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Gordon Harrison

All I want to do is paint

Gordon Harrison is a man of many parts, all of which have combined to make him one of the most successful Canadian landscape painters working today.

In September he won First Prize at the Rêves d'Automne 2014 painting contest in Baie Saint-Paul, in Charlevoix, Québec, where 140 prominent artists displayed 251 paintings, each bidding to capture the unofficial title of best Canadian landscape painter. He has also exhibited his work at what may be called the spiritual home of Canadian landscape painting, the McMichael Gallery in Kleinberg, just outside of Toronto, where all but one of the Group of Seven are buried.

For those who aren't familiar with the spectacular natural beauty of the Charlevoix region, it has been captivating Quebec and Canadian landscape painters from the Group of Seven on down and Harrison has from time to time been called the eighth member of the Group of Seven.

Harrison's work is bold and vibrant. It is difficult to believe that he is largely self-taught because of his superb abilities as a colourist and his sense of design. Yet except for a course taken here and a course taken there he hasn't had much to do with academia. In terms of his palette, Harrison's work bears some resemblance to British artist David Hockney's recent work where at first glance unlikely colours appear in landscapes which as you read the painting then become totally appropriate. The two paintings which won him first prize at Baie Saint Paul for instance, feature mountains in winter that are largely painted in shades of red and evergreens that have a good deal of blue in them.

Harrison literally revels in colour and at times it is as if he has created his own vocabulary to describe the Canadian landscape. There are aspects of his work which do remind you of the Group of Seven but they are difficult to pin down. It could be the density of emotion hidden in his work or the complexity of the draftsmanship involved in creating his very unique works of art.





Near Peyto Lake, Jasper area, Alberta, 40 x 60 in

Narrow Gorge 1, Athabaska Falls,
Jasper, Alberta, 48 x 12 in

As you might expect, any of his autumn works are extremely bright, vivid and tonally complex, so complex that it makes you wonder how he can produce 200 or so works a year. His summer paintings on the other hand are much closer to the shades used in traditional landscape. Harrison describes his style by saying: "It's a form of Impressionism verging on contemporary. Texture is pretty huge as are brush strokes. I like to see my brush strokes and I think a lot of people who look at my work enjoy that aspect of the painting, and the impasto application of colour. The combination of texture and visible brush strokes in my work is very important."

When looking back at how his style has evolved over the years Harrison says: "What I used to do with four or five brushstrokes I now do with one, simplifying shape and form. I don't want to use the word stylized but that is part of it. I am more confident in what I am doing and I think that comes across."

Harrison fits the pattern of many Canadian artists in many ways but he also breaks the mold. Like many artists, Harrison was driven inward by a malady. In his case, he was born tongue tied and really only learned to speak and communicate properly after an operation on his tongue when he was six. When he was a child he always seemed to have a pencil and paper in his possession and he was fascinated by nature, specifically trees. As a young boy he spent his summers at the family country house in Ste-Marguerite-du-Lac Masson where in 1902 his grandfather had traded a piano for ten acres of land. And that's where Gordon began to break the mold. As a young boy he was so fascinated by trees that he spent his time going back and forth on the lake looking for species of trees that he didn't have at the cottage and transplanting them. He wanted one of every tree that grew in the neighbourhood close at hand.

Harrison always drew and painted even when he worked onerous shifts at Banff as a student but like many another Canadian painter he embarked on another official career and became first a landscape architect and then an urban planner for the City of Ottawa.

His first exhibition was in his mother's basement. While you could say he worked two jobs for years, one as an urban planner and the other as a putative artist, he really only became a full time painter after he retired. And as you might imagine by this point his retirement is more like a very busy full time career than idle days of wine and roses.



Lac Blanche, 40 x 40 in

Now he has his own gallery in Ottawa, the Gordon Harrison Canadian Landscape Gallery, as well as being represented from Québec City to Victoria, and is in the process of publishing his third book. He also teaches or as he prefers to put it, “coaches” students and established artists and runs a bed and breakfast in what was going to be a retirement home for himself and life partner Phil Emond, at Lac Masson Pine Point Lake House, where he offers studio sessions.

You can’t really write a story about Gordon Harrison without mentioning his life partner Phil Emond. “Phil is my manager and gallerist and he has really helped me get to the point where I am right now. He’s done a great job. Every artist needs a Phil Emond.” It was Phil, for instance who decided that they should open their own gallery and it was Phil who thought up the idea of having an annual garden party where for three days during the summer they exhibit their work outside the Ottawa studio in New Edinburgh, for passer bys to take a closer look at. Phil was probably also behind the books. The latest of which, *Gordon Harrison, I just want to*

paint – my journey as an artist, will be published soon. His second book, *Gordon Harrison, The Colours of Canada* is available at the National Gallery.

Noel Meyer

Gordon Harrison’s work is represented at the following venues: Québec City, Galerie Perreault, 205 Saint Paul St, 418-692-4772; Sainte Adèle, L’Express Gourmand, 31 Morin St. 450-229-1915; Chelsea Qc, Les Fougères, 783 Route 105, 819-827-8942; Ottawa, Gordon Harrison Canadian Landscape Gallery, 495 Sussex Drive, 613-746-6853; Toronto, Petroff Gallery, 1016 Eglinton Ave West, 416-782-1696; Oakville, In2Art Gallery, 136 Church St, 905-582-6739; Port Carling, Peaks and Rafters Gallery, 162 Medora St., 705-765-6868; Port Carling, Ryan Fine Art Gallery, 3658 Muskoka, Hwy. 118 West, 705-765-1500; Saskatoon, Rouge Gallery, 245 3rd Ave., Unit 200, 306-955-8882; Edmonton, West End Gallery, 12308 Jasper Ave. NW, 780-488-4892; Victoria, West End Gallery, 1203 Broad St., 250-388-0009.