



Untamed Colour:
Celebrating Jean McEwen

Description

Some twenty works offer an eloquent insight into the artist's distinctive practice at the MMFA

To commemorate the 20th anniversary of the death of **Jean McEwen** (1923-1999), the **Montreal Museum of Fine Arts** is paying homage to this Montreal great by presenting a selection of his works acquired mainly over the last two decades. The number and importance of these works donated by the artist's family and various local collectors attest to the special connection between McEwen and the MMFA.

This commemorative exhibition presents a selection of works that the Museum has mainly acquired since 1999 and that span nearly a half-century of his career.

Installed in a newly renovated gallery of the Michal and Renata Hornstein Pavilion, about 20 pieces – which include paintings and works on paper that date from 1951 to 1998 – provide a concise summary of McEwen's distinct artistic practice, characterized by an exploration of the pictorial surface through the application of successive layers of paint that exploit the expressiveness of colour within a confined space. By unravelling the duality between colour and structure in his own way, the artist organized his colour fields with tremendous spatial precision while exploring the full potential of colour and the space/plane dynamic.



Jean McEwen (1923-1999), *Long Plumb Line No. 2*, 1961, oil and varnish on canvas. © Estate of Jean McEwen / SOCAN (2019)

Some of the paintings highlight the international scope of exhibitions dedicated to the artist, extending as far as Brazil, Japan, the United States and England. These major works include *Long Plumb Line No. 2* (1961), which won him a solo exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York in 1963. *Open Mauve* (1962) is another powerful painting that includes a central band that intersects with two colour fields, a composition that became the artist's signature.



Jean McEwen (1923-1999), *Loophole Crossing Blue*, 1961, oil and varnish on canvas. © Estate of Jean McEwen / SOCAN (2019)

This presentation is also an occasion to showcase McEwen's monumental masterpiece *Jubilant Red* (1963), on loan from the Power Corporation of Canada Collection. It also includes watercolours from the series *De ma main à la couleur* [Hand to Colour] – given to the MMFA by the artist's wife, Indra – that illustrates the artist's poems, as well as the recently restored *Untitled* (1951), a painting that demonstrates the influence of Paul-Émile Borduas on McEwen's practice.

Nathalie Bondil, Director General and Chief Curator of the MMFA, explains that “Jean McEwen is without doubt one of Canada's greatest painters. In the tradition of automatism and colour field painting, McEwen's style using hand-applied varnish is sensual yet precise and truly unique. His work creates a universe that is both complex and poetic and that has singular depth. As the artist himself said, ‘There are two ways to judge a painting. One is based on criteria and theories of art. The second is based on the sensations we get before a picture. I paint the second way.’ “

“This commemorative exhibition presents a selection of works that the Museum has mainly acquired since 1999 and that span nearly a half-century of his career. It underlines the understated monumentality, continuity and haunting beauty of the work of this Montrealer who marked the history of modern painting in Canada,” said **Anne Grace**, Curator of Modern Art, MMFA.



Jean McEwen (1923-1999), *Untitled*, 1963 or 1964, oil and varnish on canvas, 106.5 x 91.5 cm. © Estate of Jean McEwen / SOCAN (2019)

About the Artist

A self-taught painter born in Montreal, Jean McEwen (1923-1999) exhibited his art for the first time in 1949 at the MMFA's 66th Annual Spring Exhibition. His early development was shaped by a meeting with fellow Quebec painter Paul-Émile Borduas as well as a trip to Paris in 1951, where he met Jean-Paul Riopelle and was introduced to prominent avant-garde painters, including most significantly Sam Francis.

His return to the Montreal scene coincided with a crucial moment in the history of abstract painting: in 1955, he was part of the *Espace 55* exhibition at the MMFA as well as the first collective exhibition of the Galerie actuelle. McEwen would subsequently join the *Association des artistes non figuratifs de Montréal* (AANFM).



Jean McEwen (1923-1999), *Barbarous Poem No. 8*, 1998, oil on canvas. © Estate of Jean McEwen / SOCAN (2019)

His bold paintings engaged with the Paris and New York avant-garde, which led to a solo exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York in 1963. That same year, McEwen was invited to represent Canada at the 7th São Paulo Biennial. His work captured the attention of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. of the Museum of Modern Art in New York as well as that of Joseph Hirshhorn, both of whom acquired works for their respective institutions.

In 1987-1988, the MMFA devoted a first major retrospective to the artist called Jean McEwen: Colour in Depth. Paintings and Works on Paper, 1951-1986, and in 2005 it held the Jean McEwen "From my Hand into Colour" exhibition that included a series of watercolours of the same name. The major stages of his stylistic evolution are represented by 54 works from the Museum's collection.

Credits

This exhibition was organized by the MMFA under the direction of Anne Grace, Curator of Modern Art, MMFA. It benefited from the collaboration of **Indra McEwen** and **Constance Naubert-Riser**, curator of the MMFA's 1987 retrospective and editor of numerous other publications on the artist.

Acknowledgments

The MMFA would like to thank the following donors: Constance Naubert-Riser, Simon Blais, Line Chevette, Suzanne Thiboutot, Hélène Dorion and Violaine Corradi, Elizabeth Anne Harris, as well as Lise and Xavier Briand. • Official Partners: Air Canada, Denalt • Public Partners: Ministère de la Culture et des Communications, Canada Council for the Arts and Conseil des arts de Montréal

Associated event

Through the Eyes of the Curator
Wednesday, September 25, 7 pm



Michal and Renata Hornstein Pavilion – Level 1.

A guided tour with Anne Grace, Exhibition Curator and Curator of Modern Art, MMFA. Places are limited. Reserve your seat.

Untamed Colour: Celebrating Jean McEwen

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

Michal and Renata Hornstein Pavilion – Level 1

Until February 2, 2020

Images: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

Sign-up to our newsletter
and get email notification
of our most recent articles

Sign up

Read also: [New Contemporary Art installation at the](#)

[MMFA](#)



Boasting more than 1.3 million visitors annually, the **MMFA** is one of Canada's most visited museums and the eighth-most visited museum in North America. The Museum's original temporary exhibitions combine various artistic disciplines – fine arts, music, film, fashion and design – and are exported around the world. Its rich encyclopedic collection, distributed among five pavilions, includes international art, world cultures, decorative arts and design, and Quebec and Canadian art. For more information, consult the Website mbam.qc.ca



FREE SHIPPING over \$99*

LINEN CHEST

SHOP NOW

Category

1. Art
2. Visual Arts

Tags

1. abstract art
2. Anne Grace
3. art abstrait
4. Constance Naubert-Riser
5. Indra McEwen



6. Jean McEwen
7. modern art in Canada
8. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts
9. Nathalie Bondil
10. painter

Date Created

September 2019