

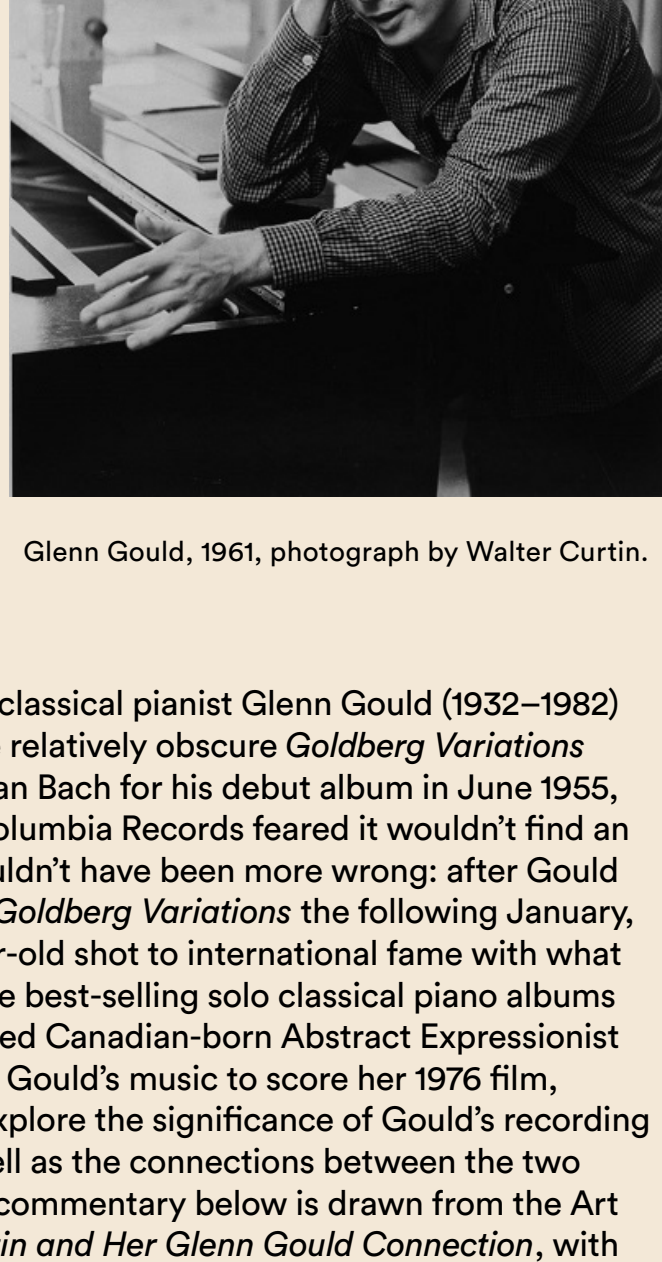
JANUARY 12, 2024

AGNES MARTIN & GLENN GOULD
A CROSS-DISCIPLINARY CONNECTION

A little-known fact from art and history is the intersection of two internationally renowned Canadians: pianist Glenn Gould and artist Agnes Martin. Sixty-eight years ago this month, in January 1956, Gould released his landmark recording of Johann Sebastian Bach's Goldberg Variations. In celebration of this cultural touchstone, we take a closer look at his work and its significance within Martin's 1976 film, Gabriel.



Agnes Martin in her studio, 1954, photograph by Mildred Tolbert.



Glenn Gould, 1961, photograph by Walter Curtin.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada InstituteGABRIEL AND THE
GOLDBERG VARIATIONSAgnes Martin, *Gabriel*, 1976, contemporary still photographed by Bill Jacobson from original film, Pace Gallery, New York. © Agnes Martin Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / CARCC Ottawa 2024.Glenn Gould playing the *Goldberg Variations* during a recording session at the Columbia 30th Street Studio in Manhattan, June 1955, photograph by Fred Plaut.

Martin's film *Gabriel*, 1976, opens with a shot of a boy staring out at the rolling waves of a broad, blue ocean (above left) as the [opening aria](#) of Gould's *Goldberg Variations* plays. For Christopher Régimbal, author of *Agnes Martin: Life & Work*, the scene conjures the feeling of "being lost in the abstract emotion of the music... [and] in the abstract beauty of nature." When Martin made *Gabriel*, the Saskatchewan-born artist was living in an isolated region of northwestern New Mexico. Over the course of three months in 1976, she filmed her neighbours' young son, Peter Mayne, wandering through vast, empty landscapes in New Mexico, California, and Colorado. Gould (above right) recorded the *Goldberg Variations* at the Columbia 30th Street Studio in Manhattan over the course of four days in June 1955.

Read more in ACI's [Agnes Martin: Life & Work](#) by Christopher Régimbal

ORIGINS OF INSPIRATION

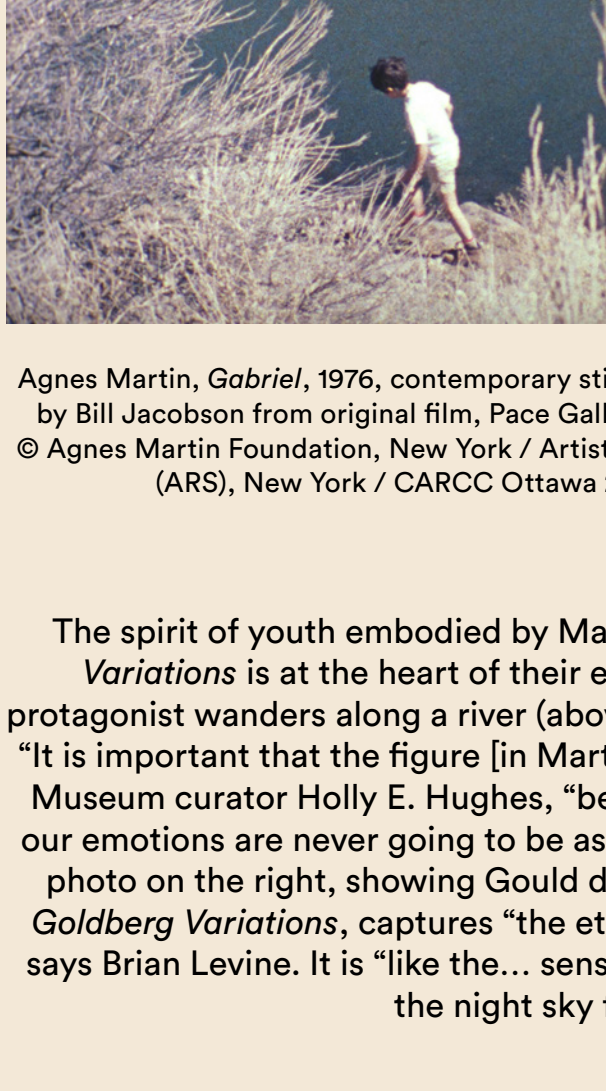
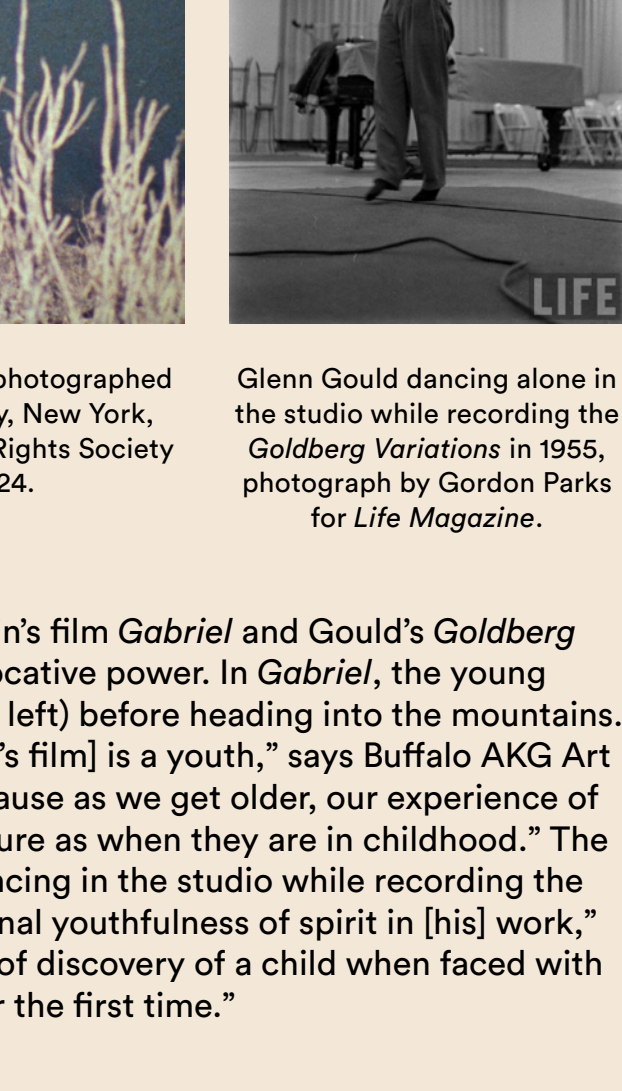


Agnes Martin painting outdoors in New Mexico, c.1947, photograph unknown.

Elias Gottlob Haussmann, *Portrait of Johann Sebastian Bach*, 1748, Museum of City History, Leipzig.

Martin's film *Gabriel* was strongly inspired by her surroundings on the isolated mesa where she lived in New Mexico (above left). Like her famed abstract paintings, the film delves into the "unrepresentable emotions that Martin felt when she contemplated the natural world," [explains author Christopher Régimbal](#). The film is mostly silent, with the exception of musical passages from the *Goldberg Variations*, a composition by Johann Sebastian Bach (above right), composed around 1741 and named after Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, [said to be the first performer of the work](#).

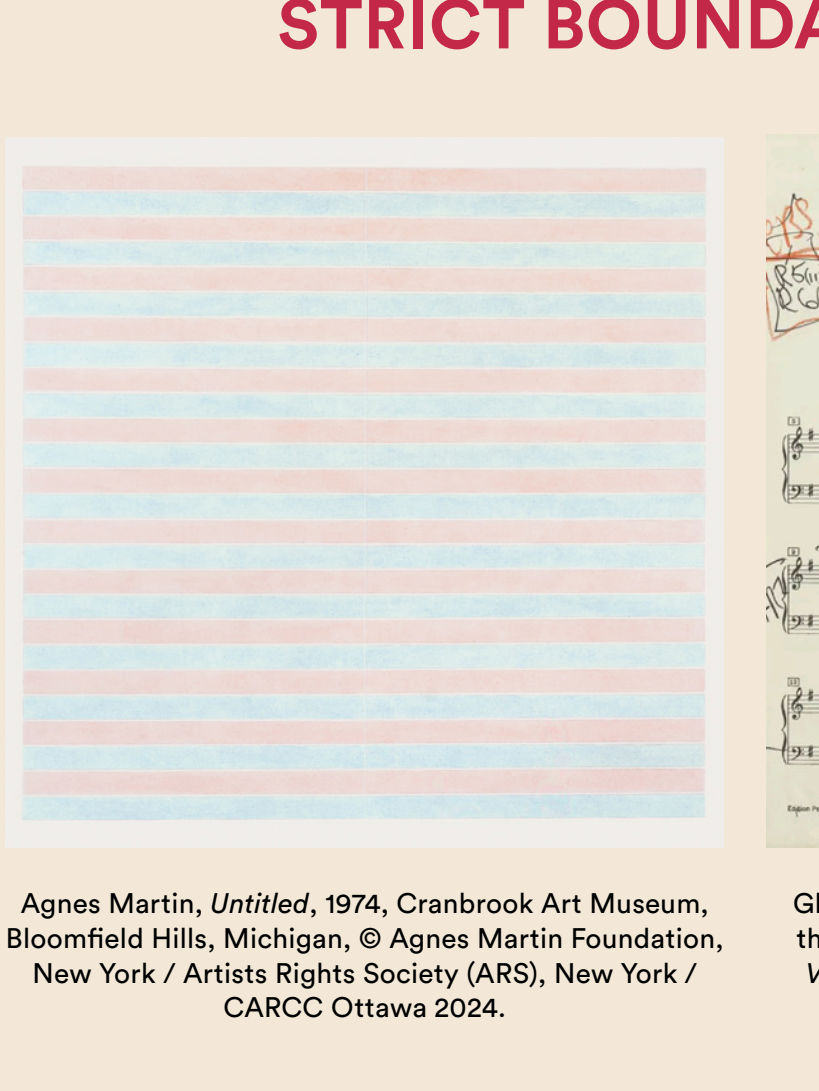
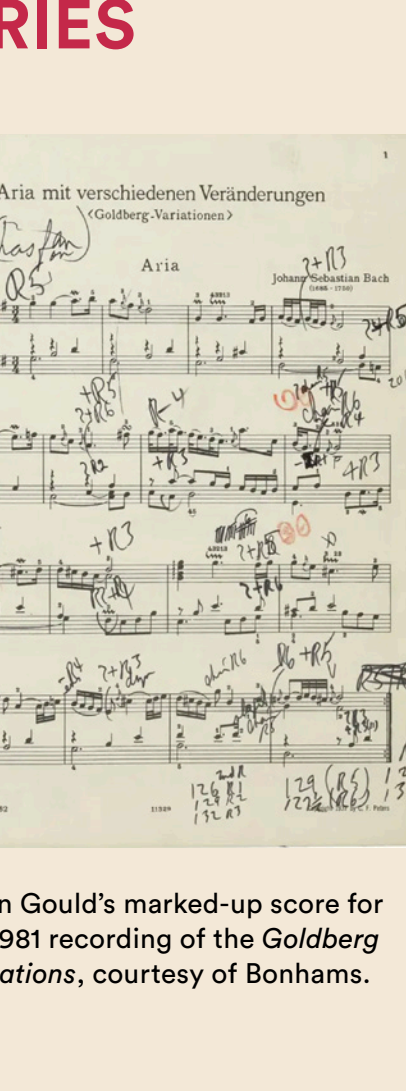
SUCCESS IN NEW YORK

Agnes Martin, *Friendship*, 1963, Museum of Modern Art, New York, © Agnes Martin Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / CARCC Ottawa 2024.Cover of Glenn Gould's 1956 album, *Bach: The Goldberg Variations*.

Although they were born and raised in Canada, Martin and Gould both launched their careers in New York. In the early 1960s, at the renowned Betty Parsons Gallery in Manhattan, Martin premiered her signature grid paintings—such as *Friendship*, 1963 (above left)—which would garner her international acclaim. Gould's New York City debut on January 11, 1955, at the Town Hall theatre on 43rd Street and Broadway, was such a sensation that he was signed by Columbia Records the next day. When asked what he wanted to record, he requested Bach's *Goldberg Variations* (above right), drawn to what Brian Levine, Executive Director of the Glenn Gould Foundation, describes as its "depths of emotion and spiritual intensity." The rest, as they say, is history.

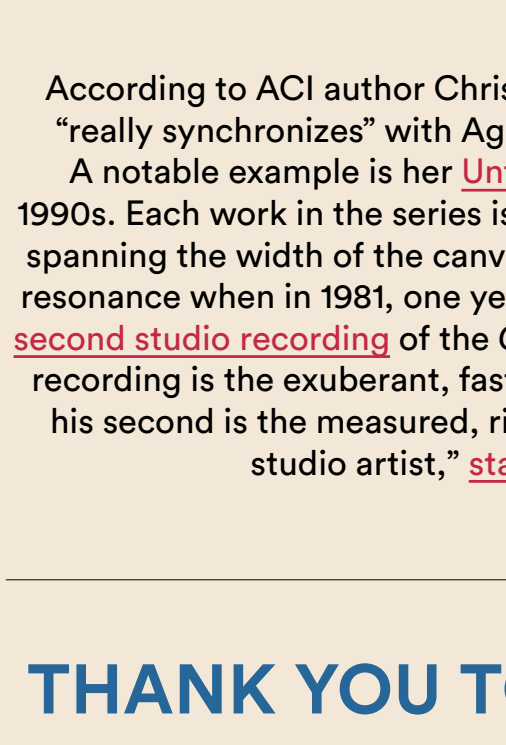
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THE SPIRIT OF YOUTH

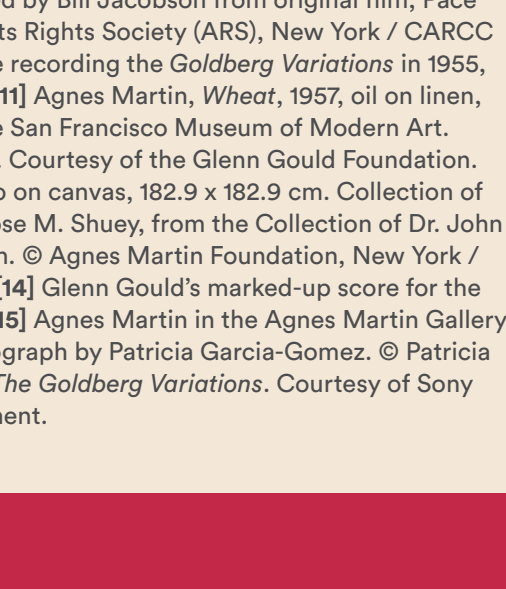
Agnes Martin, *Gabriel*, 1976, contemporary still photographed by Bill Jacobson from original film, Pace Gallery, New York, © Agnes Martin Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / CARCC Ottawa 2024.Glenn Gould dancing alone in the studio while recording the *Goldberg Variations* in 1955, photograph by Gordon Parks for Life Magazine.

The spirit of youth embodied by Martin's film *Gabriel* and Gould's *Goldberg Variations* is at the heart of their evocative power. In *Gabriel*, the young protagonist wanders along a river (above left) before heading into the mountains. "It is important that the figure [in Martin's film] is a youth," says Buffalo AKG Art Museum curator Holly E. Hughes, "because as we get older, our experience of our emotions are never going to be as pure as when they are in childhood." The photo on the right, showing Gould dancing in the studio while recording the *Goldberg Variations*, captures "the eternal youthfulness of spirit in [his] work," says Brian Levine. It is "like the... sense of discovery of a child when faced with the night sky for the first time."

CONNECTION TO RURAL CANADA

Agnes Martin, *Wheat*, 1957, The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, © Agnes Martin Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / CARCC Ottawa 2024.Glenn Gould during the making of *The Idea of North*, c.1967, courtesy of the Glenn Gould Foundation.

Beyond the connections between *Gabriel* and the *Goldberg Variations*, the work of Martin and Gould share other affinities, notably the influence of the Canadian landscape. Though Martin moved far from her birthplace of Macklin, Saskatchewan—first to Vancouver, then to New York City and New Mexico—she retained a connection to the wide landscapes of the Prairies. This relationship comes through in the tranquility of Martin's work, as in the luminous *Wheat*, 1957 (above left). In 1967, Gould channelled his fascination with northern landscapes into a radio documentary titled *The Idea of North*. During the making of it, Gould travelled to Churchill, Manitoba, in 1965 (above right), his first and only trip to the North.

CREATIVITY WITH
STRICT BOUNDARIESAgnes Martin, *Untitled*, 1974, Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, © Agnes Martin Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / CARCC Ottawa 2024.Glenn Gould's marked-up score for the 1981 recording of the *Goldberg Variations*, courtesy of Bonhams.

In their respective works, Martin and Gould explored the interplay between emotion and mathematical precision. Martin's famed grid paintings (above left) represent her investigations into abstract emotional paintings like happiness, beauty, and innocence. The *Goldberg Variations* (above right) are governed by similar strictures as Martin's grids: it is composed of an aria and 30 variations—each one based on the bass line of the opening aria—arranged in a complex pattern. Yet despite these formal qualities, Gould "broke traditional rules of Baroque interpretation," writes his biographer Peter Ostwald. As can be seen in Gould's marked-up score for his 1981 recording of the *Goldberg Variations* (above right), "he used his intuition and imagination to mould the music into a replica of his inner self," [explains Ostwald](#).

VARIATIONS

Agnes Martin in the Agnes Martin Gallery of the Harwood Museum of Art, Taos, New Mexico, 2002, photograph by Patricia García-Gómez.

Cover of Glenn Gould's 1982 album, *Bach: The Goldberg Variations*.

According to ACI author Christopher Régimbal, Gould's *Goldberg Variations* "really synchronizes" with Agnes Martin's work—particularly her paintings.

A notable example is her *Untitled series of seven paintings* from the early 1990s. Each work in the series is a unique iteration of pale blue and white bands spanning the width of the canvas. For Gould, the idea of variations gained new resonance when in 1981, one year before his death at the age of fifty, he made a [second studio recording](#) of the *Goldberg Variations* (above right). "While his first recording is the exuberant, fast-paced work of a 22-year-old pianistic prodigy, his second is the measured, richly detailed interpretation of an experienced studio artist," [states the Glenn Gould Foundation](#).

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