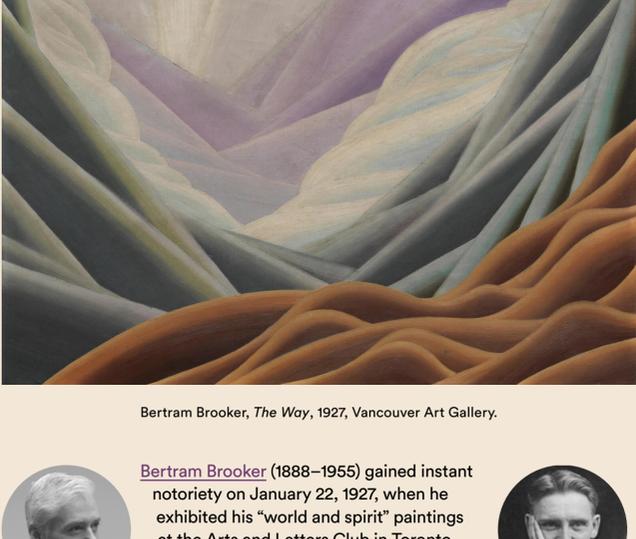


JANUARY 19, 2024

BERTRAM BROOKER THE RADICAL PIONEER OF CANADIAN ABSTRACTION

Ninety-seven years ago this month, Bertram Brooker became the first artist to hold a solo exhibition of abstract painting in Canada. Michael Parke-Taylor—guest editor of this week's newsletter and curator of the upcoming major retrospective [Bertram Brooker: When We Awake!](#) at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection—explores this pivotal moment and Brooker's role as a pioneer of abstract art.



Bertram Brooker, *The Way*, 1927, Vancouver Art Gallery.



Michael Parke-Taylor

Bertram Brooker (1888–1955) gained instant notoriety on January 22, 1927, when he exhibited his “world and spirit” paintings at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto.



Bertram Brooker

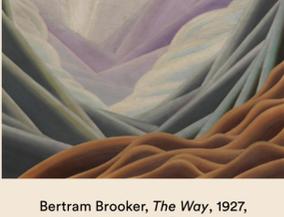
In honour of this event—considered to be the first show of abstract painting held in Canada—I am guest-editing this week's newsletter to take a closer look at Brooker's journey into abstraction, which occurred alongside his artistic development in multiple disciplines. Following his move to Toronto from Manitoba in the early 1920s, the autodidact polymath became involved in visual art, graphic design, novels, short stories, poetry, criticism, playwrighting, acting, and singing.

In 1936, his novel *Think of the Earth* won the first Governor General's Award for fiction.

Michael Parke-Taylor

Curator of [Bertram Brooker: When We Awake!](#) at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario (February 10 to June 2, 2024), and author of the Art Canada Institute publication [Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald: Life & Work](#)

A BREAKTHROUGH EXHIBITION



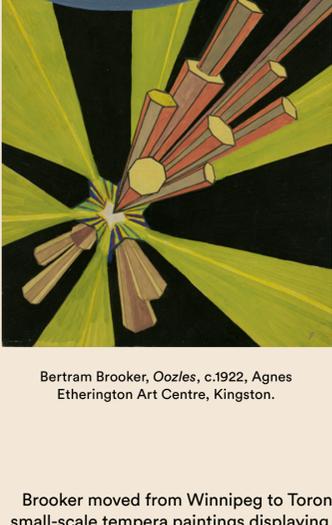
Bertram Brooker, *The Way*, 1927, Vancouver Art Gallery.



Bertram Brooker, *Abstraction, Music*, 1927, Museum London.

When Arts and Letters Club members entered Brooker's exhibition, sponsored by Group of Seven members Lawren S. Harris and Arthur Lismer, on January 22, 1927, they were dumbfounded. Most of them experienced feelings of deep uneasiness; they had no way of knowing that this event marked the beginning of an undeniable shift in Canada's artistic advancement. Unfortunately, there is no record of which paintings were included in the exhibition, but based on Brooker's assertion that the paintings “were expressions of musical feeling” and that one was a response to the Largo from Antonin Dvořák's *New World Symphony* (1893), art historians speculate that *The Way*, 1927 (above left), and *Abstraction, Music*, 1927 (above right), were present.

A MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE



Bertram Brooker, *Oozles*, c.1922, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston.



Alvin Langdon Coburn exhibition cover drawing for *Vortographs and Paintings* by Alvin Langdon Coburn (London: The Camera Club, 1917), George Eastman House, Rochester.

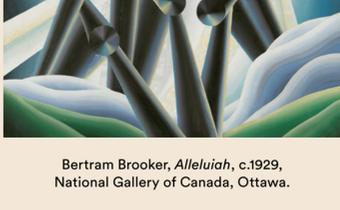
Brooker moved from Winnipeg to Toronto in 1921 and soon began a series of small-scale tempera paintings displaying geometric and architectural elements in space. *Oozles*, c.1922 (above left), drew inspiration from several sources: it is thought to have perhaps come after a profound mystical experience known as “cosmic consciousness” and to be a riff on a drawing by British Vorticist photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn (1882–1966) (above right). What is certain is that Brooker's *Oozles* anticipates his most famous painting, *Sounds Assembling*, 1928 (see below).

Read more in ACI's [Bertram Brooker: Life & Work](#) by James King

THE MUSIC OF ABSTRACTION



Bertram Brooker, *Sounds Assembling*, 1928, Winnipeg Art Gallery.



Bertram Brooker, *Alleluiah*, c.1929, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Music was Brooker's passion and his portal into the arts. In 1930, he claimed: “Affects me the supreme in life. Nothing else—even Nature—affects me so deeply.” One of Brooker's ambitions was to create a visual equivalent to the ineffability of music. *Sounds Assembling*, 1928 (above left), his masterpiece, marries his conception of music and the cosmos. The suggestion of an infinite space beyond the boundaries of the frame evokes the experience of spiritual transport to distant galaxies. Given its title, the painting is also about music visualized, just as the painting *Alleluiah*, c.1929 (above right), pays homage to the “Hallelujah” chorus from Handel's *Messiah* (1741).

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A COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP



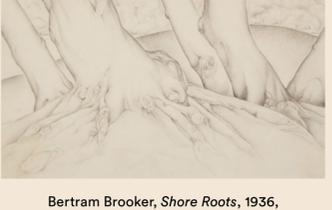
Bertram Brooker, *Endless Dawn*, 1927, Tom Thomson Art Gallery, Owen Sound.



Lawren S. Harris, *Mountain Form IV (Rocky Mountain Painting XIV)*, 1927, private collection.

Brooker admired the Group of Seven but declared his own work, such as *Endless Dawn*, 1927 (above left), “quite alien to their direction and even opposite to it.” He did not believe that paintings such as Harris's *Mountain Form IV (Rocky Mountain Painting XIV)*, 1927 (above right), were “modern” enough in their embrace of the avant-garde. [In his opinion](#), “the Group of Seven are modern only in the sense of being different; they are not ‘modern’ in the generally accepted sense of belonging to the special tendency in painting that stems from Cézanne.” Brooker was leery of the Group of Seven's emphasis on nationalistic rhetoric and instead advocated for a mystical revolution that would transcend cultural ideology to unite humankind.

A TURN TOWARD REPRESENTATION



Bertram Brooker, *Shore Roots*, 1936, Winnipeg Art Gallery.



Bertram Brooker, *Cabbage and Pepper*, c.1937, Confederation Centre of the Arts, Charlottetown.

Two years after the Arts and Letters Club exhibition in Toronto, Brooker met Group of Seven member Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald (1890–1956) in Winnipeg during the summer of 1929. Inspired by his example, Brooker worked frequently outdoors during the 1930s, when his smoothly modeled drawings of plants and trees came closest in style to those of his friend, as in Brooker's *Shore Roots*, 1936 (above left). The thirties were a period of transition for Brooker as he combined abstraction and representation in works like *Cabbage and Pepper*, c.1937 (above right), to achieve what he called a “plus quality over traditional realism.” This was an exciting new phase in his career, one during which he felt like he was “at the beginning of things rather than anywhere near the middle or the end.”

Learn more in ACI's [Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald: Life & Work](#) by Michael Parke-Taylor

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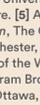
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Image Credits: [1, 2] Bertram Brooker, *The Way*, 1927, oil on canvas, 60.8 x 76.5 cm. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, donated by the Estate of Anna K. Jetter (VAG 2004.12.12). Photo credit: Maeagan Hill-Carroll, Vancouver Art Gallery. [3] Bertram Brooker, *Abstraction, Music*, 1927, oil on canvas, 43 x 61 cm. Collection of Museum London, F.B. Housser Memorial Collection, 1945 (45.A.47). Photo credit: Museum London. [4] Bertram Brooker, *Oozles*, c.1922, tempera on paper, 22.8 x 17.8 cm. Collection of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, purchase, consolidated fund, 1976 (19-004). Photo credit: Agnes Etherington Art Centre. [5] Alvin Langdon Coburn, Exhibition cover drawing for *Vortographs and Paintings* by Alvin Langdon Coburn, The Camera Club, London 1917, ink on paper, 16.4 x 13.2 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Purchased 1969 (15812). Photo credit: National Gallery of Canada. [6] Bertram Brooker, *Sounds Assembling*, 1928, oil on canvas, 112.3 x 91.7 cm. Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery (L-80). Photo credit: Ernest Mayer, courtesy of the Winnipeg Art Gallery. [7] Bertram Brooker, *Alleluiah*, c.1929, oil on canvas, 123 x 123.3 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Purchased 1969 (15812). Photo credit: National Gallery of Canada. [8] Bertram Brooker, *Endless Dawn*, 1927, oil over graphite on pressboard, 43 x 61 cm. Collection of the Tom Thomson Art Gallery, Owen Sound, Gallery purchase with Wintario Funding Funds Grant, 1980 (980.016). Photo credit: Tom Thomson Art Gallery. [9] Lawren S. Harris, *Mountain Form IV (Rocky Mountain Painting XIV)*, 1927, oil on canvas, 121.9 x 152.4 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of Alan Klinkhoff Gallery, Toronto. [10] Bertram Brooker, *Shore Roots*, 1936, graphite on paper, 25.4 x 35.5 cm. Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery; Acquired with funds from the Winnipeg Foundation, G-74-4 Photo: courtesy of WAG-Qaumajuq. [11] Bertram Brooker, *Cabbage and Pepper*, c.1937, oil on canvas, 40.6 x 50.8 cm. Collection of the Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown, purchased 1973 (CAG 73.5). Photo credit: Confederation Centre Art Gallery.