

MARCH 1, 2024

## THE CLOSE-UP: RAY CRONIN ON MAUD LEWIS'S ROADSTER AND COW

In celebration of the legendary Nova Scotia folk artist's birthday on March 7, Ray Cronin, author of ACI's *Maud Lewis: Life & Work*, guest edits our spotlight on *Roadster and Cow*, c.1960s.



Maud Lewis, *Roadster and Cow*, c.1960s, Collection of Dr. Doug Lewis and Florence Lewis.



Ray Cronin

This week, we celebrate the birthday of Canada's most beloved folk artist, Maud Lewis, who was born 123 years ago on March 7, 1901. A perennial Canadian favourite and among the most famous artists to come from Atlantic Canada, Lewis's vibrant works hold a singular yet universal appeal, and the story of how she ceaselessly painted simple visions of joy despite



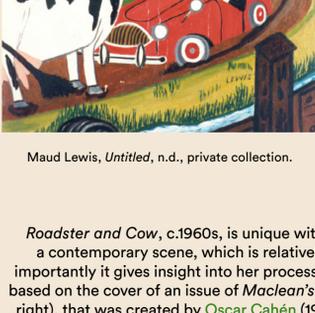
Maud Lewis

having a life that featured no small amount of pain has continued to inspire art lovers in the half-century since her death. In honour of her birthday, I am guest-editing this week's newsletter spotlighting *Roadster and Cow*, c.1960s, a painting that, despite being one of Lewis's most unique, bears several of the key elements of what makes so many of her works great.

### Ray Cronin

Author of the Art Canada Institute publication *Maud Lewis: Life & Work* and Curator of Canadian Art, Beaverbrook Art Gallery

## ROADSTER AND COW AND OSCAR CAHÉN



Maud Lewis, *Untitled*, n.d., private collection.



Oscar Cahén, Cover of *Maclean's* magazine, April 14, 1956, The Cahén Archives.

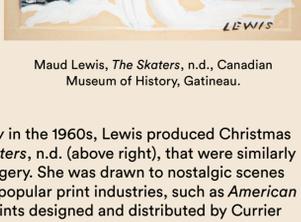
*Roadster and Cow*, c.1960s, is unique within Lewis's body of work. It shows a contemporary scene, which is relatively rare in her paintings, but more importantly it gives insight into her process of inspiration. The painting is likely based on the cover of an issue of *Maclean's* magazine from April 14, 1956 (above right), that was created by Oscar Cahén (1916–1956), a member of the Toronto abstract art group Painters Eleven and one of Canada's leading illustrators. Lewis likely based other works on images from popular media around her, but here the source can be clearly identified. There are at least two versions of this work; the painting above left is much more similar to Cahén's illustration, while *Roadster and Cow* shows more obvious hallmarks of Lewis's singular visual style.

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## INFLUENCED BY POPULAR CULTURE



Unknown [after Joseph Hoover and Currier & Ives], *American Winter Scene*, 1940s, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.

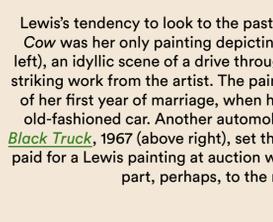


Maud Lewis, *The Skaters*, n.d., Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau.

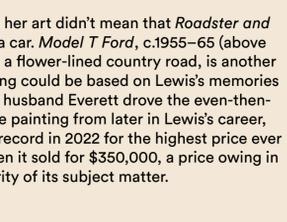
Before completing *Roadster and Cow* in the 1960s, Lewis produced Christmas cards and early paintings like *The Skaters*, n.d. (above right), that were similarly inspired by existing commercial imagery. She was drawn to nostalgic scenes popularized by the greeting card and popular print industries, such as *American Winter Scene*, 1940s (above left). Prints designed and distributed by Currier & Ives, a highly successful lithography business in North America in the late nineteenth century, would have been common in homes in Yarmouth and Digby. These popular images depicted similar scenes and subjects to those beloved by Lewis, such as snowy landscapes, country churches, and farm animals.

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## MODEL T FORD



Maud Lewis, *Model T Ford*, c.1955–65, Collection of CFFI Ventures Inc. as collected by John Risley.



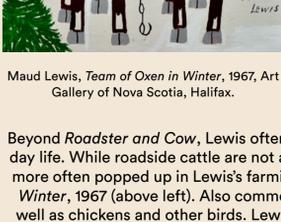
Maud Lewis, *Black Truck*, 1967, private collection.

Lewis's tendency to look to the past in her art didn't mean that *Roadster and Cow* was her only painting depicting a car. *Model T Ford*, c.1955–65 (above left), an idyllic scene of a drive through a flower-lined country road, is another striking work from the artist. The painting could be based on Lewis's memories of her first year of marriage, when her husband Everett drove the even-then-old-fashioned car. Another automobile painting from later in Lewis's career, *Black Truck*, 1967 (above right), set the record in 2022 for the highest price ever paid for a Lewis painting at auction when it sold for \$350,000, a price owing in part, perhaps, to the rarity of its subject matter.

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## LOCAL ANIMAL LIFE



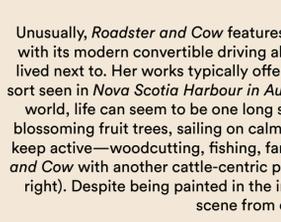
Maud Lewis, *Team of Oxen in Winter*, 1967, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.



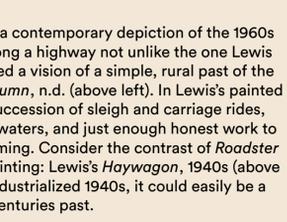
Maud Lewis, *Three Black Cats*, 1955, private collection.

Beyond *Roadster and Cow*, Lewis often depicted animals she saw in her day-to-day life. While roadside cattle are not an uncommon sight in Nova Scotia, cows more often popped up in Lewis's farming scenes, as we see in *Team of Oxen in Winter*, 1967 (above left). Also common in her farm paintings were horses, as well as chickens and other birds. Lewis's most famous animal subjects are the trio in *Three Black Cats*, 1955 (above right), which were based on the memory of her childhood cat, Fluffy. Black cats and kittens, often painted among blooming plant life, became perhaps her most common subject: she painted this image dozens, if not hundreds, of times.

## A RARE GLIMPSE OF THE PRESENT



Maud Lewis, *Nova Scotia Harbour in Autumn*, n.d., Collection of CFFI Ventures Inc. as collected by John Risley.

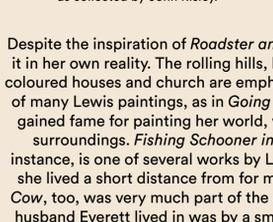


Maud Lewis, *Haywagon*, 1940s, private collection.

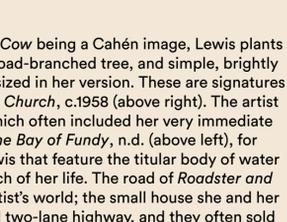
Unusually, *Roadster and Cow* features a contemporary depiction of the 1960s with its modern convertible driving along a highway not unlike the one Lewis lived next to. Her works typically offered a vision of a simple, rural past of the sort seen in *Nova Scotia Harbour in Autumn*, n.d. (above left). In Lewis's painted world, life can seem to be one long succession of sleigh and carriage rides, blossoming fruit trees, sailing on calm waters, and just enough honest work to keep active—woodcutting, fishing, farming. Consider the contrast of *Roadster and Cow* with another cattle-centric painting: Lewis's *Haywagon*, 1940s (above right). Despite being painted in the industrialized 1940s, it could easily be a scene from centuries past.

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## FAMILIAR LANDSCAPES



Maud Lewis, *Fishing Schooner in the Bay of Fundy*, n.d., Collection of CFFI Ventures Inc. as collected by John Risley.



Maud Lewis, *Going to Church*, c.1958, courtesy of Mayberry Fine Art, Winnipeg and Toronto.

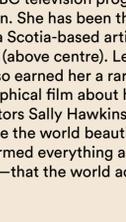
Despite the inspiration of *Roadster and Cow* featuring a Cahén image, Lewis plants it in her own reality. The rolling hills, broad-branched tree, and simple, brightly coloured houses and church are going to be in her version. These are signatures of many Lewis paintings, as in *Going to Church*, c.1958 (above right). The artist gained fame for painting her world, which often included her very immediate surroundings. *Fishing Schooner in the Bay of Fundy*, n.d. (above left), for instance, is one of several works by Lewis that feature the titular body of water she loved, a very short distance from for much of her life. The road of *Roadster and Cow*, too, was mostly part of the artist's world; the small house she and her husband Everett lived in was by a small two-lane highway, and they often sold her paintings to passersby in cars.

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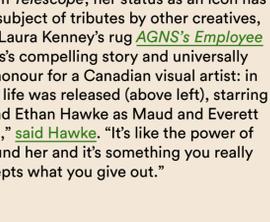
## THE POPULARITY OF MAUD



Film poster for *Maudie*, 2016, courtesy of Mongrel Media.



Laura Kenney, AGNS's Employee of the Month, 2018, private collection.



Selfie-station with Maud Lewis's painting *The Bluenose*, 2017, photograph by T.J. Maguire.

While Lewis began to become a national celebrity as early as 1965, when she was featured in the CBC television program *Telescope*, her status as an icon has only grown since then. She has been the subject of tributes by other creatives, including Truro, Nova Scotia-based artist Laura Kenney's rug *AGNS's Employee of the Month*, 2018 (above centre). Lewis's compelling story and universally touching artwork also earned her a rare honour for a Canadian visual artist: in 2016, a feature biographical film about her life was released (above left), starring major Hollywood actors Sally Hawkins and Ethan Hawke as Maud and Everett Lewis. "[Lewis] made the world beautiful," said Hawke. "It's like the power of her own joy transformed everything around her and it's something you really notice—that the world accepts what you give out."

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Image Credit: [1] Maud Lewis, *Roadster and Cow*, c.1960s, oil over graphite on particle board, 30.4 x 34.7 cm. Collection of Dr. Doug Lewis and Florence Lewis, Digby, Nova Scotia. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax. [2] Maud Lewis, *Untitled*, n.d., Private collection. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax. [3] Cover of *Maclean's* magazine, April 14, 1956, by Oscar Cahén. Collection of the Cahén Archives. Courtesy of the Cahén Archives. [4] Unknown [after Joseph Hoover and Currier & Ives], *American Winter Scene*, 1940s, offset lithography on paper laid on card, 35 x 53.2 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax. [5] Gift of John and Norma O'Flyer, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2009. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax. [6] Maud Lewis, *The Skaters*, n.d., watercolour on card, 10.8 x 15.9 cm. Collection of the Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau. Courtesy of Cowley Abbott, Toronto. [7] Maud Lewis, *Model T Ford*, c.1955–65, oil on board, 29.8 x 34.8 cm. Collection of CFFI Ventures Inc. as collected by John Risley. Courtesy of CFFI Ventures Inc. [8] Maud Lewis, *Black Truck*, 1967, oil paint on board, 28 x 35.6 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of Miller & Miller Auctions Ltd. [9] Maud Lewis, *Team of Oxen in Winter*, 1967, oil over graphite on pulpboard, 28.9 x 34.1 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax. Gift of Vic and Ann Matties, Surrey, British Columbia, 2012. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax. [10] Maud Lewis, *Nova Scotia Harbour in Autumn*, n.d., oil on board, 22.5 x 30.5 cm. Collection of CFFI Ventures Inc. as collected by John Risley. Courtesy of CFFI Ventures Inc. [11] Maud Lewis, *Haywagon*, 1940s, oil on pulpboard, 23 x 30.5 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario. Photo credit: Alexandra Cousins. [12] Maud Lewis, *Fishing Schooner in the Bay of Fundy*, n.d., oil on board, 29.8 x 35.6 cm. Collection of CFFI Ventures Inc. as collected by John Risley. Courtesy of CFFI Ventures Inc. [13] Maud Lewis, *Going to Church*, c.1958, oil on board, 29.2 x 35.1 cm. Courtesy of Mayberry Fine Art, Winnipeg and Toronto. [14] Film poster for *Maudie*, 2016. Courtesy of Mongrel Media. [15] Laura Kenney, *AGNS's Employee of the Month*, 2018, wool and silk on burlap, 33 x 50.8 cm. Private collection. Photo credit: Jody O'Brien. [16] Selfie-station with Maud Lewis's painting *The Bluenose*, 2017. Photograph by T.J. Maguire. Courtesy of T.J. Maguire.