

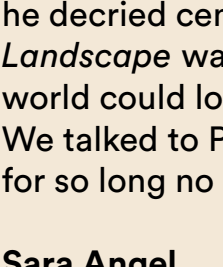
MAY 17, 2024

THE REMARKABLE STORY OF THE NEWLY FOUND MASTERPIECE: BROOKER'S FIGURES IN LANDSCAPE

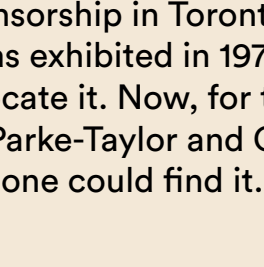
For forty-eight years, no one knew the whereabouts of *Figures in Landscape*, one of the most controversial paintings in Canadian art. Now it is on view at the McMichael.



Bertram Brooker, *Figures in Landscape*, 1931, private collection.



John Geoghegan



Michael Parke-Taylor

When art historian Michael Parke-Taylor was organizing the current blockbuster exhibition *Bertram Brooker: When We Awake!*, now on at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, he and John Geoghegan, Associate Curator of Collections and Research, set out to find *Figures in Landscape* (above). The painting became one of the most talked-about works in Canada's history after its creator **Bertram Brooker**

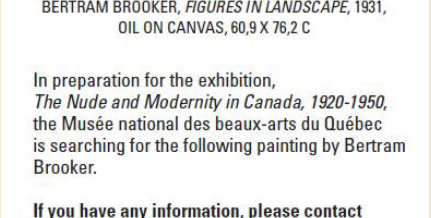
(1888–1955) submitted it to the 1931 Ontario Society of Artists exhibition, only to have the show's organizers remove it at the very last minute. This became front-page news across the country as reporters sought to uncover the mystery behind the exclusion of the painting. At first Brooker didn't comment. But shortly thereafter, he wrote the now-famous essay titled "Nude and Prudes" in which he decried censorship in Toronto—and in the arts in general. After *Figures in Landscape* was exhibited in 1976, it fell off the radar and no one in the art world could locate it. Now, for the first time in decades, the canvas is on view. We talked to Parke-Taylor and Geoghegan about this outstanding work, and why for so long no one could find it.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

AN IN-DEMAND PAINTING

PAINTING WANTED



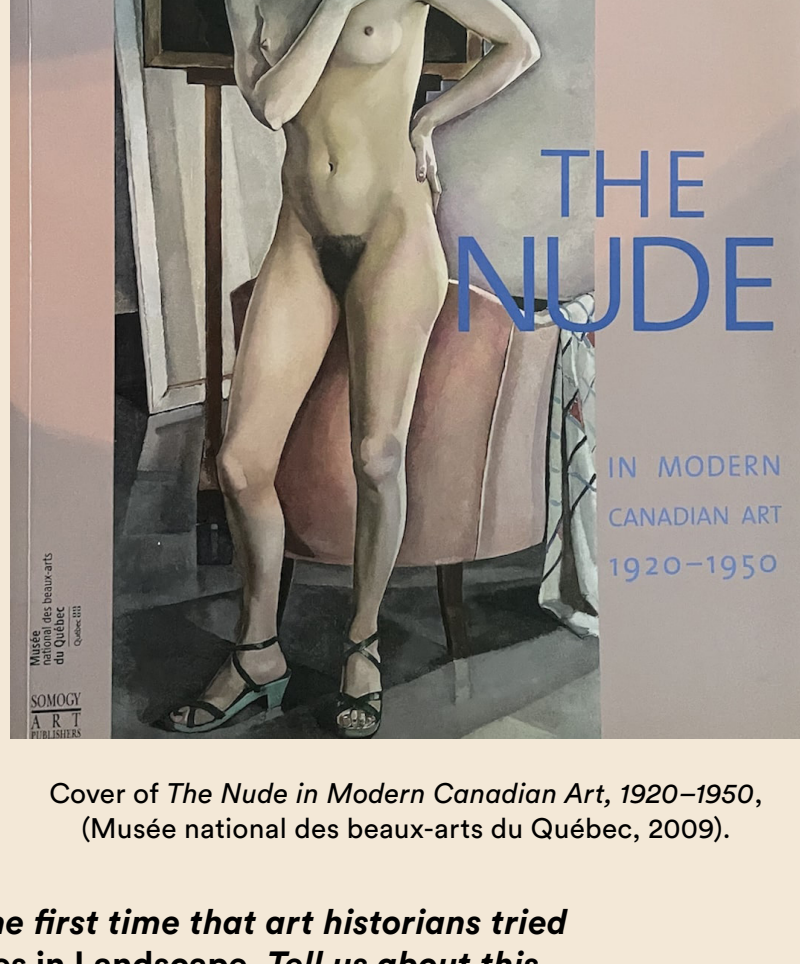
Bertram Brooker, *Figures in Landscape*, 1931, oil on canvas, 80.8 x 76.2 cm.

In preparation for the exhibition, *The Nude and Modernity in Canada, 1920–1950*, the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec is searching for the following painting by Bertram Brooker.

If you have any information, please contact the exhibition curators, Michèle Grandbois at 418-644-6460 ext. 5226, or Anna Hedson at 416-738-2100 ext. 77427.

Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec

Newspaper ad published in the *Globe and Mail*, May 15, 2008.

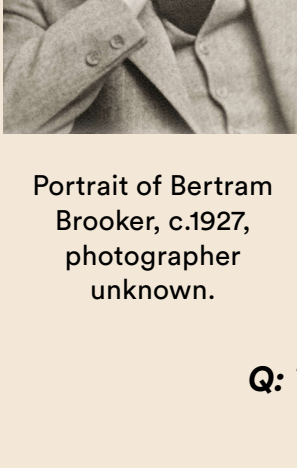


Cover of *The Nude in Modern Canadian Art, 1920–1950*, (Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, 2009).

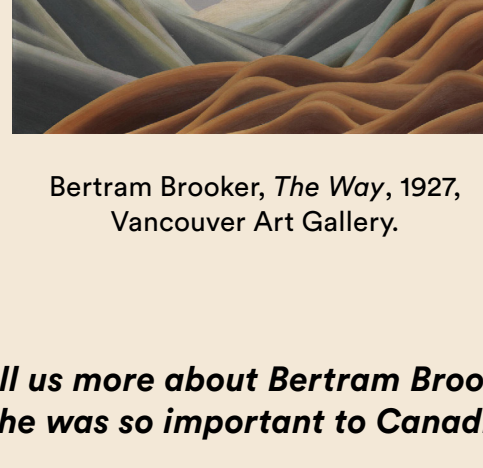
Q: This isn't the first time that art historians tried to find *Figures in Landscape*. Tell us about this.

While the painting certainly attracted media attention following stories about its censorship, a different kind of newspaper feature on Brooker's work was published decades later. In 2009, art historians Anna Hudson and Michèle Grandbois collaborated to curate the major exhibition *The Nude in Modern Canadian Art, 1920–1950* for the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (above right). The landmark show featured close to 130 groundbreaking creations by artists including Alex Colville (1920–2013) and Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960); but one work was notably absent. Hoping to find and include the important *Figures in Landscape*, Hudson and Grandbois placed a wanted notice in the *Globe and Mail* on May 15, 2008 (above left). Unfortunately, this novel initiative to find the picture elicited no response.

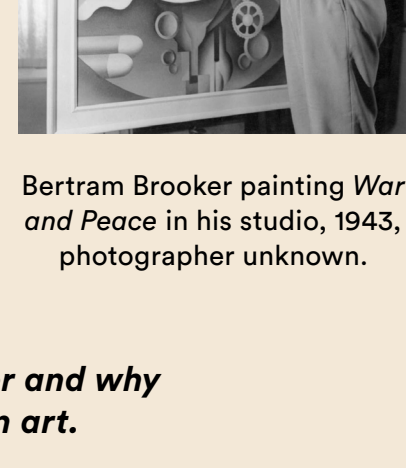
A TRAILBLAZING ARTIST



Portrait of Bertram Brooker, c.1927, photographer unknown.



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



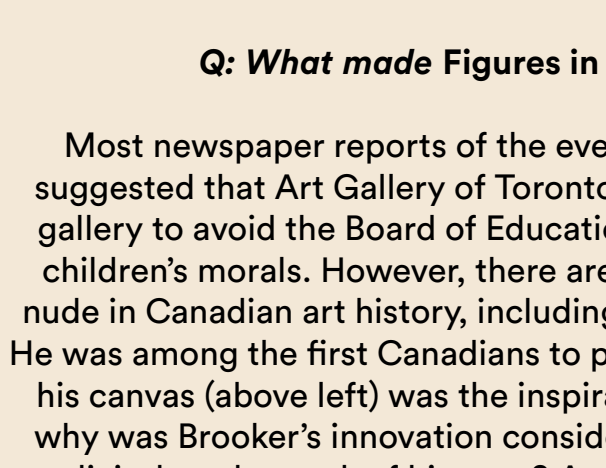
Bertram Brooker painting *War and Peace* in his studio, 1943, photographer unknown.

Q: Tell us more about Bertram Brooker and why he was so important to Canadian art.

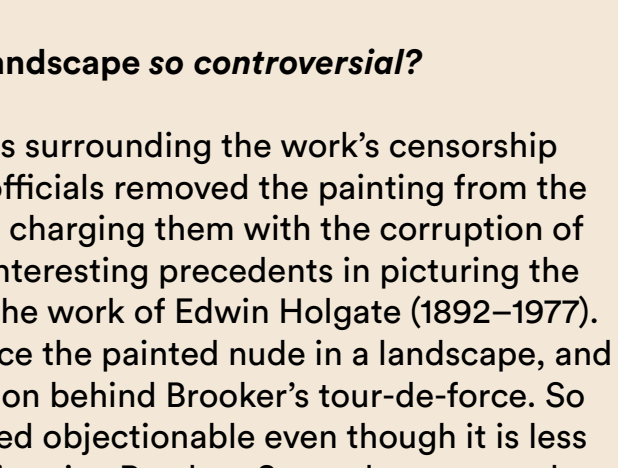
Bertram Brooker (1888–1955), an associate of the Group of Seven, was a multi-disciplinary artist deeply engaged with the visual arts and music. A polymath, Brooker was a painter, graphic designer, art critic, novelist, poet, short-story and essay writer, screenwriter, playwright, actor, musician, and advertising executive. In 1927, he burst on the Toronto art scene at the Arts and Letters Club with an exhibition of "world and spirit" paintings considered to be the first show of abstraction in Canada. Inspired by melodic and mystical experience, Brooker combined elements of abstract and figurative art throughout his career, as in *The Way*, 1927 (above centre).

Read more in ACI's *Bertram Brooker: Life & Work* by James King

A NATIONAL SCANDAL



Edwin Holgate, *Nude in a Landscape*, c.1930, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



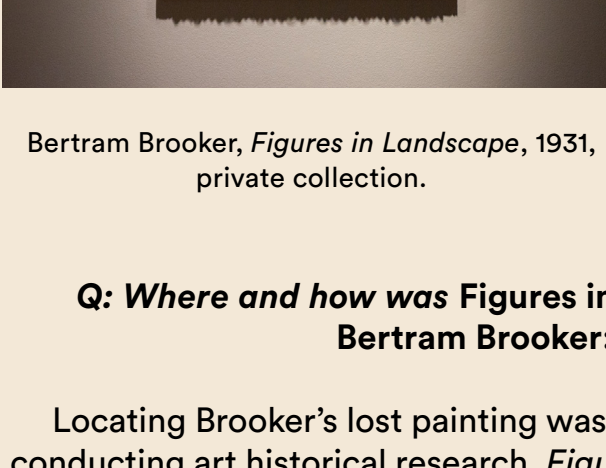
Bertram Brooker, *Figures in Landscape*, 1931, private collection.

Q: What made *Figures in Landscape* so controversial?

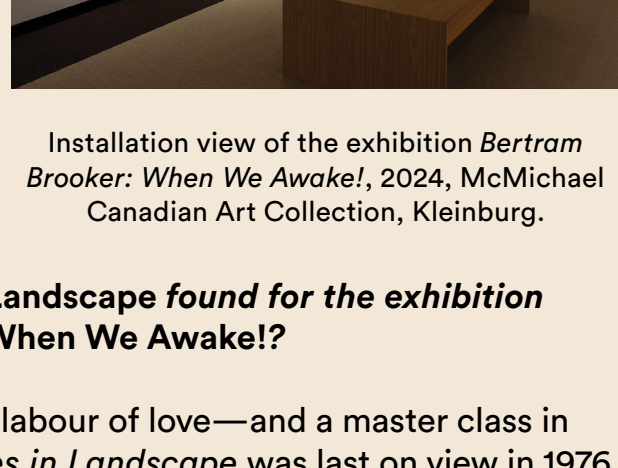
Most newspaper reports of the events surrounding the work's censorship suggested that Art Gallery of Toronto officials removed the painting from the gallery to avoid the Board of Education charging them with the corruption of children's morals. However, there are interesting precedents in picturing the nude in Canadian art history, including the work of Edwin Holgate (1892–1977). He was among the first Canadians to place the painted nude in a landscape, and his canvas (above left) was the inspiration behind Brooker's tour-de-force. So why was Brooker's innovation considered objectionable even though it is less explicit than the work of his peer? Art historian Pandora Syper suggests that the cropping of legs and heads centralized the figures' naked flesh, and it was an "alarming image of two women together," in sensual, close proximity.

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A BREAKTHROUGH DISCOVERY



Bertram Brooker, *Figures in Landscape*, 1931, private collection.

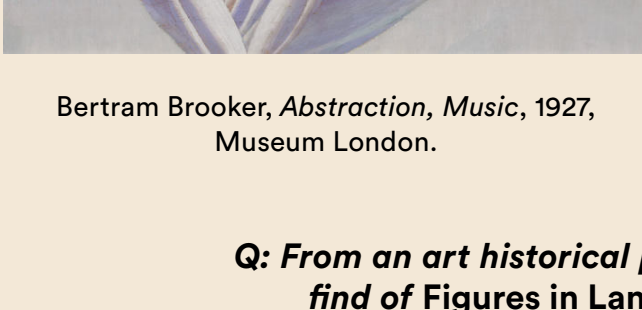


Installation view of the exhibition *Bertram Brooker: When We Awake!*, 2024, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg.

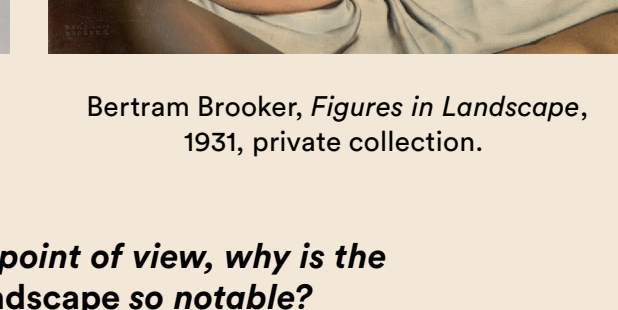
Q: Where and how was *Figures in Landscape* found for the exhibition *Bertram Brooker: When We Awake!*?

Locating Brooker's lost painting was a labor of love—and a master class in conducting art historical research. *Figures in Landscape* was last on view in 1976 when it was sold at the Morris Gallery in Toronto. While organizing *When We Awake!*, Michael Parke-Taylor was able to identify the first initial and last name of the owner in one of the gallery's letters found in the Brooker family archive. On the process of tracking the lost canvas down, John Geoghegan shares: "I sit in between generations of people who are familiar with traditional archival research, and then younger people who are doing almost exclusive online research. Marrying those two approaches has suited me well in tracking things down." Geoghegan then searched an old phonebook available online and identified a possible owner; a subsequent obituary led him to a descendent. He reached out and was met with a response the following day: "That painting belonged to my parents, and it now belongs to my brother [...]." And that's how this mythical masterpiece was found—hiding in North Toronto for so many decades.

NEW DIRECTIONS



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

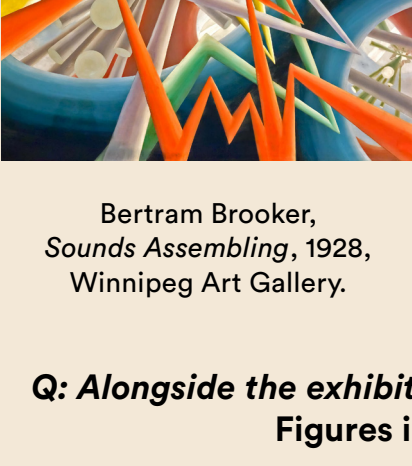


Bertram Brooker, *Figures in Landscape*, 1931, private collection.

Q: From an art historical point of view, why is the *Figures in Landscape* so notable?

In terms of art history, *Figures in Landscape* (above right) marked a new beginning for Brooker as he was moving towards more representational painting after meeting **Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald** (1890–1956) in Winnipeg during the summer of 1929. Before that, his artistic career was distinguished by a solo exhibition of abstract paintings at Toronto's Arts and Letters Club in 1927. By 1931, *Figures in Landscape* marked a sea change because of its "realistic" qualities. However, it still demonstrates elements of abstraction inherited from his earlier works like *Abstraction, Music*, 1927 (above left). For instance, this quality is present in the top figure, whose ribbons of falling hair resemble tree-like forms.

MASTERPIECES ON VIEW



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



Installation view of the exhibition *Bertram Brooker: When We Awake!*, 2024, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg.

Q: Alongside the exhibition of other Brooker masterpieces, how did finding *Figures in Landscape* change the exhibition?

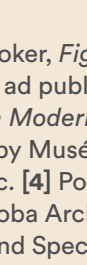
Next to *Sounds Assembling*, 1928 (above left), *Figures in Landscape* is the most significant painting of Brooker's career. This work is notable because it marked a new chapter in the history of Canadian art. With the rise of the Canadian Group of Painters in the early 1930s, Brooker recognized that the former emphasis on landscape painting had shifted to other concerns. He wrote in his April 19, 1930 "The 7 Arts" column published in the *Ottawa Evening Citizen*, "The human figure, so long neglected, except by a few orthodox portrait painters, will again become a subject [...] this will [...] produce an approach to every kind of subject, landscape included, that will be different from either the academic or the Group approach."

THANK YOU TO OUR BENEFACTORS

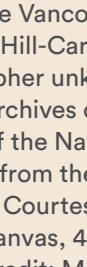
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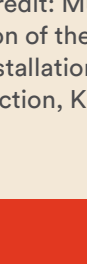
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Image Credits: [1] Bertram Brooker, *Figures in Landscape*, 1931, oil on canvas, 60.8 x 76.2 cm. Private collection, Toronto. [2] Newspaper ad published in *The Globe and Mail*, May 15, 2008. Courtesy of the *Globe and Mail*. [3] Cover of *The Nude in Modern Canadian Art, 1920–1950*, by Anna Hudson, Michèle Grandbois, and Esther Trépanier, published by Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, 2009. Courtesy of Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. [4] Portrait of Bertram Brooker, c.1927. Photographer unknown. Bertram Brooker fonds, University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections, Winnipeg (PC 16:1:13). Photo credit: 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: Maegan Hill-Carroll, Vancouver Art Gallery. [6] Bertram Brooker painting *War and Peace* in his studio, 1943. Photographer unknown. Ontario Society of Artists fonds, Archives of Ontario, North York (F 1140-7-0-1). Photo credit: Archives of Ontario. [7] Edwin Holgate, *Nude in a Landscape*, c.1930, oil on canvas, 73.1 x 92.3 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. [8,9] Bertram Brooker, *Figures in Landscape*, 1931, installation views from the exhibition *Bertram Brooker: When We Awake!*, 2024, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg. Courtesy of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection. [10] 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. [11] 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. [12] Installation view of the exhibition *Bertram Brooker: When We Awake!*, 2024, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg. Courtesy of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection.