

ARTS&LIFE

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Lost and found

Women's Art Association rescues
1888 painting by co-founder



REGINA
HAGGO
OPINION

This is a story about a forgotten painting. It has a happy ending.

The painting in question, "Summer, Poppies," was created in 1888 by Clara Elizabeth Galbreath, a local artist who was one of the founders of the Women's Art Association of Hamilton. The painting was loaned out by the association in 1943 to a nursing residence.

Years later, it was found in a storage room — and almost disappeared forever.

Karen Logan, the current president of the WAAH, came to the rescue.

"I was contacted recently by a representative at the organization asking if we wanted it back. They found it in a storage room in really rough shape and almost threw it out until they saw the label on the back saying we had loaned it to them," she says. "I never hesitated to say yes when asked if WAAH wanted the painting back."

Logan got in touch with Tobi Bruce, the chief curator at the Art Gallery of Hamilton. As it happens, the AGH had another floral painting by Galbreath, who worked with oil and watercolour and painted on china.

"I think the biggest challenge was the learning process needed for such an undertaking," Logan tells me. "Tobi Bruce helped me by explaining how to find restorationists and get the recommended three estimates. Then I had to make the decision on who would do the work and how we would pay for it."

"The easiest thing for me was knowing it was the right thing to do. The painting is wonderful and there was no question that it had to be restored and given to the AGH."

McMaster Gallery Custom Framing in Dundas took on the challenge of cleaning and repairing the painting and its frame. Guennadi Kalinine, the gallery's conservator, says it took him about four weeks to complete the restoration. The upper part of the painting seemed to have suffered the most damage.

He says he began by inspecting the painting.



Brenda McCafferty, "Field of Hope," acrylic on canvas.

"I photographed the damaged areas, removed dust and secured tears and cracks on the painting's surface with rice cigarette paper. Then I removed it from the stretcher."

This 137-year-old oil was not Kalinine's earliest restoration assignment. He says he's cleaned some portraits that could go back to the 18th century.

Galbreath's "Summer, Poppies" is a gorgeously lifelike and gorgeously proper work for a 19th-century woman artist in Canada. This was a time when women were expected to fully embrace domesticity, and women artists were encouraged to take on feminine subjects such as flowers and images of women.

Galbreath's poppies grow outdoors and come in several colours and heights. She includes numerous flower buds and seed pods as well as blooms, producing the kind of naturalistic variety that 19th-century viewers admired.

A recognizable message was good, too. So portraying the poppies at different life stages is a traditional way of conveying nature's ability to renew itself. A well-loved floral painting also offers an appeal to the senses like sight, smell and touch.

The painting is now on show at the AGH as a focal point for the WAAH's 130th annual juried exhibition, "Messages from Nature: Then and Now." Logan suggested that members take inspiration from Galbreath's painting and create work that captures nature's beauty.

There are 24 artists working in a variety of styles and techniques, including painting, photography,



Clara Elizabeth Galbreath (1864-1941), "Summer, Poppies," 1888, oil on canvas.



Margaret Pardy, "Evening, Blue Heron," ink on scratchboard.

printmaking and drawing. Here are three examples from an impressive lineup of florals and landscapes.

Brenda McCafferty follows in Galbreath's footsteps in "Field of Hope." That is, she focuses on poppies growing outdoors. But she simplifies her flowers using broad brush strokes loaded with red and green paint to hint at blooms and leaves rather than depict them in a more mimetic way. She restricts her palette by sticking to reds and greens in the distant landscape.

In "Garden Path," Patty Lynes also takes to the outdoors, offering part of a vibrantly hued garden filled with flowers and shrubs, all painted in a loosely representational style. An expansive conifer in the background grows tall beyond the picture space.

Margaret Pardy's "Evening, Blue Heron," executed on scratchboard, is stunning both technically and compositionally. The heron is fro-

zen in flight, seemingly as still as when it stands watching for prey. Drawing on scratchboard involves scratching away a black coating to reveal white underneath.

Pardy has enriched the scene in a restrained way, as befits the evening setting, by adding a bit of colour in the vegetation and the heron's beak and eye.

Admission to the Fischer Gallery is free.

REGINA HAGGO IS AN ART HISTORIAN, PUBLIC SPEAKER, CURATOR, YOUTUBE VIDEO MAKER AND FORMER PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY IN NEW ZEALAND.

130TH ANNUAL EXHIBITION

Who Women's Art Association of Hamilton
Where Fischer Gallery, Art Gallery of Hamilton, 123 King St. W., Hamilton
When Until Feb. 1, 2026
Website artgalleryofhamilton.com



DOUGLAS HAGGO PHOTOS

Patty Lynes, "Garden Path," acrylic on canvas.

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