ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

MAY 9, 2025

MOTHER, MAKER, AND MUSE

EXPLORING MATERNITY IN CANADIAN ART

From bold self-portraits to scenes of tender connection, a look at how motherhood has been depicted in all its forms.

Helen McNicoll, *In the Shadow of the Tree*, c.1914,
Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City.

With Mother's Day on Sunday, the Art Canada Institute celebrates mothers in Canadian art. Looking at a selection of works by women throughout Canadian history, this newsletter showcases the unique and meaningful ways several artists have broached the subject of motherhood. Exploring topics and imagery related to the maternal experience, these creators demonstrate the multifaceted ways in which motherhood can resonate. Whether through the nurturing depiction of a bond between mother and child or an exploration of the struggle to navigate a work–life balance as a new mom, the artists below reveal deeper themes of identity, gender, and the social and political realities of the maternal experience.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

DIS-MOI? (THE LESSON), 1895

by Laura Muntz Lyall

Laura Muntz Lyall, *Dis-Moi? (The Lesson)*, 1895, University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, Alberta.

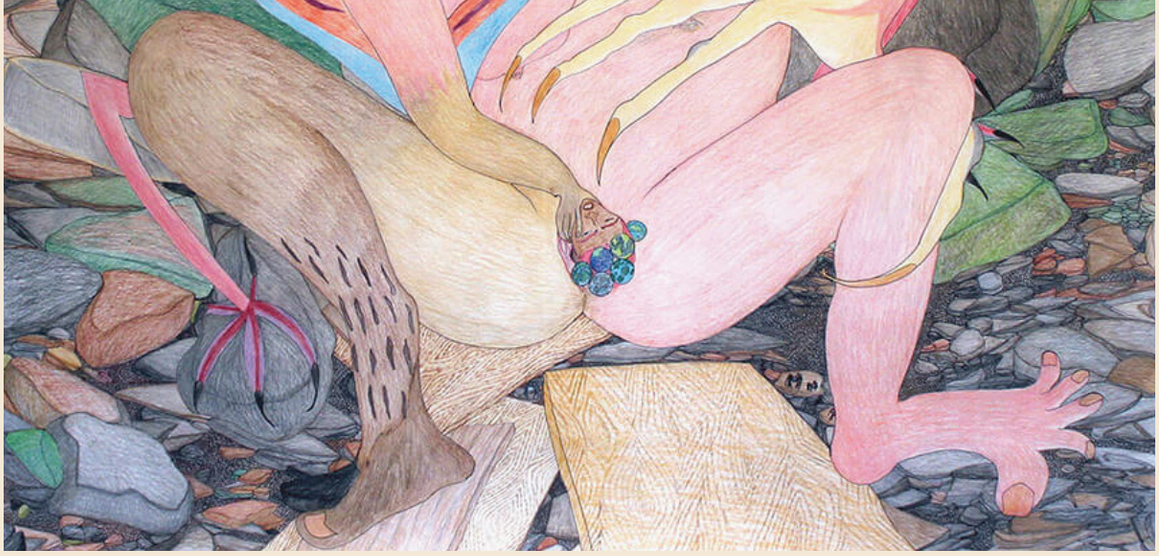
Laura Muntz Lyall

Laura Muntz Lyall (1860–1930) was a Canadian Impressionist known for her gentle representations of maternal life. Art historian Carolyn Harris explains that Lyall conveyed "subtle expressions of children and their parents through the depiction of light in her paintings," which is exemplified in this scene. Lit by the warm glow of a fireplace, Lyall captures a quiet moment between a woman and child, their body language suggesting they share a close bond. The figures read together, the child's finger tracing along the pages and the woman guiding them, emphasizing the multifaceted role of the mother as a caretaker, nurturer, and teacher.

Learn more about Laura Muntz Lyall

HAPPY MOTHER, 2013

by Shuvinai Ashoona



Shuvinai Ashoona, *Happy Mother*, 2013, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Shuvinai Ashoona

The evocative drawings of Shuvinai Ashoona (b.1961) blend Inuit stories and iconography with surrealist figures in dreamlike scenes. In this otherworldly image, a woman with monstrous appendages is embraced by a bird—possibly taking on the role of a midwife or shaman—as a baby, with globes encircling its head, enters the world. These mystical elements suggest that this is not a rendering of a human birth but a "depersonalized experience," as ACI author Nancy G. Campbell suggests. Ashoona uses the experience of childbirth to symbolize a transformation or supernatural experience.

Read more in ACI's
Shuvinai Ashoona: Life & Work by Nancy G. Campbell

HANNAH MAYNARD AND HER DAUGHTER LAURA LILLIAN, KNOWN AS LILLIE, C.1875

by Hannah Maynard

Attributed to Hannah Maynard, *Hannah Maynard and her daughter Laura Lillian, known as Lillie,* c.1875, BC Archives, Royal BC Museum, Victoria.

Hannah Maynard

Active during a time when Canadians were beginning to embrace the new technology of photography, Hannah Maynard (1834–1918) was a pioneer of the medium. A savvy businesswoman who ran a successful portrait studio in Victoria, B.C., Maynard set herself apart from her contemporaries through her use of experimental photomontage and multiple-exposure techniques. Photography was thoroughly integrated into all aspects of her family life, as revealed in the whimsical composite scene above picturing Maynard (right) and her daughter Lillie (left). As a photographer, Maynard played with the gender and class conventions of her day and was driven to document family milestones.

Read more about Hannah Maynard in ACI's *Photography in Canada, 1839–1989: An Illustrated History* by Sarah Bassnett and Sarah Parsons

KITCHEN DOOR AND ESTHER, 1965

by Christiane Pflug

Christiane Pflug, *Kitchen Door and Esther*, 1965, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

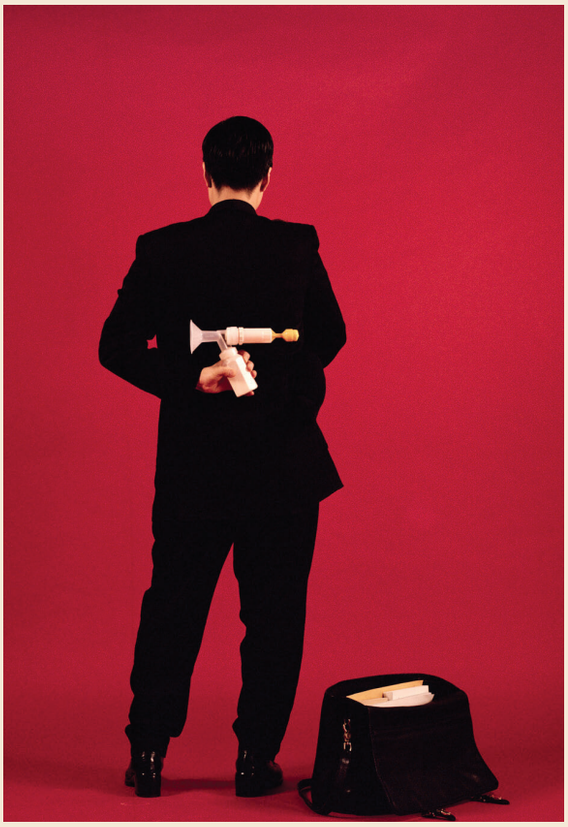
Christiane Pflug

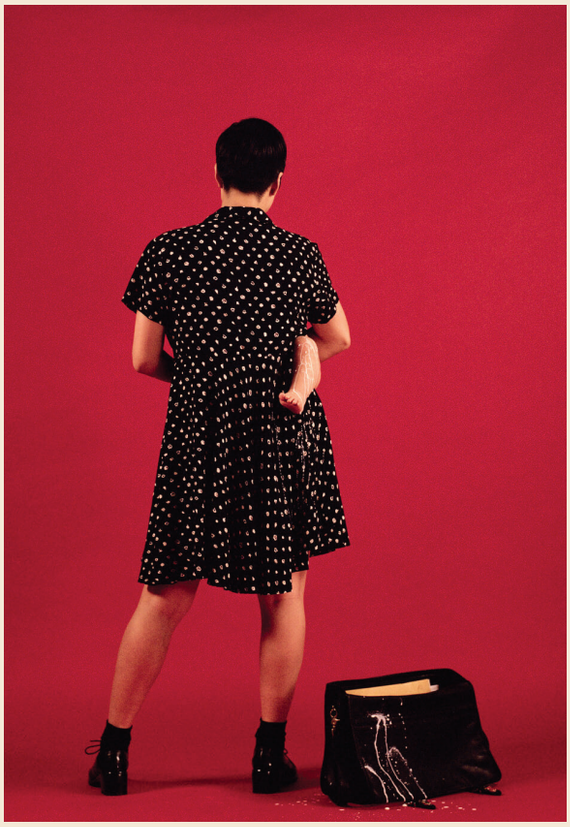
Toronto-based painter Christiane Pflug (1936–1972) was known for her ability to depict atmospheric landscapes and interiors. Pflug frequently reimagined the same locations, such as her kitchen, through altered vantage points, colour palettes, seasons, figures, and objects to create distinct scenes. In this intimate portrait, Pflug captures her daughter, Esther, sitting in the doorway. As a child, it was difficult for Esther to model, especially on a beautiful summer's day. But Esther recognized the passion and dedication that her mother had. So, she sat, reading her book of fairytales, supporting her mother's creative endeavours.

Learn more about Christiane Pflug

INTERSECTIONS 1, 1996

by Jin-me Yoon





Jin-me Yoon, *Intersection 1*, 1996, courtesy of the artist.

Jin-me Yoon

Since the beginning of her prolific career, Vancouver-based artist Jin-me Yoon (b.1960) has explored the complexities of identity, memory, place, race, and gender in her multidisciplinary works. Between 1996 and 2001, Yoon developed her large photographic diptych series, Intersection, to highlight her experiences as a working artist and mother to two small children. In *Intersection 1*, 1996, wearing a black suit and holding a breast pump behind her back in one frame and holding a baby on her hip with a briefcase at her feet in another, Yoon refuses "to separate the sphere of mothering from that of paid labour."

Read more in ACI's
Jin-me Yoon: Life & Work by Ming Tiampo

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MYSELF, 1933

by Paraskeva Clark

Paraskeva Clark, *Myself*, 1933, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Paraskeva Clark

When Russian-born Paraskeva Clark (1898–1986) immigrated to Canada in 1931, she quickly established herself as a spokesperson for modernist art. Two years later, as Clark was expecting her second child, she commemorated herself in this larger-than-life portrait. Leaning on a table, Clark confidently gazes at the viewer, arms folded over her pregnant belly. With a relatively subdued palette, her red lips being the only pop of colour, Clark boldly represents herself as a mother and a woman artist. In the early twentieth century, when women struggled for recognition in the art world, this was a significant act of self-expression that asserted her creative identity.

Read more in ACI's
Paraskeva Clark: Life & Work by Christine Boyanoski

IN THE SHADOW OF THE TREE, C.1914

by Helen McNicoll

Helen McNicoll, *In the Shadow of the Tree*, c.1914, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec,

Helen McNicoll

Helen McNicoll (1879–1915) was a pioneer of Canadian Impressionism who frequently explored images of women and children in private or intimate environments. *In the Shadow of the Tree*, c.1914, shows a mother apparently lost in her novel, unbothered by the baby sleeping next to her. Unlike other artists who emphasized the love of the mother–child bond, McNicoll's mother-and-child relationships have been described as "detached." However, as ACI author Samatha Burton explains in *Helen McNicoll: Life & Work*, the mother in *In the Shadow of the Tree*, engaged in "imagination and fantasy," can be read as a subversive challenge to domesticity and femininity—"an escape from the drudgery of housework and child-rearing."

Read more in ACI's
Helen McNicoll: Life & Work by Samantha Burton

CRADLEBOARD (KAHNAWAKE, MOHAWK), C.1850–1880

by a once-known Kahnawake maker

Once-known Kahnawake maker, cradleboard (Kahnawake, Mohawk), c.1850–1880, Minneapolis Institute of Art.

Cradleboards have been used within Indigenous communities throughout history, enabling mothers to carry babies on their backs. This hands-free device ensured that mothers could keep their children close, providing them with a warm space as families and communities went about their travels or daily routines. Designs vary across Turtle Island (North America), but most cradleboards feature decorative paintings and carvings. The cradleboard pictured above derives from the Kahnawake (Mohawk) of the Haudenosaunee in the seventeenth century. Many Indigenous communities continue to use cradleboards not only because they are practical but because they ensure the preservation of traditional child-rearing practices.

Learn more about the use of cradleboards among Indigenous communities

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BLACK MOTHER BLACK DAUGHTER, 1989

by Sylvia D. Hamilton

Still from the film *Black Mother Black Daughter*, 1989, directed by Sylvia D. Hamilton and Claire Prieto.

Sylvia D. Hamilton

Sylvia D. Hamilton is a Nova Scotia filmmaker whose work is concerned with documenting the lives and stories of African Canadian women. In her 1989 film *Black Mother Black Daughter*, co-directed with Claire Prieto, Hamilton explores the bonds between different generations of women and how mothers help shape and support their broader communities. Through projects such as this one, Hamilton brings greater recognition and representation to Black women's experiences and culture, which has been largely absent from Canadian art and media.

Read more about Sylvia D. Hamilton in ACI's *Halifax Art & Artists: An Illustrated History* by Ray Cronin

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THE PEACE BIRD, 1946

by Pegi Nicol MacLeod

Pegi Nicol MacLeod, *The Peace Bird*, 1946, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

Pegi Nicol MacLeod

Ontario-born artist Pegi Nicol MacLeod (1904–1949) was known for her expressive portrait studies and landscapes. Children were often the subject matter of her bold and vibrantly coloured works. Through her energetic and modernist approach to painting, MacLeod had a knack for capturing the liveliness and often the joy of childhood. However, *The Peace Bird*, 1946, takes on a deeper meaning. From the bottom right, MacLeod's daughter, Jane, looks down upon the swirling mass of a crowd celebrating the end of the Second World War. The work is cautiously optimistic about the world the young girl will inherit.

Read more about Pegi Nicol MacLeod in ACI's *Ottawa Art & Artists: An Illustrated History* by Jim Burant

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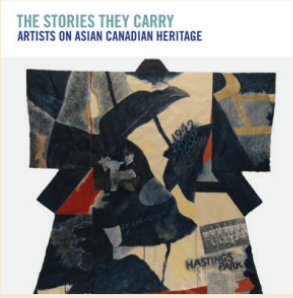

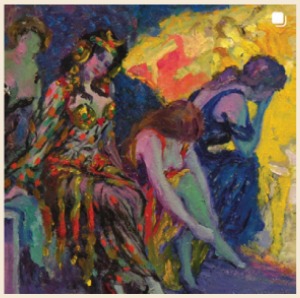

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Image Credits: [1, 8] Helen McNicoll, *In the Shadow of the Tree*, c.1914, oil on canvas, 100.3 x 81.7 cm. Collection of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City, Purchase (1951.140). **[2]** Laura Muntz Lyall, *Dis-Moi? (The Lesson)*, 1895, oil on canvas, 99.1 x 80 cm. Collection of the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, Alberta, Purchased 1988 as a result of a gift from Mr. Gerald Pencer. **[3]** Shuvinai Ashoona, *Happy Mother*, 2013, coloured pencil, graphite and ink on paper, 123 x 127.5 cm. Collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, purchased with the Monique Parent Fund, 2014 (2014.91). Courtesy of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Reproduced with the permission of the artist and West Baffin Cooperative. Photo credit: Christine Guest. **[4]** Attributed to Hannah Maynard, *Hannah Maynard and her daughter Laura Lillian, known as Lillie,* c.1875. Collection of BC Archives, Royal BC Museum, Victoria. **[5]** Christiane Pflug, *Kitchen Door and Esther*, 1965, oil on canvas, 159.5 x 193 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Purchased 2002 (40963). Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada. © Estate of Christiane Pflug. Photo credit: NGC. **[6]** Jin-me Yoon, *Intersection 1*, 1996, diptych, chromogenic prints, 141 x 98 cm each. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist. © Jin-me Yoon. **[7]** Paraskeva Clark, *Myself*, 1933, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 76.7 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Purchased 1974 (18311). © Clive and Benedict Clark. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada. Photo credit: NGC. **[9]** Once-known Kahnawake maker, cradleboard (Kahnawake, Mohawk), c.1850–1880, wood, pigment, string, 81.9 x 33.7 x 36.2 cm. Collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift of funds from Constance Kunin and the Allen and Kathy Lenzmeier Fund (2010.76). **[10]** Still from the film *Black Mother Black Daughter*, 1989, directed by Sylvia D. Hamilton and Claire Prieto. Courtesy of Sylvia D. Hamilton. **[11]** Pegi Nicol MacLeod, *The Peace Bird*, 1946, oil on canvas, 119.7 x 101.5 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Gift of Mrs. F. Maud Brown (1981.009.001).