

Celebrating the Art of the Ottawa River Watershed

17 December 2004 Lynn Jones

The Ottawa River watershed is a place of great natural beauty. The majestic Ottawa itself flows over 1000 km from its source in the wilderness of north-western Quebec, with at least 10 major tributaries: wild and beautiful rivers such as the Madawaska, Petawawa, Dumoine, Coulonge, Black, Gatineau, and Lievre; and less wild but still beautiful rivers such as the Bonnechere, Rideau and South Nation. There are vast, wild expanses of forest as well, including large swaths of boreal spruces and many wonderful pine and hardwood forests and glades. Countless are the places in the watershed where a connection to the great mystery lies very close indeed.

It is no surprise then that the Ottawa River watershed has been a source of inspiration for artists dating from thousands of years back. One significant example of ancient art, dating from at least 3,000 years ago, is Oiseau Rock or Migizi Kiishkaabikaan, as it is called in Algonquin language. Situated on a cliff on the Ottawa River, Oiseau Rock is a sacred pictograph site. The Algonquin today describe it as a beautiful, powerful, place where the earth's energy is exposed and where the pictographs represent their ancient traditional understanding of the spiritual and physical landscape. (Ken Swayze, Canadian Museum of Civilization).

Perhaps the most famous modern painter to draw inspiration from the watershed was Tom Thompson. Thompson painted many beautiful images in Algonquin Park, most of which is in the watershed. One of his most famous paintings, "The Jack Pine", was inspired by the shores of Grand Lake, near Achray in 1916. About this painting, a curator at the National Gallery wrote that it is "an icon embodying the spirit of the land and the Canadian experience of nature".

In the early to mid-1900's, most, if not all members of the Group of Seven painted extensively in the Ottawa River watershed. Scenes included the countryside outside of Montreal (A.Y. Jackson and J.E.H. MacDonald), the more northerly wilderness near Mattawa (Franklin Carmichael and J.E.H. MacDonald), the south-eastern edge of the watershed in Bancroft (A.J. Casson) and Algonquin Park, to which members were introduced by Tom Thompson. In later years, many of the group frequently visited the Combermere area for some autumn painting. In the '50s and early '60s, A.Y. Jackson made a number of paintings around Lake Clear and the Opeongo Line when visiting a friend at his Lake Clear cottage.

Earlier examples of watershed art include a number of paintings by Frances Anne Hopkins, a British woman who painted detailed, naturalistic canoe scenes as she traveled through the watershed in a Voyageur canoe with her husband, an inspector for the Hudson's Bay Company. One of her most famous paintings, "Shooting the Rapids", can be viewed on the Museum of Civilization website. Many other 1800's era paintings from the watershed depicting early life and scenes of nature on the Ottawa and its tributaries are contained in the National Archives of Canada.

Drawing inspiration from the Ottawa River watershed today are legions of contemporary artists working in all kinds of media from wood and metal to paint and paper, often incorporating elements of nature in their designs.

Hoping in a small way to increase appreciation for the works of watershed artists and make their works available to a wider audience, the Ottawa River Institute (ORI) has recently launched an on-line art gallery of contemporary works from the Ottawa River watershed. The gallery can be viewed at www.ottawariverinstitute.ca.

Another aim of the ORI gallery is to increase appreciation for the majestic Ottawa River watershed itself. In the words of one of the gallery's on-line artists, Kathrin Winkler of Morrison Island, "The arts open a door to seeing and cherishing the beauty that surrounds us - and if that door is opened wide enough we will strive to protect that life-giving gift of river and sky."

The ORI gallery currently contains work from painters Kathrin Winkler, John Macgillivray, John Bateson and John Almstedt, and photographer and hand-made paper artist Edith Hanatschek. Original paintings and archival quality prints are available for purchase through the website, with a portion of the proceeds going to support the Ottawa River Institute's programs and activities. Original paintings and prints are also on display at Purvis Gallery and Framing in downtown Pembroke.

Lynn Jones is a founding member of the Ottawa River Institute, a non-profit, charitable organization based in the Ottawa Valley. ORI gratefully acknowledges the support of the Ontario Trillium Foundation and private donors for the creation of the Watershed Gallery.