)
Watercolour and gesso on rag paper
15 x 11 1/8"

Maldo McClain was raised in Tennessee. Her world was changed at a young age when the American Civil War raged. Her future husband's family had been ensconced in the culture of the south and owned many slaves. Her future husband was a sergeant in the Confederate army.

Hallie's Quest, 2002

Hallie Eslick (1881-1939)
Watercolour and mixed media on illustration board
19 3/4 x 30"

Hallie was born and raised in Tennessee. She married there and had nine children. In the early part of the twentieth century, times were very hard for people living in the south. Poverty was in the forefront. She was married to a kindly man who owned a grocery. Unfortunately, his kindness meant that he often allowed people to buy items on credit which they would fail to

repay. As a result, Hallie's family never felt secure. It was said of Tennessee in those days that it was beautiful but that beauty did not pay the bills. So, in the mid 1920's, Hallie's eldest sons went to Detroit where they found jobs in the auto industry. Hallie, her husband, and the rest of the family followed them.

***Ellen Within*, 2002**

Ellen Nicks (1832-1907)
Watercolour and gesso on rag paper
20 x 40"

Ellen Nicks was born and raised in Tennessee. We don't know much about her, except that she married a country doctor and that at one point, she went to bed and never got up again. She threw her pills for depression behind her bed. She died about seven years later. Her daughter also suffered from depression.

***Marie Cultivates*, 2002**

Marie Rollet (1580-1649)
Watercolour on rag paper
22 1/2 x 30"

In 1617, Marie Rollet, along with her husband, Louis Hébert and her three children, was the first European settler in New France. Her husband, an apothecary by trade, was commissioned by Champlain to settle with his family in what is now the Quebec City area and to farm the land there. Life was difficult for them. The fur trade was big business and there was no local support for settlement. As a result, the Hébert family had to farm the land without the modern implements of their time. However, by developing good relations with the local First Nations people, they learnt cultivating methods and how to grow medicinal herbs. The family remained



***Gracie's Lexicon*, 2002.** Grace McInerney (1882-1954)
Watercolour, drawing ink, and photographic image collage on rag paper



***Grace*, 2002,** Grace Morgan (1886-1970)
Watercolour on rag paper

in New France through some difficult times including famines and English occupation. The food they grew saved the lives of other Europeans in Quebec on more than one occasion.

***Marie-Ann – Fille du Roi*, 2002**

Marie-Anne Metru (1656-1731)
Watercolour, drawing ink, and gesso on rag paper
22 1/2 x 30"

Marie-Anne Metru was a "fille du roi" ("daughter of the king"). In the early days of French settlement in New France, the king provided incentives for unmarried girls to cross the Atlantic to marry the hearty young men who had decided to settle in the New World. Each young woman was provided with a dowry and money. Upon arrival, they immediately chose a husband and married. Marie-Anne married Jacques Samson in 1671 when she was sixteen. They settled in what is now Lévis, Quebec. Sources indicate that she bore between 19 and 21 children. Following her husband's death in 1699, their property was sold to provide for her minor children. A record, documenting her possessions and their value, has been preserved. She later remarried.

***The Siege of Quebec*, 2002**

Barbe Poire (1726-1769)
Watercolour, gesso,
and gel medium on illustration board
22 1/2 x 40"

In 1759, Barbe Poire was raising a young family and was pregnant with her seventh child, when the English began the siege of Quebec. This siege, that led to the battle of the Plains of Abraham in September of that year, resulted in the end of French rule in New France. Barbe and her family lived in Lévis, a small community situated directly across from Quebec City. Lévis was captured before Quebec City fell to the British. The British troops took over her own church, St. Joseph, where they brought Wolfe's body after his death on the Plains of Abraham. Barbe's sister and brother both died in 1759.

***Catherine's Ways*, 2002**

Catherine Herbinne (1726-1789)
Watercolour on rag paper
22 1/2 x 30"

Catherine and her husband, Michael Yax, were from Germany. They came to the United States heading for a German settlement on the Mississippi, when they became lost. According to records, they were raided by the Ottawas who kidnapped Catherine and ransomed her to a French Commander at Fort Detroit. However, she was reunited with her husband and the couple settled in Detroit. It is also recorded that Catherine, who was illiterate, was the first person in Michigan to convert from Protestantism to Catholicism.

***Mary Heals*, 2002**

Mary Moross (1836-1913)
Watercolour, gouache, and transparent parchment
paper collage on rag paper
7 1/2 x 40"

As a young lady, Mary Moross, descendant of the earliest French settlers in Detroit, studied homeopathy and became a homeopathic physician. The marble-top table, on which she mixed her remedies, remains with the family and still bears the stains that she made on the surface. Mary was well known in the area for being able to cure skin diseases with her poultices. Sadly, one record documents that she was the attending physician at her own grandson's death.

***Amelia Grieves*, 2002**

Amelia DeWolf (1825-1869)
Watercolour, gesso, and transparent parchment paper
collage on rag paper
Triptych: 14 5/8 x 6 5/8", 20 3/4 x 6 5/8", 20 3/4 x 6 5/8".

Amelia De Wolf was born in Belgium. At some point in her childhood, she was orphaned and raised in a

convent. She married Felix Deneweth and immigrated with him and their young children to the United States. On the voyage, her infant daughter, Sidonie, died and was buried at sea.

***The Mirror*, 1997**

Virginia Deneweth (1859-1944)
Mixed media collage on illustration board
24 1/2 x 28"

Even though life was difficult, Virginia was remarkable for the family she raised. She had twelve children. Most of her daughters never married but they were well educated and had careers. Many of them were talented either musically or artistically. A love for family history, antiques, education, travel, and the arts, was strong in this family.

***From the Mist*, 2002**

Catherine (unknown)
Watercolour and ink on rag
29 3/4 x 15 1/2"

No genealogical study is complete without an unknown ancestor. We know very little about Catherine. However, we can piece together a sketchy biography. She was Irish Catholic and born in the late 1700's. She lived in County Clare, Ireland, and married Cornelius McInerney. At least some of her children were literate at a time when it would have been difficult for Catholic families to provide education for their children. At least three of her sons, possibly five, crossed the Atlantic to begin new lives in North America. The only possible relic we have from this extended family is an old walking stick carved with Celtic imagery.

***Mary's Legacy*, 2002**

Mary E. Marr (1812-1859)
Watercolour and gesso on rag paper
30 x 13 3/4"

Mary Marr was born in 1812 in County Clare, Ireland. She married James McInerney, twelve years her senior, and immigrated to the United States sometime before 1829. At 17, she had her first child, a daughter, in 1829. Because of the scarcity of records in Ireland, we do not know much about Mary's background except that she and her husband were both literate. Mary had tempestuous relationships with her husband and with her neighbours. She was a strong, independent woman who was not afraid to fight her battles in court. For many years, Mary and her husband lived separate lives with a few attempts at reconciliation. She worked as a coffee house owner to raise her children alone. Her youngest child was only four years old when Mary died at the age of 47.

Gracie's Lexicon, 2002

Grace McInerney (1882-1954)
Watercolour, drawing ink, and photographic image
college on rag paper
22 1/2 x 30"

Grace was born and raised in Mt. Clemens, Michigan. The daughter of an Irish father and a French mother, she was one of a large number of children. Education was not a priority for the girls of the family and Grace only attended school until the sixth grade. Grace is remembered by her family for her humour, her laughter, her irreverence, and for her unusual sayings (see Gracie's Lexicon). It was only recently that we have taken another look at Gracie's sayings. We have discovered that they have their roots in French, likely a language that Grace had heard spoken by her grandmother. Because Grace did not know French, she just repeated what she thought she heard.

Marion, 2003

Marion (1912-2001)
Watercolour and embroidery thread on rag paper
34 x 38 1/2"

My maternal grandmother, Marion was someone who enjoyed life to the fullest. The consummate host, she loved to entertain her friends and relatives. She was remarkable for her generation because she went into business with her husband during the Great Depression. They owned a fish market which she operated until she was 81 years old. Marion was also an artist who painted delicate china, an image that always stood for me in stark contrast to her livelihood gutting fish.

Artist's Biography

Solo Shows

- | | |
|------------|--|
| May 2002 | Bright's Grove, Ontario: Gallery in the Grove, <i>Just for the Fun of It</i> |
| June 1999 | Sarnia, Ontario: Vision Nursing and Rest Home, <i>All Good Gifts</i> |
| March 1997 | Bright's Grove, Ontario: Gallery in the Grove, <i>Tapestries</i> |
| March 1994 | Bright's Grove, Ontario: Gallery in the Grove, <i>Changing Faces</i> |

Selected Group Shows

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| 1992-2001 | <i>Lambton County Studio Tour</i> |
| 2002 | Grand Bend, Ontario: Lambton Heritage Museum, <i>Paint the Huron Shores</i> |
| 2002, 2001,
1998 | Sarnia, Ontario: Gallery Lambton, <i>Look</i> |
| 1997, 1998 | London, Ontario: St. Paul's Cathedral, <i>Art in the Heart of London</i> |
| 1996-1998 | Sarnia, Ontario: <i>The Guild Show</i> |
| March 1996 | Bright's Grove: Gallery in the Grove, <i>Escape Routes (The Guild)</i> |
| May 1993 | Petrolia, Ontario: Bear Creek Studio, <i>Niches (With Pam Wong)</i> |

Watercolour Teaching Experience

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 1997-2001 | Sarnia, Ontario: Lambton College, Instructor |
| 1995-2001 | Private Watercolour Instructor |
| 1993-1998 | Various Workshop Leadership Programs |



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Gallery Lambton

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