



## MARION NICOLL: SILENCE AND ALCHEMY

by Ann Davis and Elizabeth Herbert

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## ART IN PROFILE

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Ann Davis and  
Elizabeth Herbert

with contributions from Jennifer Salahub and Christine Sowiak

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Marion Nicoll  
*Sicilia #5 The House of Padrone*, 1959  
Oil on canvas  
90.0 × 105.5 cm  
Collection of Nickle Galleries



## INTRODUCTION

Painting variations on Alberta's landscape and character, she abstracted the mountains, winter mornings, and Bowness Road, where she lived, exposing the skeleton beneath Alberta's physical beauty. At the time, Calgary was not exactly welcoming to modernism and at least one private buyer who had commissioned a painting bailed out when he saw the work. Still, with each new style and challenge, her art gained in finesse. Her strongest work was marked by abstraction, line, colour and form – and not least by her powerful determination.

Aritha van Herk

*Audacious and Adamant: The Story of Maverick Alberta*

(Calgary: The Glenbow Museum, 2007)

As Aritha van Herk captures in her catalogue for the Glenbow Museum, Marion Nicoll is revered within the art history of this province for the power of her work as much as for her personality. Certainly, Nicoll's steady purpose in her practice was unwavering despite the noise surrounding her – the rather late acceptance of modernism in Alberta, the opposition to female art teachers at the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art,

her own fragile health. Her legacy is an absolutely stunning body of work that has been celebrated in exhibitions, represented in public collections, and sought after by private collectors, and it is also understood as representing a shift in Alberta toward an embrace of modernism and abstraction.

Marion Nicoll (1909–1985) is an important founding artist in the history of Alberta art and certainly one of a dedicated few who brought abstraction into practice and acceptance in the province. Introduced to ‘automatic’ ways of working by J.W.G. (Jock) Macdonald during their time teaching together at the Banff School, Nicoll also studied with Will Barnet at Emma Lake in 1957 and later followed him to New York, where she continued to work with him and study at the Art Students League. Upon her return from New York, Nicoll became the first woman instructor hired full-time at what is now the Alberta College of Art and Design – and although limited to teaching craft and design, she became a significant mentor for generations of artists. One of only a very few in the region fully committed to abstraction, Nicoll was also the first woman on the prairies to become a member of the Royal Canadian Academy. There is no assessment of Alberta art that does not in some manner acknowledge Marion Nicoll, whether exhibitions such as *Alberta Mistresses of the Modern* (Art Gallery of Alberta, 2012) and *Made in Calgary: The 1960s* (Glenbow Museum, 2013) or written histories such as *A History of Art in Alberta 1905–1970* (Nancy Townshend, 2005) and *Alberta Art and Artists: An Overview* (Mary-Beth Laviolette and Patricia Ainslie, 2008). Nicoll’s place in the history of abstraction in Canada is also undisputed, evidenced by her inclusion in works such as Roald Nasgaard’s *Abstract Painting in Canada* (Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 2007) and *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s* (Denise Leclerc, National Gallery of Canada, 1992).

In early 2013, nearly forty years after her retrospective in Edmonton (*Marion Nicoll: A Retrospective, 1959–1971*, Edmonton Art Gallery, 1975) and thirty since her death, the Nickle Galleries at the University of Calgary staged a sweeping retrospective of her work. The exhibition brought together not only major paintings from the expanse of her career but also her early representational work and her explorations of automatic drawing. It afforded the opportunity to see connections between her prints and her paintings, and also for the first time brought her craft work – batiks and jewellery – into the same space as her art. By the public and by the art community in Alberta, the retrospective was acknowledged as being a long overdue salute to the work and impact of Marion Nicoll. However, because of the gap of more than a generation between Nicoll’s time as an active artist and the exhibition, this audience was divided into two distinct groups – those who had known, worked with, or studied under Nicoll and were revisiting much loved works and those who knew her by name only, by her reputation and legacy, and were seeing her work for the first time.

It is a telling distinction, one that gives subtle evidence of the importance of such retrospective exhibitions and one that is also the impetus for this book: there is a vast difference between somewhat blindly accepting the place of an artist such as Marion Nicoll within the pantheon of significant Canadian artists and understanding through exhibition and examination just *why* they are there. In this book, Ann Davis, Elizabeth Herbert, and Jennifer Salahub provide the *why*. They offer strikingly different interpretations of the life and work of Marion Nicoll that, when taken together, reveal a full portrait of the artist and her context.

Ann Davis laces the work of Marion Nicoll together with the history of abstraction in a national and international context, one that reveals its deeply rooted connection to

the spiritual, from the early writings of Wassily Kandinsky, through to the surrealism of Jock MacDonald and Grace Palinthorpe, the perspectives of Will Barnet and on to Donald Kuspit's analysis of the spiritual in art. Davis positions Nicoll's work between abstraction, what she terms "silence," and realism, or "alchemy."

Elizabeth Herbert provides an essential and very sensitive interpretation of Nicoll's work throughout the trajectory of her career, evidencing the biography of the artist in a careful analysis of her art works. In doing so, Herbert reiterates a sanctioned or official view of Marion Nicoll, yet also gives voice to what would be the artist's own highly independent and rather irreverent response to such a history.

Finally, Jennifer Salahub offers a revision of the history of Nicoll's work in craft and design. Through her deep knowledge of the history of craft in its association with women's work, and its relationship to "fine" art, Salahub articulates their different roles within Nicoll's work, allowing a porous relationship between the two aspects of her practice. She suggests that Nicoll used craft as a strategy to support her own career.

Perhaps unwittingly, the essays and perspectives of Davis, Herbert, and Salahub reveal a broader truth of what it means to interpret the life and work of an artist from a vantage point removed by decades – a distance that offers a much broader historical perspective for interpretation, yet also removes the subject from their environment of time and place. The first removal, that of time, has a very specific impact on the writers, driving their research not to first-hand knowledge of the artist's framework or personal interviews but to primary sources found in the archives of the Glenbow Museum, the National Gallery of Canada, and the like. While they are as fulsome as possible, these are erratic sources that plague researchers with incomplete indexes, missing exhibition catalogues, or loose clippings that have no associated dates or locations. Very few unchallenged sources survive. From such a finite pool of references, it is small wonder that those



same sources and even quotations appear in the essays of Davis, Herbert, and Salahub. That they are put into much different service by each author shows the divergent approaches of the writers and the value of constructing an understanding of Marion Nicoll from a merging of perspectives.

The second removal – that of place – should also be understood as the role of regionalism in any account of Canadian art and in this particular chronicling of Marion Nicoll. Written in 1963, Clement Greenberg’s seminal “Painting and Sculpture in Prairie Canada”<sup>1</sup> begins with an assessment of regionalism not only in prairie Canada but throughout the art world. He acknowledges that those in the major art centres – New York and Paris – cared little for work that was going on in other art scenes. Artists working in Canada outside of its major centres were wrapped in a sort of “double obscurity,” held in disdain for their provincialism by Toronto and Montreal, centres that were themselves condemned for their outpost status. The significance of this understanding of regionalism in considering Marion Nicoll’s work is that she and other Canadian abstract artists combatted their sense of isolation not by looking to Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, or even Vancouver but by forging relationships directly with the New York scene and its players. Consequently, every community of abstract artists that formed on the prairies developed its own history – connected not to each other, but to New York – and any appreciation of their work necessitates a simultaneous understanding of a specific regional context and the global trajectory of abstraction.

By concentrating on the spiritual aspects of abstraction, Ann Davis begins with a broad analysis of abstraction and positions Nicoll within it. Elizabeth Herbert, concentrating on a biographical approach to Nicoll, reveals the ways in which the artist sought out personal connections to abstraction and how those associations are evidenced in her art. Jennifer Salahub offers further perceptions on regionalism – that between art and

craft and that facing women artists at work in the mid-twentieth century – and traces Nicoll’s strategies for working against that isolation. The lens of history is multifaceted. It is by splicing together divergent views and interpretations that a full, inclusive portrait can be formed, one that only becomes possible across the distance of time and space.

Christine Sowiak

#### NOTE

- 1 Clement Greenberg, “Paintings and Sculpture in Prairie Canada,” *Canadian Art* (March/April 1963); reprinted in George Fetherling, *Documents in Canadian Art* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1987).