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Largest gift of cultural properties in University of Lethbridge history given by Dr. Margaret (Marmie) Perkins Hess

Collection includes works by the Group of Seven, Tom Thomson, European and Indigenous artists

The University of Lethbridge Art Gallery today unveils an unparalleled bequest of more than 1,000 works of art valued between \$4 and \$5 million from the estate of Dr. Margaret (Marmie) Perkins Hess (DFA '04).

“This is the largest gift of art and cultural properties to the U of L in its 51-year history,” says Dr. Mike Mahon, U of L president and vice-chancellor. “We are honoured to become the home for these iconic works of art. Marmie was truly a renaissance woman; she was highly educated and committed to the arts, education and the community.”

The diverse collection is like a hidden treasure — most of the works haven’t been seen in public since Hess acquired them, including *Cliffs Near Petawawa* by Tom Thomson, a contemporary of the Group of Seven. It alone is valued at more than \$1 million. The collection also contains more than 400 works by Indigenous artists, primarily Inuit and Northwest Coast First Nations.

“It was important to Marmie that her collection be open and accessible to the broadest audiences possible and also be used to support education, teaching and research. Given these wishes, we find it so satisfying that the Hess collection has found a new home at the U of L,” say Dale Boniface and Richard Haskayne, co-executors of the Hess estate. “Recognized nationally for the quality of its art collection and the standard of care and stewardship it provides to the collection, we take great comfort in knowing that Marmie would be absolutely thrilled with the new home and plans for her collection.”

Together, these works help tell the story of Canadian art in the 20th century from both settler and Indigenous perspectives. A.Y. Jackson, a member of the Group of Seven and a personal friend, advised Hess on her Canadian art purchases, which include works by Lawren Harris and Emily Carr. Another friend, the late photographer Roloff Beny, advised Hess on her purchases of international art, which include artists such as Picasso and Chagall.

“Marmie had a really good eye and she was ahead of her time with her strong interest in learning from Indigenous people and their art,” says Dr. Josephine Mills, U of L Art Gallery director and curator and Fine Arts professor. “This collection is an amazing addition for us.”

The U of L Art Gallery, in addition to renaming the main gallery space as the Dr. Margaret (Marmie) Perkins Hess Gallery, will focus on researching the works and providing access to them through exhibitions and public programs.

“The U of L Art Gallery is the perfect home for this gift because of our emphasis on creating in-depth engagement for students, scholars and the public,” says Mills.

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Backgrounder

Margaret (Marmie) Perkins Hess, a community leader, internationally recognized art historian and lecturer, businesswoman, rancher and philanthropist, was born in Calgary on May 3, 1916, an only child whose father was president of the Revelstoke Sawmill Company. She attended high school in Calgary and began her post-secondary education at the University of Alberta in 1934. Hess completed a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Toronto in 1938 and post-graduate studies at the University of Iowa in 1947. During her time in Toronto, she met several members of the Group of Seven and they encouraged her love of art.

During the Second World War, she returned to Alberta to teach art history at what are now the Alberta College of Art and Design and the Banff Centre, replacing male instructors who had enlisted. When she lived in Banff, she hosted parties that were attended by the likes of A.Y. Jackson and Lawren Harris. Hess may have met the renowned Canadian photographer, Roloff Beny, during this time. They became lifelong friends and, following Beny’s death in 1984, Hess served on an advisory committee to his estate that determined his collection should come to the U of L.

In the 1950s, Hess travelled extensively in the Canadian north. These journeys, and later visits to the West Coast, inspired her love of Indigenous art. In 1970, Hess opened Calgary Galleries Ltd., which was one of the first galleries in Canada to showcase Indigenous art. Recognized as a world authority on Inuit and First Nations art, she willingly shared her knowledge with students and scholars.

Hess was made an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1993 for her research, writing, exhibitions and lectures on Canadian Indigenous art. She also received many other awards, including the Alberta Order of Excellence and the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee medal. In 2004, the U of L awarded Hess with an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts, one of several honorary degrees she received from universities.

Generous with her time and expertise, Hess supported students through scholarship and endowment funds and she volunteered on many community organizations, including the U of L Senate and the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede. She was appointed by then-premier Peter Lougheed to the Kananaskis Citizens Advisory Committee tasked with developing a provincial park for the 1988 Winter Olympics. Hess was given an honorary membership in the Ranchmen's Club long before the organization officially allowed women to join in the early 1990s.

Hess passed away on Sept. 2, 2016 at 100 years of age.