

APRIL 30, 2021

THE ART OF MONEY

COLVILLE'S CENTENNIAL COINS

Fifty-four years ago Expo 67 opened in Montreal—and the coins created by revered Canadian painter Alex Colville were a part of the world fair festivities. On the anniversary of the event ACI is launching a new online exhibition about the famed currency that marked the country's 100-year celebration of Confederation.

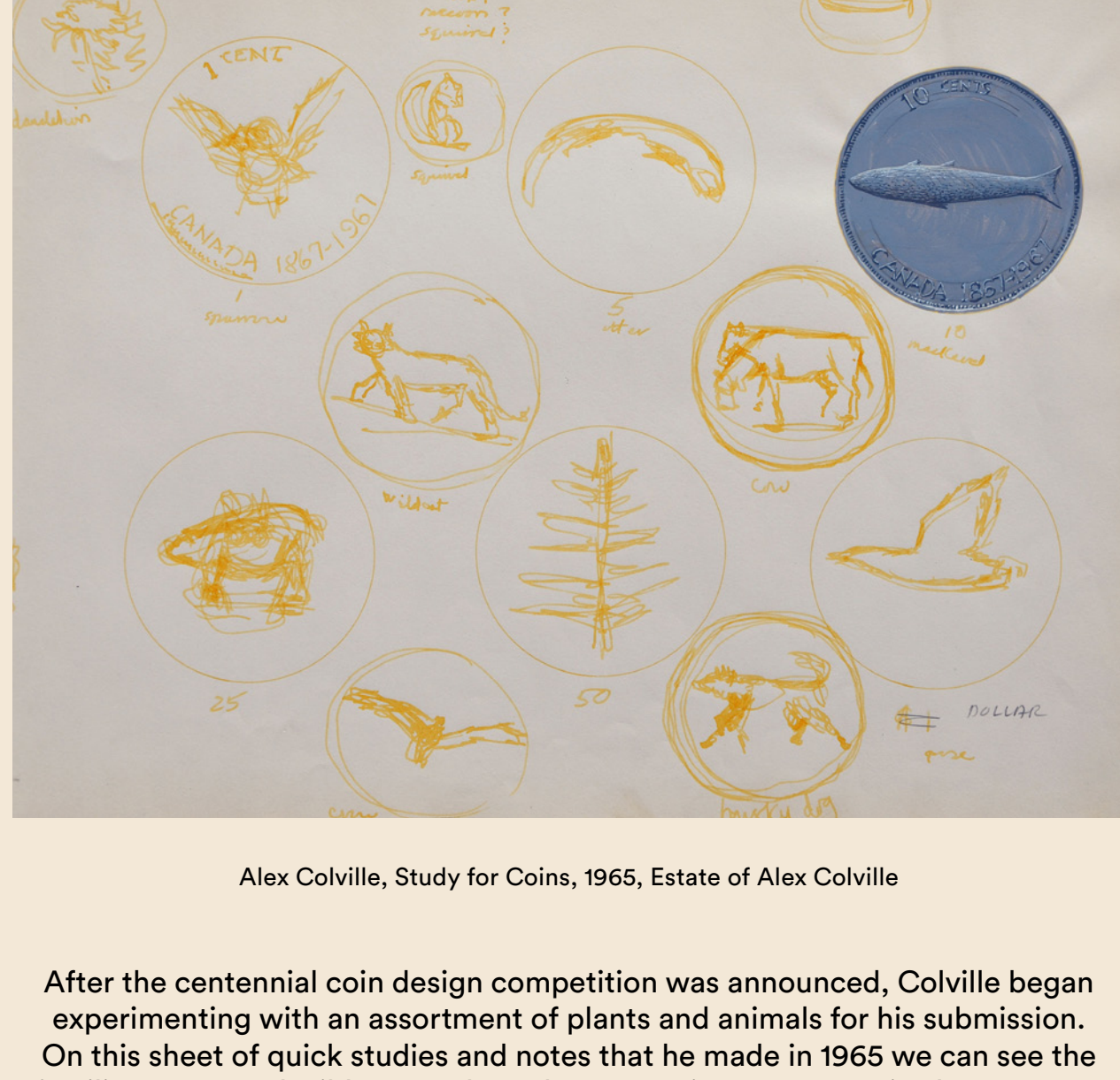


In 2017, the Art Canada Institute published *Alex Colville: Life & Work* by Ray Cronin, a work about our country's foremost realist painter and how he imbued his meticulously painted scenes of everyday life with profound questions about the human condition. Our new online exhibition takes a closer look at a highly celebrated project by the Toronto-born, Maritime-based artist, one that produced the most widely-circulated artistic objects in Canadian history: six centennial coins that Colville (1920–2013) designed in 1965 and 1966 for the Royal Canadian Mint in celebration of Canada's one hundredth anniversary of Confederation. Marking the anniversary of the opening of Expo 67 on April 27, 1967, *The Measure of Nature: Alex Colville's Centennial Coins*, presented in partnership with the Beaverbrook Art Gallery and Billie Magazine, reveals the artist's process of developing indelible currency inspired by Canadian wildlife.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

A NATIONAL TALENT

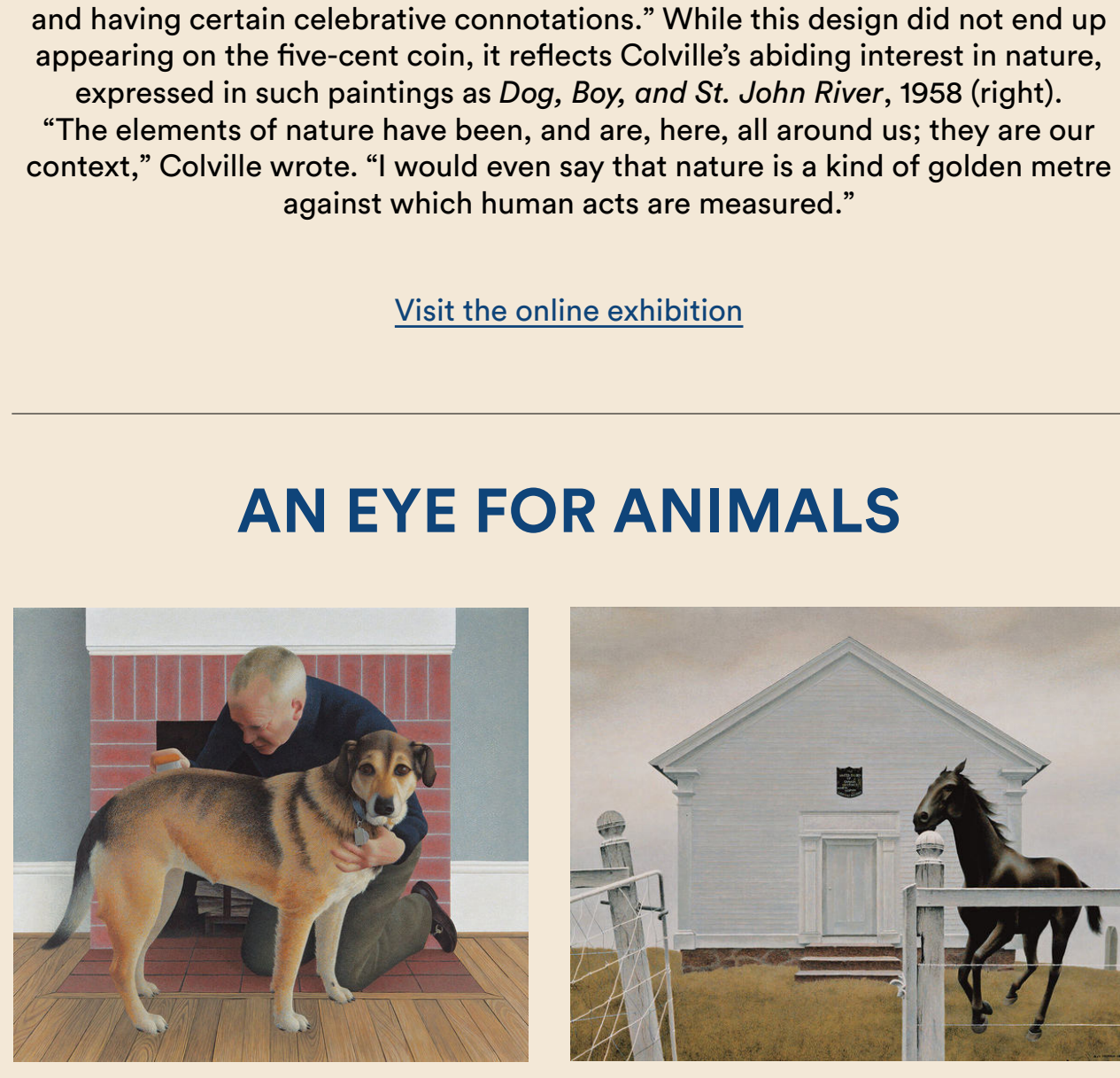


Alex Colville, *Family and Rainstorm*, 1955

In 1964, when Minister of Finance Walter L. Gordon invited Canadian artists, sculptors, and designers to submit proposals for a coin set to be issued in 1967 to commemorate the Canadian Centennial, Colville's career was thriving. With works such as *Family and Rainstorm*, 1955, he had come into his signature style. Employing careful, unified brushwork and precisely ordered compositional structures, Colville depicted his family, his home, and his surrounding environs in Sackville, New Brunswick, and Wolfville, Nova Scotia. Never merely a mirror of the physical world, his paintings are conceptual explorations, predominantly of the relationships between humans and animals, and men and women. Colville's art was regularly exhibited and his success allowed him to resign from his teaching position at Mount Allison University in 1963.

Read more about Colville's early career in [Alex Colville: Life & Work](#) by Ray Cronin

THE COMPETITION

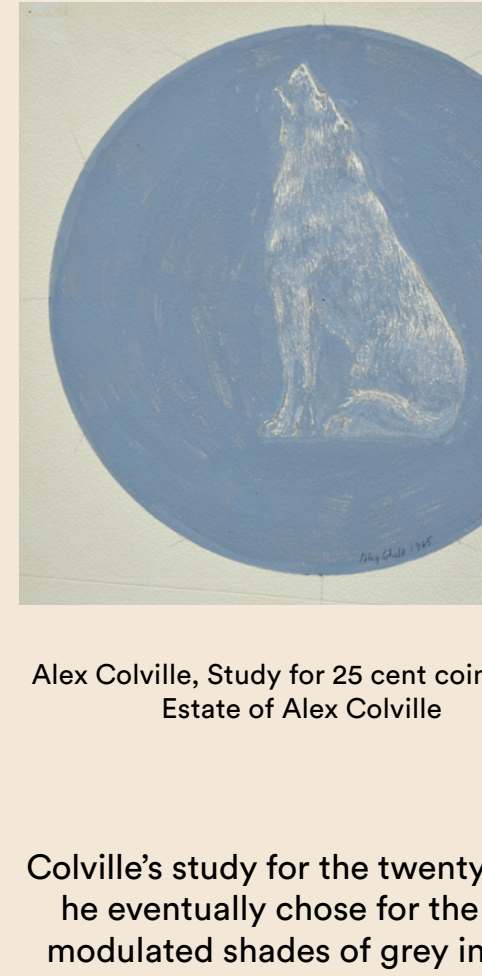


Alex Colville, *Study for Coins*, 1965, Estate of Alex Colville

After the centennial coin design competition was announced, Colville began experimenting with an assortment of plants and animals for his submission. On this sheet of quick studies and notes that he made in 1965 we can see the familiar goose and wildcat are there, but so too is a cow, a squirrel, a sparrow, an otter, a crow, and what appears to be a bear. "It is a question of finding images which are worthy and appropriate for use in celebrating our country's Centennial," Colville explained, "[to] express not merely some particular time, place, or event, but a whole century of Canada, and even more; natural creatures provide this enduring and meaningful continuum."

[Visit the online exhibition](#)

THE GOLDEN METRE



Alex Colville, *Study for 5 cent coin*, 1965, Estate of Alex Colville

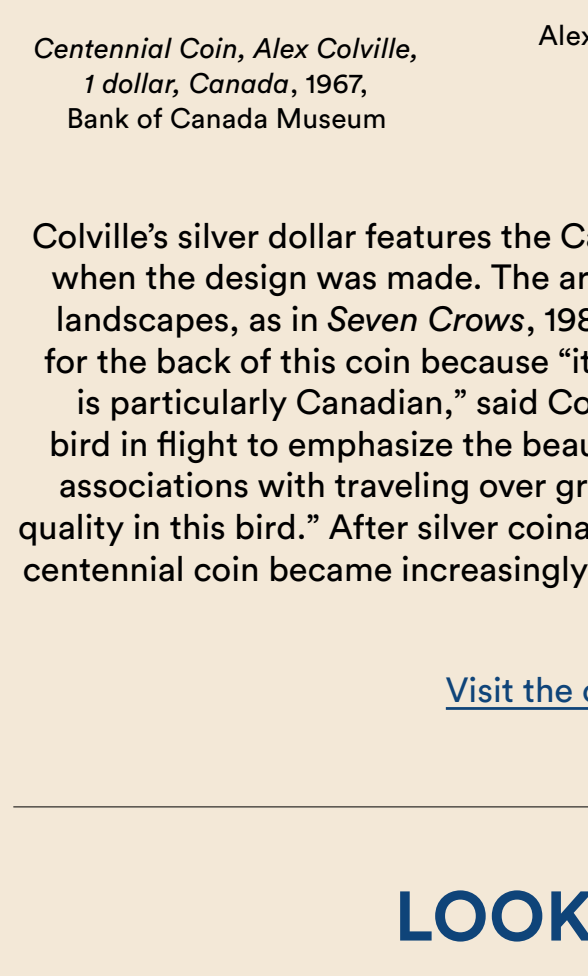


Alex Colville, *Dog, Boy, and St. John River*, 1958

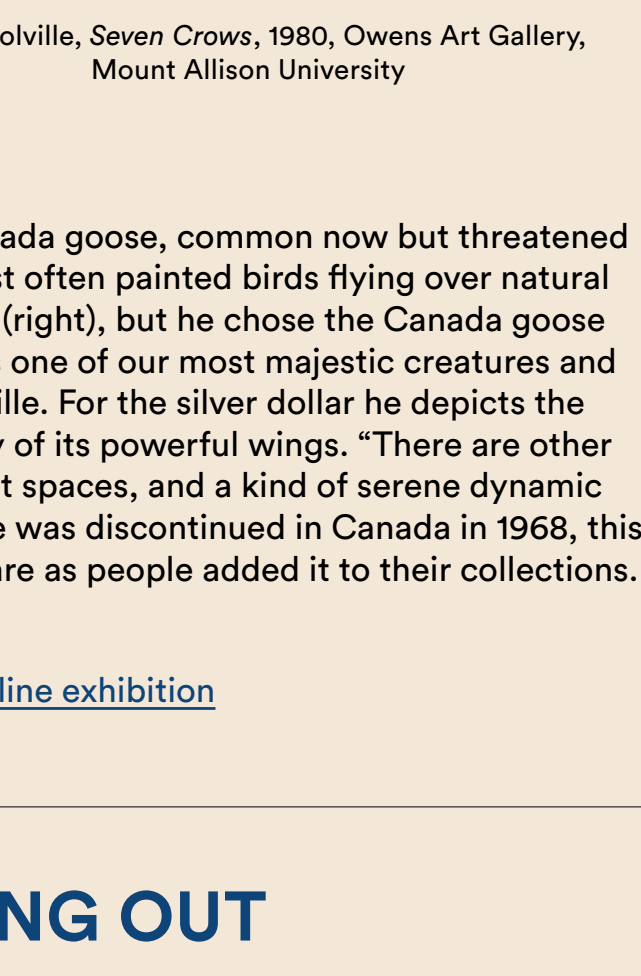
Colville initially considered plants in his designs, including the humble dandelion and the spritely spruce tree featured in this study for the five-cent coin (left). The artist provides insight into the creation of this drawing in a comment on the back of the panel where he explains: "[I] selected a spruce tree as being common, and having certain celebratory connotations." While this design did not end up appearing on the five-cent coin, it reflects Colville's abiding interest in nature, expressed in such paintings as *Dog, Boy, and St. John River*, 1958 (right). "The elements of nature have been, and are, here, all around us; they are our context," Colville wrote, "I would even say that nature is a kind of golden metre against which human acts are measured."

[Visit the online exhibition](#)

AN EYE FOR ANIMALS



Alex Colville, *Dog and Groom*, 1991



Alex Colville, *Church and Horse*, 1964

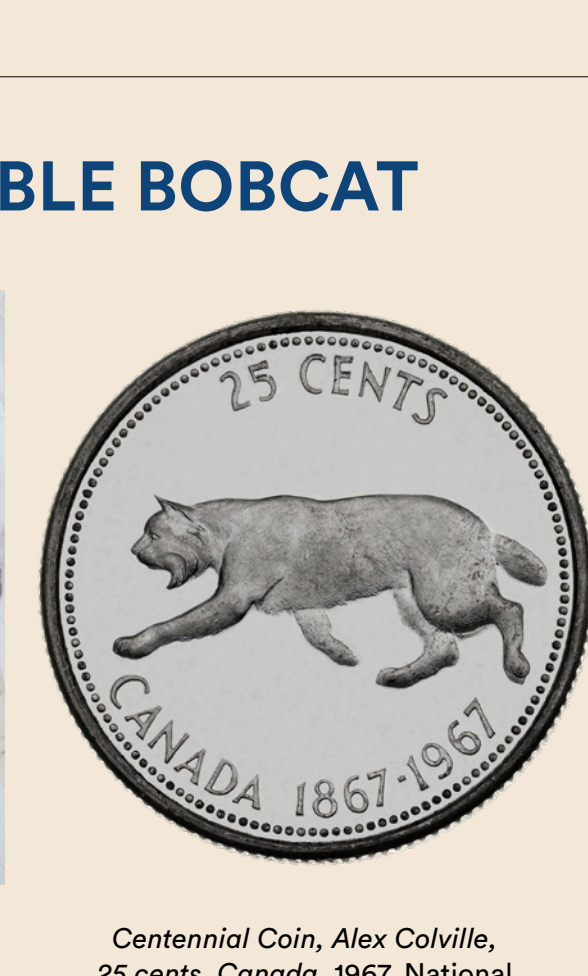
Colville ultimately decided that his centennial coin designs would concentrate only on animals—a subject that was central to the paintings he made throughout his life, including *Dog and Groom*, 1991 (left), and *Church and Horse*, 1964 (right). In a 1982 interview Colville said, "To me the presence of animals seems absolutely necessary. I feel that without animals everything is incomplete." Ann Kitz, Colville's daughter, says, "He wasn't sentimental about animals, but he thought that they were essentially good, and he didn't think that people were inherently good." In the dramatic *Church and Horse*, a black stallion gallops towards the open gate in front of a plain white church. Partly inspired by the riderless horse that appeared in the televised funeral of American President John F. Kennedy in 1963, the painting explores the notion of order and its potential collapse. Colville also frequently painted his pets, as in *Dog and Groom*, which portrays the artist at home with his docile canine.

Read Ray Cronin's essay "[An Eye for Animals: Why Wildlife Plays a Part in Alex Colville's Art](#)"

THE LONE WOLF



Alex Colville, *Study for 25 cent coin*, 1965, Estate of Alex Colville



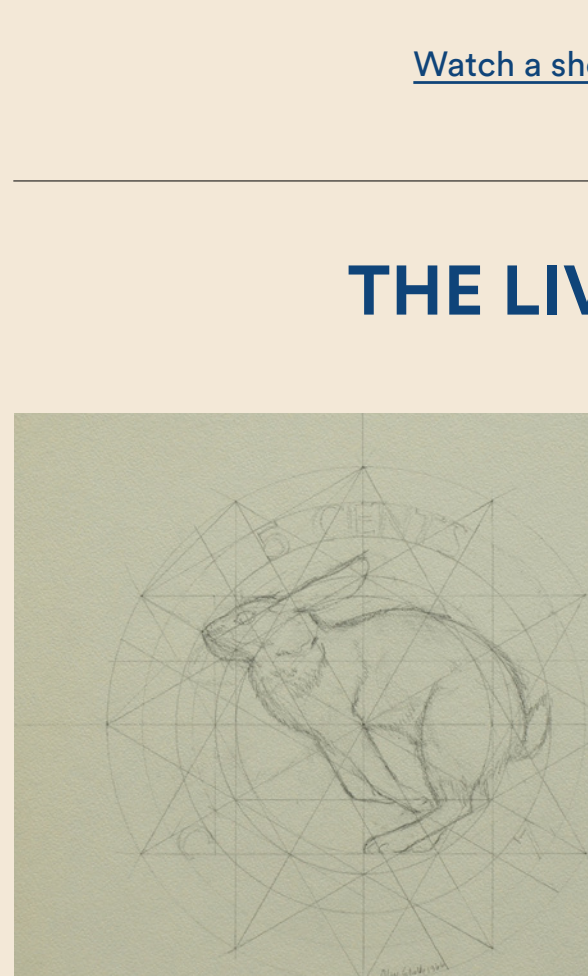
Centennial Coin, Alex Colville, 50 cents, Canada, 1967, National Currency Collection, Bank of Canada Museum

Colville's study for the twenty-five cent coin (left) depicts a howling wolf, which he eventually chose for the fifty-cent coin (right) instead. By using carefully modulated shades of grey in his drawing, Colville has produced a naturalistic impression of the seated animal's stance, and the texture of its fur. The simplified beauty and conceptual clarity of Colville's fifty-cent design explain why he remains the only Canadian fine artist to have created an entire set of circulation coins. According to him, "The wolf, unfortunately no longer common, is here symbolic of the vastness and loneliness of Canada, and thus of our isolation and to a degree, of our present condition. Yet the wolf is not a pathetic creature," Colville carefully considered the symbolism of his work and the relationship to Canadian national identity.

[Visit the online exhibition](#)

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THE MAJESTIC CANADA GOOSE



Centennial Coin, Alex Colville, 1 dollar, Canada, 1967, Bank of Canada Museum



Alex Colville, *Seven Crows*, 1980, Owens Art Gallery, Mount Allison University

Colville's silver dollar features the Canada goose, common now but threatened when the design was made. The artist often painted birds flying over natural landscapes, as in *Seven Crows*, 1980 (right), but he chose the Canada goose for the back of this coin because "it is one of our most majestic creatures and is particularly Canadian," said Colville. For the silver dollar he depicts the bird in flight to emphasize the beauty of its powerful wings. "There are other associations with traveling over great spaces, and a kind of serene dynamic quality in this bird." After silver coinage was discontinued in Canada in 1968, this centennial coin became increasingly rare as people added it to their collections.

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LOOKING OUT



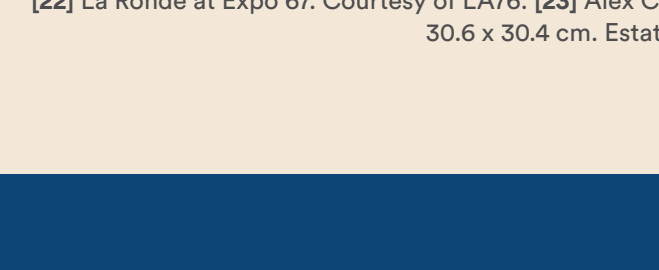
Alex Colville, *To Prince Edward Island*, 1965, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

In 1966, the same year that Colville won the centennial coin design competition, the acclaimed artist represented Canada at the 33rd Venice Biennale, showing a series of paintings that included the iconic *To Prince Edward Island*, 1965. In this painting, a woman on a boat is peering directly at the viewer through binoculars. Meanwhile, a man is seated behind her, his face and body largely obscured. Here Colville explores the contrast between what he called "the searching vision of the female" and the "stupid and passive" approach of the male gaze. He commented: "The woman sees, I suppose, and the man does not." One of Colville's most famous works, this masterpiece inspired American director Wes Anderson to restage the scene in his film *Moonrise Kingdom*, 2012, and is also referenced in Vancouver-based artist Jin-me Yoon's series *Long View*, 2017.

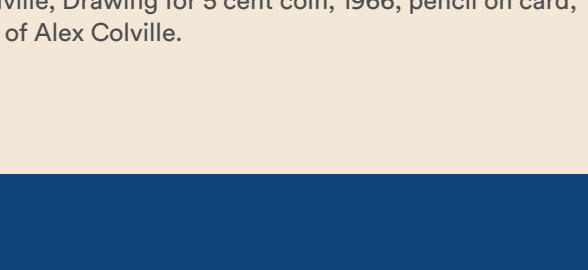
Read more about this painting in [Alex Colville: Life & Work](#) by Ray Cronin

[Learn more about Jin-me Yoon's work](#)

THE FORMIDABLE BOBCAT



Alex Colville, *Study for 25 cent coin*, 1965, Estate of Alex Colville



Centennial Coin, Alex Colville, 25 cents, Canada, 1967, National Currency Collection, Bank of Canada

Colville's preparatory sketch for the twenty-five-cent coin features the Canadian bobcat with its characteristic pointed ears and stubby tail. On the coin (right), the ambling feline appears slimmer and more agile. Colville was drawn to the creature as a symbol of the rugged and expansive Canadian landscape. He explained, "The wildcat (bobcat) seemed appropriate for this coin, which is large enough for the subtle shape of this common, though rarely seen, animal. It is expressive of a certain intelligent independence and a capacity for formidable prey." The creatures on the centennial coins represent a mix of predators and prey—bobcats, for instance, hunt rabbits—highlighting Colville's clear-eyed, unsentimental approach to the world.

[Visit the online exhibition](#)

A CENTENNIAL SPECTACLE

Crowds at Expo 67 with Canadian Pavilion in the background

La Ronde at Expo 67

Colville's coins exemplified the optimism and pride in Canadian cultural heritage that surrounded our nation's grand centennial celebrations, at the centre of which was Expo 67. One of the most spectacular events in Canadian history, Expo 67 was held on two enormous human-made islands on the St. Lawrence River in Montreal. Illustrating the fair's overall theme "Man and His World" were an array of thematic and national pavilions, including the Canadian Pavilion (left, right background), an inverted pyramid structure called Katimavik (Inuktitut for "meeting place"), and the La Ronde amusement park, this historic international event and its significance were encapsulated by the *Times of India*, a major newspaper based in Mumbai, which declared in a headline: "Canada plays host to the world and in the process discovers her soul."

[Watch a short film of Expo 67](#)

THE LIVELY HARE

Alex Colville, *Drawing for 5 cent coin*, 1966, Estate of Alex Colville

Centennial Coin, Alex Colville, 5 cents, Canada, 1967, National Currency Collection, Bank of Canada Museum

In his drawing of a snowshoe hare for the five-cent coin (left), Colville relies on a complex geometric matrix to construct a dynamic yet precisely ordered image of the hare. His depiction of the leaping creature (right) emphasizes its remarkable physical capabilities—it can bound three metres at a time and travel at speeds of up to forty-five kilometres per hour. Offering insight into his lively design for this coin, Colville said, "The rabbit (flying hare) is common, much loved by children, perhaps because of its vulnerability. It survives by alertness and speed, and is symbolically connected to the ideas of fertility, new life and promise—it is a future, or united, animal." Found in every province and territory, the snowshoe hare shown here is familiar to most Canadians.

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