
The Impact of Automatism on the Art of Jock Macdonald

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Before his arrival in Canada in 1926, Scots-born J.W.G. Macdonald (1897-1960), although an experienced designer, had never painted in oils. Within only ten years of his arrival, he had become a recognized artist whose landscape paintings were exhibited nationally and internationally. By the mid-1930s, Macdonald turned to abstract painting and continued to explore and develop his abstract expression throughout the remainder of his career. Although his style varied greatly over the years as he redefined his approach, the abstract works can be divided into three distinct and successive periods: the 'modalities,' the 'automatics,' and the late abstract canvases. The first of these were primarily semi-abstract expressions, but the years 1945-1953 saw the maturation of an automatic-surrealist period, with Macdonald's realization that his own subconscious and intuitive understanding of the artistic process, rather than formulae or objective solutions, was the appropriate key to fulfilling his artistic ideals. Towards the end of his life, he wrote to a younger artist:

That which is true for you today will move in its own time. You cannot force it to a new truth for you tomorrow, or next year, or in the next decade. ... This which has become a new truth, correctly a deeper truth, will move to a further new truth. You cannot make this happen, but it *will* happen and it will come as a flash of lightning.¹

In Great Britain, Jock Macdonald had graduated as designer from the Edinburgh College of Art and had worked for three years for Morton Sundour Fabrics. The year before he emigrated to Canada to become head of the Design Department at the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts, he was employed as Head of Design at the Lincoln (England) School of Art. Despite both this strong training and

background, as well as the fact that he continued to accept commissions in the design area for the next twenty years, Macdonald moved within two years of his arrival from an interest in surface pattern and decoration to a concern with expressing the meaning of art through the medium of painting.

In this, his first mentor was Frederick Varley (1881-1969), whose arrival in British Columbia coincided with Macdonald's. Varley's expertise as a painter and his interest in Oriental philosophy and spiritualism provided the atmosphere, and British Columbia, the landscape for the early drawings. By 1932, Macdonald referred to the 'spiritual qualities' of his landscapes which echo the interests of Theosophists and Anthroposophists with whom he was then meeting regularly. In this personal conviction, parallels may be seen with Lawren Harris's landscapes of the 1920s in his attempt to unite the world of nature and the realm of the spirit.

Macdonald called his earliest abstracts and semi-abstracts 'modalities,' which he defined as 'nature form[s] in extension ... as the 4th dimension is an extension of the 3rd ... but [with] a different space and a different time.'² By the years 1936-40, the 'modalities' characterized expressions of moods, seasons, or natural phenomena. Although preserved correspondence suggests that he continued to work in this mode until 1943, the last such work he exhibited dates from only 1940. It would seem that in later years, the works that resulted often fell short of his expectations. Having set out to discover the

¹ J.W.G. Macdonald to Frank Palmer, 18 March 1950, collection Frank Palmer.

² J.W.G. Macdonald to H.O. McCurry, 10 May 1943, National Gallery of Canada. The ellipses are mine.



FIGURE 1. Grace Pailthorpe, *The Spotted Oozle*, 1942. Oil on canvas board, 20.6 × 36.4 cm. London, Mayor Gallery (Photo: Mayor Gallery).

hidden laws of nature and to realize in his art the universal truth that governs all – to express not the appearance of nature but the spirit therein – Macdonald had found his process had become so intellectualized as to make new work impossible.

He seems to have shown no new abstracts at the Vancouver Art Gallery after 1940, so the period from 1940-43 was doubtlessly one of severe re-evaluation, ending with a meeting with Grace Pailthorpe, whose influence was to serve as catalyst in the discovery of new directions.³

Pailthorpe and her colleague, Reuben Mednikoff, arrived in Vancouver during World War II, having left London in 1939 to travel through North America. As artist and psychiatrist, she played a significant role in British Surrealism and was one of the twenty-five national contributors to the second International Surrealist Exhibition, London, 1936, and to Alfred Barr's definitive American Surrealist exhibition, the Museum of Modern Art's *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* (Figs. 1, 2). Born in 1883 and trained as a physician, Pailthorpe spent four years after World War I as a medical officer in Western Australia, returning to England in 1922 where she became a Freudian analyst. In 1923, she

began five years of research into criminal psychology sponsored by the Medical Research Council. With Reuben Mednikoff (a graduate of the St. Martins School of Art), she began in 1935 an investigation into the relationship of art and psychology which was to last more than thirty years. This interest led Pailthorpe to paint, and subsequently to accept the invitation to participate in the 1936 British Surrealist exhibition, where her work was admired by André Breton.

In January of 1939, Pailthorpe and Mednikoff exhibited jointly at the Guggenheim Jeune Gallery, London. Their work met with positive critical reception; and their paintings and drawings were deemed by many to be 'the most authentic Surrealist art yet exhibited' for their origins in psychological research. Most visitors to the exhibition believed that their scientific approach would create 'wider understanding and acceptance of Surrealist art.'⁴

Soon after her arrival in Vancouver, another joint exhibition took place at the Vancouver Art Gallery, under the auspices of the Ladies' Auxiliary in April 1944. A lecture given in conjunction with the exhibition indicates that her theses about art and psychoanalysis had not varied since 1939, when she wrote for a leading British Surrealist publication, the *London Bulletin*. Her own text found backing in Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* which she quoted:

Pure psychic automatism, by which is intended to express verbally in writing or by other means the real *process* of thought. Thought dictation in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations.⁵

Pailthorpe's fundamental theoretical analogy may be reduced to the proposition that the 'final goal of Surrealism and Psycho-analysis is the same – the liberation of man,' and that the various filters which prevent full expression through internal conflict should be overcome.⁶

This proselytizing approach to psychic automatism must have fascinated Macdonald, for, as if anticipating his quest, she had written:

Surrealism can lead to a greater understanding of the world around and within us. ... It is impossible to create a well-organized external world *unless at the same time* the inner mental world is harmonized, since it is only through mental acquiescence on the part of units that go to form the whole machinery of civilisation that it can function smoothly. Further, the understanding of the world around us is reached by means of our sense organs and if these are not functioning freely we are not capable of getting an accurate focus.⁷

3 Barbara Macdonald to Margaret McLaughlin, 5 November 1954, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. 'She [Pailthorpe] is the person we met in Vancouver who initiated Jock into automatic painting.'

4 D.L.C., 'G.W. Pailthorpe's and R. Mednikoff's Work,' *London Bulletin*, No. 17 (June 1939), 23.

5 G. Pailthorpe, 'The Scientific Aspects of Surrealism,' *London Bulletin*, No. 7 (December 1938–January 1939), 10.

6 *Ibid.*, 10.

7 *Ibid.*, 11-12.

Macdonald had previously attempted to meet the world on a consciously intellectualized spiritual level. As a result, the 'modalities' he painted, although abstract, were often rigid analogies for the living subjects he wished to re-create. Pailthorpe, by her emphasis on the sense organs, offered the artist a method of direct expression where observation gave way to intuition:

Every unconscious creation is not a work of art but where complete freedom has been possible the results are perfect in balance, design, colour, rhythm and possess a vitality that is not to be found anywhere else than in Surrealism.⁸

In sum, the fantasy of uninhibited minds was felt to hold limitless potential for a new art form notable for its 'simplicity, directness and lucidity.'⁹ Editorial comment on Pailthorpe's Vancouver lecture and exhibition ('the first lecture ever given in Vancouver Art Gallery by a surrealist artist'¹⁰) stressed the 'unusual [and] bizarre' nature of the works. In her lecture at the Gallery, Pailthorpe paraphrased Herbert Read, many of whose ideas and theories she shared, and spoke of the spontaneous development of creative education, recognizing with Bergson and Whitehead that 'the more one considers the problems of life – problems of society, of culture, of art and ethics – the more the conviction grows that the secret lies within the concept of spontaneity,' that is, of the expression of the subconscious.¹¹

Impressed by what he had seen and heard, Macdonald asked for criticism of his work. Pailthorpe attributed the loss of ease in composition which he had lately experienced to the retention of surface detail and compositional structuring originating in his work as a designer. Under Pailthorpe's tutelage, provided with large sheets of wet paper, ink, and aniline colour, Macdonald was instructed to 'just take a brush and put on a great big splash,' having to cease work when the conscious or waking state began to interfere with his subconscious.¹²

While the idea of working without preconceived subject is similar to Breton's instructions to writers, one may note that automatic painting of this type was not really unknown to Macdonald. His first semi-abstract work, *Formative Colour Activity*, must have been created in similar circumstances as early as 1934:

At that time I was interested in colour and had been, for some time, carefully observing colour in flowers and plants. But I created the canvas with no preconceived planning. I drew nothing on the canvas I just

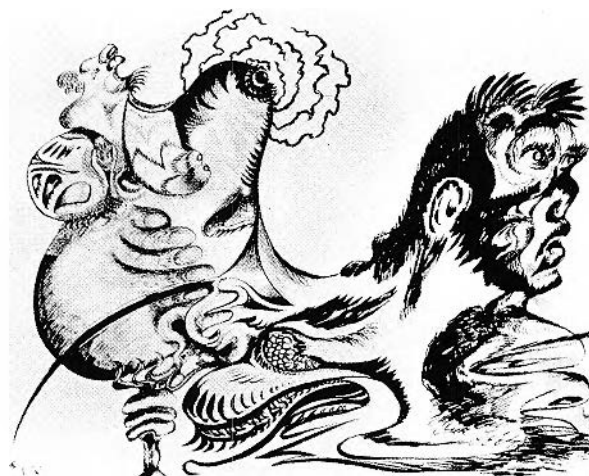


FIGURE 2. Grace Pailthorpe, *Ancestors I*, 5 July 1935. Whereabouts unknown. (From H. Read, *Surrealism*, London, 1936, fig. 72.)

started off with a pure vermillion. Well do I remember doing it. I painted the canvas from beginning to end without stopping to eat or rest. I was in an ecstasy and was pale and exhausted, but terribly exhilarated, when I finished.¹³

Three years later came *Pilgrimage*, a painting unique in its subject and handling, even though related to the modalities and landscapes of the time. Its format was, Macdonald said, the consequence of a dream but although it could be considered surrealistic in light of its dream-like atmosphere and the strange landscape it portrays, it is not automatic.

Macdonald understood the automatics as extensions of the same concerns that had been expressed in the earlier modalities, although at that time he was attempting, albeit unsuccessfully, to find visual correspondents for his theoretical ideas about abstraction.

Within a few months, Macdonald felt he was again able to follow through the force which was driving him. His artistic vocabulary as well as his method of constructing a painting altered radically. Moving from oils to the almost exclusive use of watercolour, he found he could paint almost continuously when the mood was right; when a few months earlier he had 'to do his utmost to keep painting – at least something every week.'¹⁴

8 Ibid., 15.

9 Ibid., 15.

10 *Vancouver Sun*, 13 April 1944.

11 H. Read, *Education for Peace* (London, 1950), 80.

12 Gerald Tyler, interview with the author, 28 February 1978. Tyler also tried automatic painting under Pailthorpe's guidance.

13 J.W.G. Macdonald to H.O. McCurry, 10 May 1943. Misspellings corrected by author.

14 Ibid.

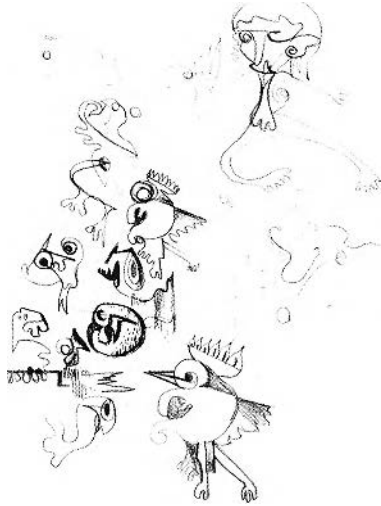


FIGURE 3. Marion Nicoll. Page from Sketchbook. Pencil on cream paper, 30 × 22.6 cm. Calgary, Glenbow Museum (Photo: Glenbow Museum).

In point of fact, Macdonald's discovery of automatism in 1943 can be seen as the key to the rest of his working life. Never again would he turn to nature directly for the subject matter of his automatic paintings, although he maintained that nature was the essential link to reality which could never be broken. (It was for this reason that he continued landscape painting throughout his career.) The hidden laws of nature and the cosmic order were henceforth to emerge from internal sources rather than to be interpreted from any external imagery or phenomena.

Macdonald had begun to work automatically almost exclusively by 1944 and was relieved from the tedium of searching for new expressive modes by the free use of brush or pen, without discernible subject matter. Lilia Farley recalls that the automatics were done:

...with a great amount of joy, more or less experimenting and getting a kick out of doing them. It was a fantasy type of world that he was generating, the psychology and the freedom of the mind-whimsey was relating to the mind expansion.¹⁵

Some of the most interesting results were the automatic Christmas cards he sent to his friends,

¹⁵ C. Nicholson and J. Frances, *J.W.G. Macdonald, The Western Years* (Burnaby Art Gallery, Burnaby, B.C., March 1969), 19.

¹⁶ Palette, 'B.C. Society Show Excels that of 1945,' *Vancouver Daily Province* (4 June 1946): 'J.W.G. Macdonald exhibits a colourful and intriguing series of watercolours executed in subconscious automatic mode of expression.'

¹⁷ Anne Payne, 'Jim and Marion Nicoll,' *Art West*, 11 (1977), 14.

tiny works on paper, often only four or five inches square.

It is certain that Macdonald knew of Surrealism and Surrealist painting long before 1943, but it was not until his meeting with Pailthorpe that automatic painting, as he chose to call it, was to affect his work substantively. It is unlikely that he actually read Surrealist authors, although he knew of their ideas through the texts of Herbert Read and from Pailthorpe herself. Rather than restricting himself to texts or treatises associated with any artistic group or movement, Macdonald read the mathematicians (Eddington, Einstein, and Jeans) and the philosophers (Ouspensky and Gurdjieff) in an attempt to understand the higher calling of the artist.

Macdonald was almost totally absorbed in the automatic form of expression before his move to Calgary in the autumn of 1946, and his automatics were exhibited twice in Vancouver before his departure – in June, at the annual British Columbia Society of Fine Arts show at the Vancouver Art Gallery, and in a one-man show in September as he prepared to leave. Yet the automatic paintings were never shown at Calgary.¹⁶ While in Calgary, he did, however, work in the automatic style, at one point concentrating for five months, producing automatic watercolours every day. A number of his Calgary students and colleagues at the Banff School of Fine Arts and the Alberta Technical School not only admired what he was doing, but were in several instances converted by him to seek the impetus which automatism offered. Alexandra Luke, who met Macdonald at Banff, became involved in automatic painting and never abandoned the freedom it offered her. This shared interest in art and aesthetics was the basis of a friendship which was to strengthen over the next fifteen years.

Marion Nicoll, a colleague in Alberta and a friend during subsequent years, corresponded with Jock after he left Calgary for Toronto. She describes how in Banff, in 1946, Macdonald introduced her to automatic drawing:

You take a pencil, you are in a quiet place, you put the pencil on the paper and you sit there until your hand moves of its own accord. You do that every day. ... You keep doing it. It will happen without any effort on your part.¹⁷

She filled sketchbooks by the dozens with automatic drawings. The drawings made a 'path to the subconscious. They open things up wide' (Fig. 3). To her Macdonald wrote letters which re-

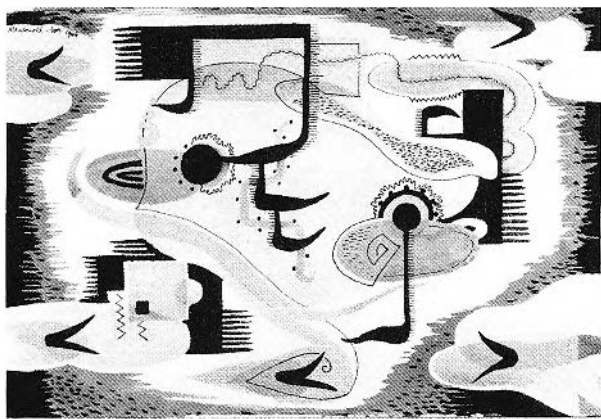


FIGURE 4. J.W.G. (Jock) Macdonald, *Music Hour*, 1946. Watercolour and ink on paper, 18 × 25.8 cm. Oshawa, Robert McLaughlin Gallery (Photo: Mario Schembri, courtesy Robert McLaughlin Gallery).

vealed not only his gentle enthusiasm as a teacher but his own enthrallment with the 'automatic' form of artistic expression.

Ha! Ha! This is interesting news about what is happening in your automatic paintings. Things are beginning to move. They will continue to move as long as you work continuously – sometimes every day or nearly every day. One cannot account for what comes forth and in truth it doesn't matter. However, now that you find things definitely suggestive of nature forms you can be sure that the door is now open – Excellent!¹⁸

I am all wound up cos I've just finished another automatic and it's quite exciting – so I think. I also did two last night, so you see I have got down to my winter work and there is going to be no let up until I have to push off to Hofmann's next summer. This has got to be a real year. I am most interested in your automatics too. This news about a painting every second or third time is just right. Slowly they will come together, especially if you keep at them daily, if possible, and you will get more and more surprises. I just hope it doesn't excite you too much. It's damnably exciting but this should prove, curiously enough, very restful. Your work at school will benefit, but it will become a secondary importance to your work at home on the automatics. ... My things are very different from any previous painting – richer, if I may say so.¹⁹

The Vancouver watercolours had attracted enough attention in informed circles that Macdonald could write to H.O. McCurry, then director of the National Gallery of Canada, of the possibility of their being seen more widely shortly after his arrival in Calgary.²⁰ As it happened, Dr. Grace Morley offered a show of his paintings,

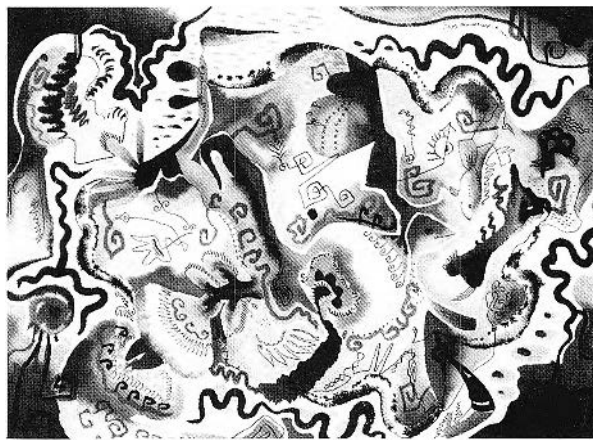


FIGURE 5. J.W.G. Macdonald, *Russian Fantasy*, 1946. Watercolour and ink on paper, 24.5 × 34.9 cm. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).

including forty-eight watercolours, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Macdonald confided to Nan Cheney:

My one man show is coming off in San Francisco in August [1947]. I am now fussing about getting my stuff away. I thought that August would be a poor month but I see that Henry Moore has a show in the same gallery, at the same time. So he should draw a crowd.²¹

The exhibition was well received. Colin Graham, who was then living in San Francisco, was so struck by a newspaper review and illustration that he determined to see the exhibition. It contained exclusively automatic works from 1945-46 (Fig. 4) and imagery which would dominate the works of the following decade. Most of the watercolours were exceedingly small – often only 4¹/₂ by 9³/₄ inches – while the titles of the paintings give some idea of their content: *Arctic Vibrations*, *Fish and Birds*, *Marine Fantasy*, *Fish and Pollywog*, *Bird Romance*, *Russian Fantasy* (Fig. 5), *Prehistoric World*, *Leaf Composition*; or of their appearance: *Colour Forms*, *Crimson-Black*, *Abstract-Vermillion Centre*, and *Abstract-Lines and Spaces*.

When Macdonald moved to Toronto and the Ontario College of Art later that year, he arranged through the good offices of a friend for the San Francisco exhibition to be shown at the

18 J.W.G. Macdonald to Marion Nicoll, 3 October 1948, McCord Museum.

19 J.W.G. Macdonald to Marion Nicoll, 21 October 1948, McCord Museum.

20 J.W.G. Macdonald to H.O. McCurry, 7 September 1946, National Gallery of Canada.

21 J.W.G. Macdonald to Nan Cheney, 27 June 1947, National Gallery of Canada.

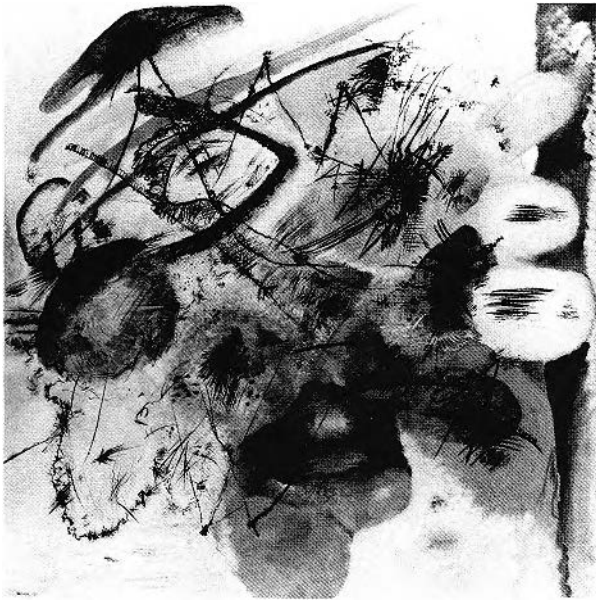


FIGURE 6. Wassily Kandinsky, *Black Lines*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 132.6 × 133.2 cm. New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (Photo: Robert F. Mates).

University of Toronto's Hart House (9–30 November 1947). It should be noted that Macdonald's work was not entirely free from the influence of contemporary movements in art other than Surrealism. He had received a Mondrian text from Grace Morley before leaving Vancouver, and Frank Palmer recalls that Macdonald seemed to be taken with the Bauhaus paintings of Klee and Kandinsky in particular during the year in Calgary.²² Whatever the personal style and imagery employed, the San Francisco paintings evince both the whimsical and geometric aspects of the Bauhaus paintings. Macdonald placed a reproduction of Kandinsky's *Black Lines* (Fig. 6) in his painting classroom, and students at the Ontario College of Art recall being referred to Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.²³ Such works as *Petit Landscape* (1950) indicate Macdonald well understood Kandinsky's concerns. Still, by and all the automatic influence prevailed.

The artist's wife, Barbara, was instrumental in encouraging Jock's work on the automatics as she had been in earlier stages of his development. In Toronto they would gravitate to the brightest lit space in their basement apartment, the kitchen.

²² Frank Palmer to the author, autumn 1978.

²³ Interviews of Alex Millar and Henri Van Bentum by the author, autumn 1978 and 11 February 1980.

²⁴ Colin Graham, interview with the author, February 1978.

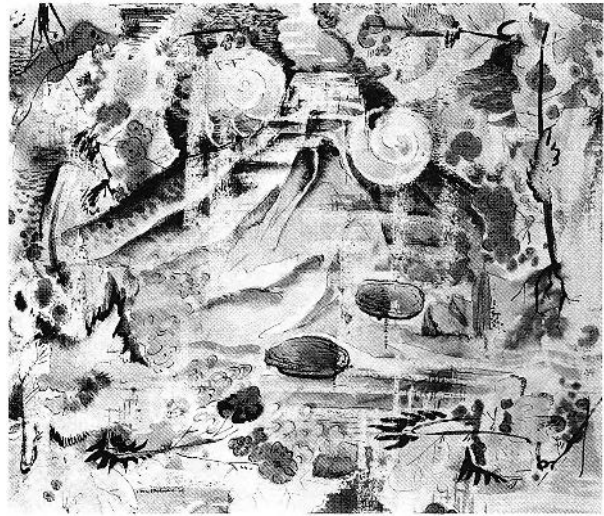


FIGURE 7. J.W.G. Macdonald, *The Magic Mountain*, 1949. Watercolour on paper, 37.7 × 45.5 cm. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).



FIGURE 8. J.W.G. Macdonald, *The Witch*, 1948. Watercolour and ink on paper, 38.7 × 46.7 cm. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).

Colin Graham, who would later host Macdonald as guest artist in the summer of 1952 at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, recalled Jock's account of this creative process:

He and Barbara would sit in the kitchen at night and Barbara would turn on the radio and Jock would just start fooling around with watercolours. Things would come out in the process. I gathered it was helped by Barbara who kept his conscious mind on what he was doing so that the automatic process was really working and he would keep talking to Barbara and still dream. This is one of the things that impressed me very much.²⁴

Later, ink and paint would be applied to embellish areas of pure colour, often extracting from

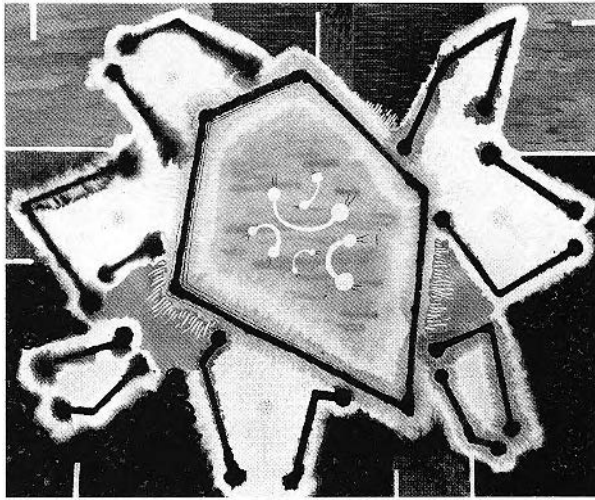


FIGURE 10. J.W.G. Macdonald, *Nature's Pattern*, ca. 1954. Gouache (watercolour?) and ink on paper, 39 × 46.8 cm. Oshawa, Robert McLaughlin Gallery (Photo: Peter W. Richardson).



FIGURE 9. J.W.G. Macdonald, Page from Notebook for Lecture 'Symbolism in Decoration.' Toronto, Private Collection (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).

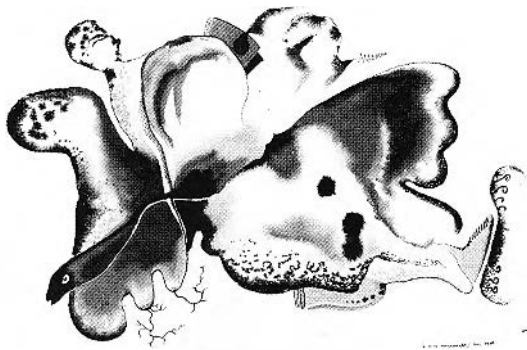


FIGURE 11. J.W.G. Macdonald, *The Butterfly*, 1946. Watercolour with black ink on paper, 25.2 × 35.4 cm. Oshawa, Robert McLaughlin Gallery (Photo: Peter W. Richardson, courtesy Robert McLaughlin Gallery).

the abstract shapes, a personal poetic vocabulary (Figs. 7, 8).

Within the automatics as a whole, certain calligraphic designs recur with some frequency, creating a strange contradiction between the openness of the underlying painted surface and the superimposed motifs. In these motifs, there is residual evidence of some subconscious reflections related to Macdonald's study of the historical significance of ancient symbols resulting from his experience in design. Amongst the fish, birds, and childhood images which constantly reappear in his art are scattered symbols and hieroglyphs which are discussed in detail in Macdonald's notes on 'Symbolism in Decoration' (Fig. 9).²⁵ Yet

it is clear that such motifs were generally used without any regard to their historical meaning, just as there is seldom a correlation between intention and imagery within the abstract context he developed. As late as 1952, he was to define the aim of creating pictures as taking free units and decorating an area of bounded space so that the pattern and the space relationships made by the pattern balanced, or, as he puts it, 'the design must balance [but] also the background.'²⁶

These works are as a rule somewhat larger than those from the period 1945-46, usually around fourteen by eighteen inches. In most instances they are exquisitely orchestrated, with the simplicity of layering of wash on wash, or of ink enhancing painterly shapes, belying the intuitive organization of the elements of colour and line with the blank paper. Occasionally, a predetermined design is reflected in a visible lack of freshness or a more mechanical construction. (In fact, there is evidence that several works, such as *Nature's Pattern* (ca. 1954, Fig. 10) arose from previously composed sketches.) Such paintings as *The Butterfly* (Fig. 11) and *Petit Landscape* are rich washes of colour with much white paper showing

25 J.W.G. Macdonald, 'Symbolism in Decoration,' unpublished notes in a private collection.

26 J.W.G. Macdonald, 'Art in Relation to Nature,' unpublished lecture notes in the collection of M. Westlake Kuczer.



FIGURE 12. J.W.G. Macdonald, *Untitled*, Summer 1951. Batik on cotton, 96 × 98 cm. Toronto, Private Collection (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).

to offset the elegance of a central composition. In others, such as *Eastern Dancers*, the whole surface of the paper is worked, sometimes loosely, and sometimes as if designing a rhythmic or repeat pattern. In this, Macdonald's previous training in fabric design re-emerges. He had often reminisced to students how he had been expected to produce hundreds of different and complex designs for embroidered net curtains, tapestries, and carpets.²⁷ These concerns are merged here with his fascination with the motifs and patterns of paintings and batiks he had seen in the Indonesian Museum in Holland in 1949, where he was impressed by their world of playfulness, fantasy, and colour.

It is virtually impossible to date the majority of the automatic paintings by either subject or style. Throughout the ten years in which this technique was used extensively, surface treatment varies from open to closed, while iconographical sources recur intermittently or in some instances continually. Some of these may be traced. Birds figure in both the earliest and the last automatic paintings, likely because Macdonald's grandfather was an amateur ornithologist. Macdonald often embellished his signature with a small bird, perhaps as an analogy to the creative force.

27 J.W.G. Macdonald, 'The Ever Open Book in the Matter of Design,' *The USDA Yearbook*, 11 (June 1927), 47.

28 'The Canadian Film Awards,' *Canadian Art*, vi (Summer 1949), 145-47, annotated by Macdonald.

29 William Scott, interview with the author, 14 March 1979.

According to his twin sister, fish were yet another childhood love, to the point that the muddy environment near their home often gave his mother cause for concern. The San Francisco exhibition, with its multitudes of fish, lies roughly half-way between *Fish Family* of 1943, perhaps the first semi-automatic painting, and the *Angel Fish* of 1952, where the motif is centrally located.

The Indonesian Museum in Amsterdam provided an ongoing source of imagery after his first visit there in 1949, as we have seen. Perhaps recognizing their affinity with automatism, he also admired the free-form calligraphy and spontaneous images of Norman MacLaren's drawings on film, particularly the fact that MacLaren, through drawing, was able to create his own film's soundtrack.²⁸ On his return from the Netherlands via London, Macdonald had seen the work of Graham Sutherland at the Tate Gallery. (He was to keep until his death a 1952 issue of *Canadian Art* magazine with reproductions of two of Sutherland's thorn paintings.) At Banff that summer, a co-faculty member, British artist William Scott, brought along a collection of lithographs, several of these being recent Sutherland works, and during that time Macdonald produced his only lithograph, the automatic *Polynesian Night*, on Maxwell Bates's stone coffee table in Calgary.²⁹ Its thorny and harsh forms are quite atypical of Macdonald and must reflect these immediate contacts. Further sources for subjects included plants and abstracted natural forms,

FIGURE 13. J.W.G. Macdonald, *Revolving Shapes*. Watercolour and wax resist on paper, 25.6 × 25.6 cm. Victoria, Private Collection (Photo: Trevor Mills).



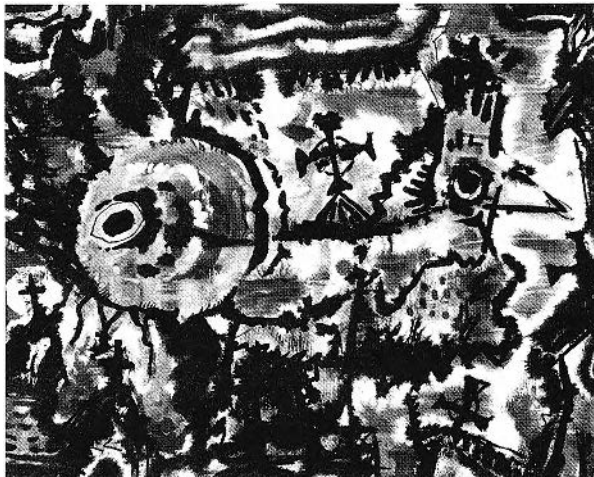


FIGURE 14. J.W.G. Macdonald, *Fabric of Dreams*, 1952. Watercolour on paper, 35.3 × 45.4 cm. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).

perhaps dating from his reading around 1932 of Karl Blossfeldt's *Art Forms in Nature*.³⁰ From his interest in the universality of natural forms, Macdonald was led to show, in random order, slides of microscopic details (acid drops, for example) and modern paintings to students and to public audiences, delighting in his ability to confound his viewers, or rather, relishing their inability to distinguish between nature's abstractions and those of modern artists.³¹ But whatever the motif, the wax-resist works which follow his experimentation with batiks during the summer of 1951 (Fig. 12) show a new approach to the methodology of automatism. In paintings such as *Revolving Shapes* (Fig. 13), the paintings are done in transparent watercolour over a drawing composed (or sketched in) with coloured wax crayons or paraffin, so that the underlying structure provides a basis for painterly effects.

In *Fabric of Dreams* (Fig. 14) and *Scent of a Summer Garden*, coloured inks are used to achieve a fluid and excitingly rich surface. Although relatively few of the 'automatics' were sold during the years 1943-1952, automatic painting dominated Macdonald's oeuvre. Barbara Macdonald remembers portfolios of them at their home at 23 Millbank, Toronto, and parties at which guests drew lots to see who would have first choice from them. Still other paintings were traded with students and friends.

An exhibition of modern art at the Willistead Art Gallery, Windsor, provided a platform for Macdonald to summarize his beliefs about abstract art as of 1954. His notes indicate to what degree automatism represented to him a



FIGURE 15. J.W.G. Macdonald, *Untitled (Fish Fantasy)*, ca. 1948. Oil on canvas, 68.6 × 83.8 cm. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).

technique permitting expression of the ideals motivating his art:

Our concepts about nature, space and time have brought into being a new form of consciousness. The abstract artist is expressing his *inner vision* of this new form of awareness.³²

When larger paintings were required for group exhibitions in these years, Macdonald submitted those oils, few in number, which had successfully developed out of the watercolour automatics. Of these, *Ocean Legend* (1947) and the untitled fish fantasy (1948; Fig. 15) are automatic in spirit. Other successful oils of the period, such as *Bird and Environment* and *Hummingbird and Environment*, were paintings which Macdonald exhibited frequently. These were derived from watercolour models, but lack the flow and spontaneity the artist sought, retaining a structured, almost Cubist organizational format. During several weeks in 1948 and 1949 at the studio of Hans Hofmann in Provincetown, Massachusetts, Hofmann invariably criticized Macdonald's restrained and inhibited oils, as opposed to the brilliance of the watercolours. The problem was not a simple one, for the automatic manipulations facilitated by watercolour were not easily transferable to oils. No immediate answer appeared and Macdonald began exploration of other ap-

30 Karl Blossfeldt, *Art Forms in Nature* (London, 1932).

31 Thelma Van Alstyne to the author, October 1978.

32 J.W.G. Macdonald, 'Artists' notes on Abstract Painting' (January 1954), Willistead Art Gallery.

proaches to the recalcitrant medium. Increasingly overwhelmed with doubt as to the quality of his work and its merits, Macdonald threatened to tear everything up and start anew. The transition, and the solution, came between 1951 and 1956. During 1954-55, a Canadian Government fellowship afforded travel to Europe and a period of painting exclusive of any other responsibilities.³³

In Venice, Macdonald met Jean Dubuffet, who was drawn to the openness and freedom of the Canadian artist's work. Dubuffet's verdict was that if Macdonald could find some medium which would allow the degree of self-expression in oils that he had reached in watercolour, he could achieve greatness. Upon returning to Toronto, with this encouragement in mind and with information about new media and, in particular, Lucite 44, Macdonald commenced translating the immediacy of the surrealist-automatic watercolours into abstract paintings of growing majesty

and strength. Like his American contemporaries of a decade previous, he retained the automatic technique suggested by Surrealism, but abandoned the mythical, poetic, or referential subject. Instead, he used the technique *per se* as a source for reaching deeper levels of inspiration and expression. The fluidity of the new medium and increased scale permitted Macdonald to exchange complicated patterns and biomorphic creatures for pure passages of colour and fine tonal control.

The discovery – and mastery – of Lucite 44 and oil in 1956 doubtless proved for Macdonald the means of attaining 'the universal truth of all-relating harmony ... an expression of order, relation, union and unity,'³⁴ which he had long sought. This means of fulfilment was possible in large measure through Macdonald's crucial encounter with Grace Pailthorpe in Vancouver many years earlier. After this encounter, Macdonald's subject matter had, through the automatic technique, become the inner rather than the outer landscape, permitting the artist to discover a new embodiment for the spiritual, transcendental reality which he sought to express.

³³ Macdonald's correspondence from this trip abroad is discussed in the following article.

³⁴ J.W.G. Macdonald, 'Art in Relation to Nature,' 7.