

James Alexander Stirling Macdonald

1921-2013

Jim was a bold leader and advocate for art education throughout his professional career as an educator and artist in British Columbia. Born in Saskatchewan, he moved with his family to Vancouver as a young man and attended Magee Secondary School. After graduating with a diploma in Painting from the Vancouver School of Art following WWII, he enrolled in the Vancouver Normal School and was immediately hired to build the secondary art program at Gladstone Secondary when it opened in 1950. In 1955 he was seconded back to the Normal School to train art teachers and was subsequently hired by Neville Scarfe in 1956 as part of the first art education team in the newly opened Faculty of Education at UBC.



Jim Macdonald in his studio c. 1960

His strong “no-nonsense” leadership abilities were evident early in his career. While teaching in Vancouver in the early Fifties, Jim became President of the Vancouver Art Teachers Association which was the precursor to the BC Art Teachers’ Association when it began in 1957. He was also on the executive of the newly established Canadian Society for Education Through Art and became its third President in 1957.

The Art Education program at UBC was “one of the most respected faculties on the continent” according to noted scholar Edmund B. Feldman (1984). Its core strength was in its studio art emphasis and the master art educators who shaped it. Jim Macdonald can be credited with leading the early faculty which included: Gordon Smith, Elmore Ozard, Sam Black, Penny Gouldstone, Michael Foster, Bob Steele, Jim Gray, Doris Livingstone, Margaret Vanderpant, Sinclair Healy, Ian Thomas, Charmian Johnson, Glenn Lewis, Stan Clarke and Jean-Marie Weakland among others. Throughout his 30 year tenure as a professor in the Faculty of Education Jim was not only one of its founders, but was twice elected Department Chairman for multi-year terms. He retired in 1986.

Jim also had a distinguished history as an artist in the 50s, 60s and 70s. Never satisfied with the status quo, he extended his studio education with sabbaticals at the Slade School of Art in London and at the Instituto San Miguel de Allende in Mexico. His strong figurative and ghostly painting style became widely acclaimed across Canada. He had exhibitions at the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, the Fine Arts Gallery at UBC, the Musee des Beaux Arts, Montreal and was collected by the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, the VAG and the Mendel Gallery in Saskatoon. His work is also included in countless private collections in Canada, the US and in Europe. He was represented by the Bau-Xi Gallery in Vancouver and had regular solo exhibitions there through 1978.

While he strongly influenced hundreds of painter / educators throughout his career (including the author), perhaps one of his more important claims to fame was Gathie Falk’s assertion that Jim Macdonald had the greatest influence on her becoming an artist (student late 50s). It’s safe to say, Jim Macdonald’s thirty-six year influence on art and art education in British Columbia was profound!!

- Bill MacDonald, 2014