

LOCATING ALEXANDRA

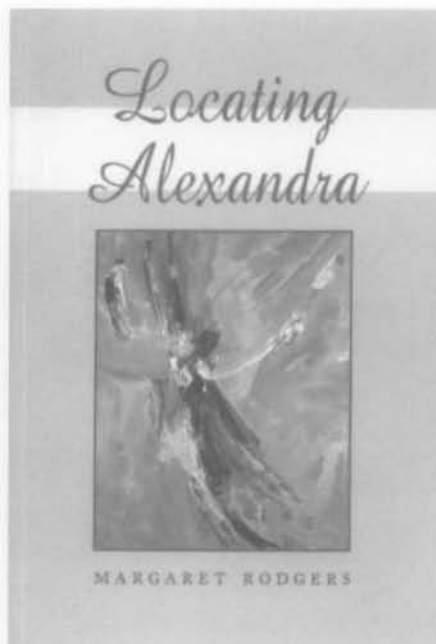
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In October 1952, the *Canadian Abstract Exhibition* was mounted at the YWCA in Oshawa, Ontario. The exhibition was not the first to show Canadian abstract work but it was the first such presentation with a national scope and it travelled to other Canadian centres. It was organized by a woman who had long been a defender of abstract art. Almost twenty years earlier, in 1933, she had written a vehement letter to the Oshawa press challenging the President of the Royal Canadian Academy, Wyly Grier, on his negative attitude to abstraction. The woman who accomplished this was the Canadian artist Alexandra Luke.

Considering the shortage of writing on the subject of Canada's women artists, Margaret Rodgers' biography of Alexandra Luke is most welcome. Rodgers' use of an intertextual approach that connects biography to social history, formal analysis, feminist theory and explorations into the development of modernism in Canada, makes the book an unusual publication. Rodgers' research was extensive and the excellent bibliography bears this out. She weaves connections between Luke's work and the many influences on the development of abstraction in Canada, demonstrating



a sophisticated grasp of the concepts and their interdependent relationships. The book uses the pseudonym or working name of the artist "Alexandra Luke" to cleverly differentiate this persona from the wife and homemaker "Margaret McLaughlin." The device enables the discussion to travel from the personal to the professional and permits Rodgers to emphasize the unusual juxtaposition between Luke's private and professional lives.

As one of the two women members of Painters Eleven (the other being Hortense Gordon), Luke was certainly influential in the development and propagation of abstract art in Canada. Yet in many ways, Margaret Alexandra Luke McLaughlin (to string all her

names together in a fashion she herself never used) remains an enigma. Prior to the publication of Rodgers' book, the story of Luke's life had been recorded only in fragments: magazine and newspaper articles, documents on Painters Eleven and in catalogues of two solo exhibitions. The first was *Alexandra Luke: A Tribute* (Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1977, text by Jennifer Watson); the second, *Alexandra Luke: Continued Searching* (Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1988, text by Joan Murray). Both include biographical detail and *Continued Searching* incorporates many reproductions of Luke's work, but neither offers the completeness of a biography.

Although she made an early public defense of abstraction, Luke did not begin to work in this direction until around 1947, with such paintings as *Automatic Number 52*. She remained committed to non-figuration from then until her death in 1967. Luke studied with Hans Hofmann (Provincetown, 1947-1952) and was greatly influenced by his concept of "reducing form to a series of 'shifting planes moving in space' to express plastic, three-dimensional form." This would be later combined with Luke's own studies in Theosophy and mysticism to create dynamic and moving works such as *Journey Through Space* (c.1956) and *Symphony* (1957). Luke's painting transmitted a great deal of joy and was sometimes light-spirited, but

always with serious investigation as its anchor.

Luke does not appear as a figure of significance in the writing of Canadian history. Dennis Reid, for example, in *A Concise History of Canadian Painting*, conflates the work of Luke and Hortense Gordon into one paragraph in his book, describing the painting as "derivative." Barry Lord, in *The History of Painting in Canada*, includes only one sentence of information about Luke and it has a derogatory tone: "Alexandra Luke, an older painter who had also studied under Hofmann and had married into the General Motors sell-out family of McLaughlins in Oshawa, used her influence to get the YWCA gallery there to hold the First Canadian Abstract Exhibition." There is no mention of her work itself. These two examples represent the position that Luke has been given in general histories of Canadian art.

Although publications devoted to the production of women artists have attempted to rectify these losses, Dorothy Farr and Natalie Luckyj's *From Women's Eyes: Women Painters in Canada* (Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1976) has constructed a biography that is not totally accurate. They state incorrectly, for example, that Luke pursued a nursing career in Oshawa. They also claim that it was because of the 1952 *Canadian Abstract Exhibition* that Luke was asked to become a member of

Painters Eleven, implying that the group already existed prior to that date and minimizing Luke's role in its nascency. *By A Lady* by Maria Tippet includes so many artists that none are discussed in any great depth. Luke receives great praise for her work, and Tippet does include a full-page, colour reproduction of *Journey Through Space*.

Considering her contributions not only as an artist, but also as the organizer of exhibitions, as a lecturer, as a holder of positions in many of Canada's prominent artistic societies and as a promoter of abstraction in Canada, Luke's public role has been seriously undervalued, a point that *Locating Alexandra* clearly emphasizes. Luke was a member of the Canadian Society of Painters in Water Color, the Canadian Group of Painters, and the Ontario Society of Artists. She was also a Fellow of the International Institute of Arts and Letters, and gave several public talks. Of course, her best-known affiliation was with Painters Eleven. Luke showed her own work locally, nationally and internationally beginning with an exhibition at the Lyceum Club in Oshawa in 1933; internationally, her work was shown in New York (three exhibitions), Miami, Jackson (Mississippi) and Vichy (France).

Luke's activities as a promoter of Canadian art was zealous and dedicated. For example, according to Joyce

Zemans (and reiterated by Joan Murray), Luke along with Oshawa art teacher Dorothy Van Luven, organized sixty-nine art exhibitions in Oshawa between 1945 and 1952, "lecturing regularly herself and inviting guest artists to speak about their work."¹ In a 1977 interview with Joan Murray, Barbara Macdonald (Luke's close friend and correspondent and the wife of Jock Macdonald) said that "she had tremendous energy and that energy shows in everything. Margaret could hardly rest the sole of her foot."² In 1948, writing about an Oshawa exhibition of the work of Rody Kenny Courtice, Coziel Haworth, Yvonne McKague Housser and Isabel McLaughlin, Luke began by asking her readers: "Do you ever wish when you look at a modern Canadian painting that you could ask the artist what it is all about? Well, you can."³

Rodgers' discussion of Luke's life is divided into four sections that consider: first, Luke's personal life; second, her development as an artist; third, her interactions with mystical thought; and lastly, the work itself. For the first time, we have a detailed biography, describing Luke's private life and her relationships with family members. As Rodgers notes, lengthy discussion of the household responsibilities of a male artist would not be relevant to a discussion of the development of his work. However, separating production from the conditions under which it is accomplished is problematic if a complete

understanding of the work is desired. As Rodgers points out in reference to Luke's life, her imposed and self-imposed household responsibilities:

serve to underscore the kind of expectations that constrained Margaret in obvious and subtle ways throughout her life... [and] it is clear that Margaret's family would have preferred a traditional mom. Margaret felt the constant pressure of the needs of her children, the demands of family routine, and, finally, her own sense of propriety. (p.33)

For these reasons, the text includes a great deal of information about Luke both as a mother and as a wife.

But the Margaret McLaughlin persona was only one facet of Luke's life. The artist Alexandra Luke was the other. In some ways, the playing of the two lives by one individual seems impossible. The life of Margaret McLaughlin was strictly controlled by the social conventions governing the actions of a society matron. She worked as a volunteer for the Oshawa blood-donor clinic; founded the Oshawa Skating Club; taught pottery classes from her home; was a member of the Oshawa Historical Society and chair of the Henry House Museum Committee; she organized Saturday morning children's art classes at Centre Street School and she was a member of the Oshawa Lyceum Women's Club.

While living this life, Luke managed simultaneously to find the space to study teachings of the mystic Ouspensky and his teacher Gurdjieff and to pursue her interest in such paranormal phenomena as flying saucers. Luke's complex relationship with her husband, Ewart McLaughlin, is presented in detail and assessed using Carolyn Heilbrun's comments on matrimony to consider the possibility that this was a typical "society" marriage. Rodgers notes:

Circumstances conspired to make their marriage seem like a good idea at the time, but Margaret and Ewart soon proved to be ill-suited to one another. A fundamental disagreement was at the root of Margaret's failure to meet Ewart's expectations as to what a wife should be. He wanted his socks darned; he wanted a wife to look after him, his home, and his children. Margaret was not interested in domesticity....Her painting was acceptable to him when she was making landscapes in a Group of Seven fashion, but her wholehearted espousal of modern art, her interest in esoteric thought, and, later, her arty friends, amounted to a hostile intrusion into Ewart's world. (p.28-30)

There is a parallel to Heilbrun's own life, in that she chose to write detective novels under the name Amanda Cross. Heilbrun was protecting her university position, whereas Luke was protect-

ing her marriage, but both assumed pseudonyms for the purpose of shielding one facet of their lives from another.

Rodgers is wise to limit her discussion of Luke's participation in *Painters Eleven*. She includes the important facts, but confines them to a short section of the book as Luke's association with the group has been discussed elsewhere. Instead, Rodgers focuses more on understanding Luke's complex relationship with the art world. For example, using arguments by theorist Gisela Breitling, Rodgers suggests that we must consider Luke in the context of a social framework that has not simply excluded women, but has in fact included them as collaborators in the construction of culture. Breitling argues that women must participate in a male-dominated art world because they do not have female predecessors on whom they might rely. Rodgers contends that Luke's work does not contain specifically female iconography (as in Joyce Wieland's imagery). But, Luke did participate in a male-dominated idiom. Breitling (and Rodgers, I assume) would commend this.

However, I have some difficulty with Breitling's notion that there are no models for women to rely upon in order to represent a female experience, thus forcing their reliance on male experience. Whether artists chose to follow a path that might be thought of

as connected historically to "women's work," or whether, like Luke, they chose an idiom that remained male, the idea that there are no women for women to use as paradigms is simply not the case. Women have always made art. Whether that art has followed a stereotype or whether it has challenged the practice that men have claimed for themselves has not mattered. While the argument for an art that can transcend gender might be a worthwhile goal, Rodgers' argument that Luke's "existence within a masculinized sphere creates an exemplary case for Breitling's argument" is missing a key factor. Alexandra Luke may have fitted nicely into the growth of modernism in Canada, but she has not been remembered for her contribution. This is not particularly to argue with the notion that ideally the evaluation of art should transcend gender, but merely to suggest that, although the idea is sound, reality does not reflect this goal. Art, in other words, has not proven itself capable of transcending gender, so it is not clear how a strategy of simply asserting that it should will make much difference. Rodgers concludes, however, that Breitling may have mounted this argument in order to defend an artistic production that she happens to prefer — a preference formed by "the internalization of a patriarchal aesthetic" (p.49). I agree.

Along with her studies of the writings of Ouspensky and Gurdjieff,

and prior to her work with Hofmann in Provincetown, Luke also studied with the Canadian artist and teacher Jock Macdonald (Banff, 1945). Macdonald introduced her to the idea of "automatic painting," learned from the British Surrealist painter and psychiatrist Dr. Grace Pailthorpe. In this section of the text, Rodgers deals with the complexities of the relationships between Surrealism, automatic painting, psychoanalysis, Abstract Expressionism and the Automatistes. Rodgers also emphasizes the importance of synaesthesia in Luke's work — the creation of a "visual music."⁴ This is also linked to Gurdjieff's underscoring of the relationship between spiritual growth, movement and musical pitch and tone. Rodgers notes the importance of music and its relationship to abstract art in Ontario, exemplified by artists such as Bertram Brooker, Jack Bush, William Ronald, Graham Coughtry, Gordon Rayner and Michael Snow.

There is one point at which I would disagree with Rodgers' analysis of Luke's life, or at least put her assessment into some question. She maintains that during Luke's lifetime her artistic production was virtually ignored by the critics. She writes, "Luke was...consistently slighted in the critical coverage given to the group," and "A pattern of trivializing or ignoring Luke's work was, and continues to be, perpetuated both during her life and after her death" (p.74).

Certainly there is some evidence to back this up. One of the other members of Painters Eleven, Jack Bush, once commented, "God, the way she [Luke] has been treated in this town makes us weep blood all over the floor." "Well, it doesn't bother me," Luke replied. "Well it damn well bothers us," he answered.⁵ However, Bush was reacting here to Luke's failure to have a solo exhibition during the previous few years rather than to a failure of the press and critics to cover her work. It is true that on occasion Luke would be left out of a review of the work of Painters Eleven. But far more often she was included and the press was positive. Luke's works were "characterized by verve of colour and form," according to Pearl McCarthy of the *Globe and Mail*.⁶ Jo Aldwinckle wrote in 1958, "Courageous colour concepts give these paintings a definite 'Luke' signature."⁷ *The Globe and Mail* and the *Oshawa Times* frequently printed articles praising Luke's work.

What is much more interesting is how a careful reading of all these positive reviews reveals a gendered language. The use of colour was frequently mentioned (as in the above two quotations) as opposed to form in the work of male painters. Often, her work would be considered in terms of its stereotypically "feminine" qualities: "Light-hearted, gay little water colors" described Luke's work in 1960;⁸ "Charming colors with decorative

effect" described her work, according to the *Globe and Mail*, also in 1960.⁹ In a 1977 article, the same newspaper claimed that Joan Murray had described Luke's paintings as "womanly." The article continues, "We can compare this, say, with Ronald's paintings, which with their hard blacks are concentrations of power and energy."¹⁰ In addition, there was a tendency to admire Luke's small paintings rather than her large canvases. Robert Fulford, for example, prefers Luke's smaller works. He calls her piece *College 59* (*sic*), a "light and precise...a delightful little work."¹¹ Abstract work by Luke, then, was considered most successful when "feminine" attributes could be isolated and praised. Nevertheless, newspaper reviews would remain generally supportive. There are many more examples. The *Globe and Mail*, in 1953, commented that "Alexandra Luke's painting, seemingly inspired by a blaze of sun on flowers, shows her very real talent for relaying the emotional pleasure in such sights."¹² In 1954, the *Toronto Star's* Hugh Thomson wrote of Luke's work: "[T]he general impression, though vague, is pleasing and thought-provoking."¹³ Luke's work was also often compared to musical compositions in recognition of her use of the technique of synaesthesia, as in the *Daily Times-Gazette* of 1956, which explained that the visitor to the Painters Eleven exhibition at the Robert McLaughlin

Gallery "could find a parallel to Debussy in Alexandra Luke's inventive colour and freedom of form."¹⁴ It was not in the press that Alexandra Luke became lost.

In addition to the one criticism of the content of Rodgers' text, I would like also to add two minor comments on the format chosen (I presume) by the publishers. First, the inclusion of footnote information within the text would be more appropriate in a strictly academic text, but including it in a book that might easily be read for pleasure disrupts the continuity. Second, while the book has included a great deal of information, the lack of an index precludes its usefulness as a reference tool. Those two things being said, however, the book is attractively produced with a readable font and illustrations of Luke herself and a few reproductions of her work. The twelve photographs serve well to emphasize the conservative lifestyle of Margaret McLaughlin, as Luke is often wearing a tailored suit or other conservative dress, and holds her body in a reserved and poised manner. The pictures add something to the understanding of the character. Unfortunately, considerations of a financial nature have obviously forced the reproduction of Luke's paintings in black and white only. Perhaps it might have been better to omit these eight images altogether because they convey little, if any, of the emotion of the works. Some

care has been taken not to crop the images, but they are not particularly sharp and some are very small: 6 x 10 centimetres to represent *Journey* (1957), for example, which is 121 x 208 centimetres in size.

These minor criticisms notwithstanding, *Locating Alexandra* successfully strikes that fine and difficult balance between a text that is purely academic, to be read by only a few specialized readers and a more accessible biography that will satisfy the desires of the reader who simply wants to know more about Canada's artistic heritage. Such books on the subject of Canadian women artists are woefully needed.

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Notes

1 Joyce ZEMANS, "From Landscape to Abstractionism: Alexandra Luke," *Vanguard* 13, no.1 (February 1984): 16.

2 Joan Murray and Barbara Macdonald, interview, 25 May 1977, Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives.

3 Margaret LUKE MCLAUGHLIN, "Oshawa Welcomes Exhibit of 'Four Women Who Paint'," *Daily Times-Gazette* (Oshawa-Whitby), 13 Apr. 1948.

4 Joan VASTOKAS, "The Roots of Abstraction: An Introduction," *Artscanada* 36, no.1 (May/June 1979): 23.

5 Luke's minutes of Painters Eleven meeting, 9 May 1957, Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives.

6 Pearl MCCARTHY, "Let Buying Replace Bossing, Then Leave it to the Painters," *Globe and Mail*, 22 March 1952.

7 Jo ALDWINCKLE, "One-Woman Show at Park Gallery Success for Alexandra Luke," *Daily Times-Gazette* (Oshawa-Whitby), 19 May 1958.

8 "Paintings in Individual Settings Brave, Praiseworthy Exhibit," *Oshawa Times*, 14 March 1960.

9 "Luke Display," *Globe and Mail*, 12 March 1960.

10 Peter WHITE, "Painting the Mystical into the Oshawa Y," *Globe and Mail*, 16 July 1977.

11 Robert FULFORD, "Pioneers," *Toronto Daily Star*, 4 Feb. 1961.

12 Pearl MCCARTHY, "Parade of Abstract Talent, With Hodgson in the Lead," *Globe and Mail*, 17 Oct. 1953.

13 Hugh THOMSON, "Painters Eleven Show Modern Art," *Toronto Star*, 13 Feb. 1954.

14 "Painters Eleven Soon Scattered to Important Art Exhibitions," *Daily Times-Gazette* (Oshawa-Whitby), 31 March 1956.