

**William Kurelek and his Connection
with St. Stephen's-on-the-Hill U.C.
Mississauga, Ontario**



Graham Segger

Tuesday, June 5, 2018

-This painting by William Kurelek with St. Stephen's in the background is titled "Suburban Church". It was created in 1965

-It shows the church as it looked prior to the 1983 addition and with the parking lot still on the south side

My plan today is threefold:

- 1) To provide a brief overview of the fascinating life of William Kurelek
- 2) To introduce you to a cross section of his paintings, and
- 3) To discuss this particular painting and the gospel reading which inspired it

Dmytro and William Kurelek late 1940s



-One of Kurelek's biographers, Patricia Morley, has described his life as "one of the strangest stories ever told"

-His father Dmytro was a Ukrainian immigrant farmer who struggled to raise and support his family in Western Canada

-William was born in 1927 on a small farm in Alberta. He grew up during the hard depression years helping his family plough fields in Alberta then tend dairy cattle in Manitoba

-He graduated with a 3 year BA from University of Manitoba then spent one term at Ontario College of Art before moving to Alberta

-William worked summers as a lumber jack and many other labour intensive jobs to fund university and his later travel to Mexico and Europe

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man - 1950



-Kurelek identified with the young Stephen Dedalus, fictional alter ego of James Joyce in his books Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man and Ulysses. Like Kurelek, Dedalus was sensitive, bullied, observant, drawn to art and immigrated to a foreign land from his home.

-He also identified with Van Gogh

-Kurelek saw himself as "an enigmatic figure, a dramatic figure." His sister called him "the first hippie."

-This painting created in Edmonton in 1950 achieved the highest price ever paid at auction for one of Kurelek's paintings - \$531,000 in 2016

Early Health Struggles

- William was a quiet and sensitive boy who felt emotionally abused by his father and was bullied at school
- Had early vision issues which developed into periods of near blindness and excruciating pain. He would draw with one eye closed — and then the other — as a way of rationing the pain. Soon, he was hooked on pills and his mood swings became more pronounced.
- 1951-52 – self-admits himself to Maudsley Psychiatric Hospital in London, England as resident and then out-patient
- 1953-55 – Netherne Mental Hospital, Surrey where he enrolled in the art therapy program and developed many of his stylistic techniques - attempts suicide
- Paranoia about the potential for nuclear war led him later in life to plan and partially build bomb shelters in both Toronto and Combermere - convinced that the world was about to end in a nuclear blaze of Biblical fury

-Also worked as a track layer for London Transport while in England and sold his first major painting – Tramlines

-was diagnosed with depersonalization, a condition he described as a “trance handicap” that left him feeling that “reality was not concrete enough...to be convincing.”

-As a love token, Kurelek gifted one of his pieces to an occupational therapist, Margaret Smith, then swallowed eight sleeping pills and slashed his arms and face with a razor blade in a failed suicide attempt. Fourteen treatments of electroconvulsive therapy followed, leaving him dazed, disoriented, and suffering significant memory loss. It was “like being executed fourteen times over,” he wrote.

The Maze - 1953



This very complex painting was executed at Maudsley Hospital in England as a depiction of the inside of his skull to illustrate the many dark thoughts which were tormenting him at the time

This was Kurelek's way of showing his doctors what their job was. He writes, in his autobiography, "Now clean me out, I challenge you scientists, and put me back together again - a happy, balanced, mature, fulfilled personality. Lift that rat out and unwind him and let him run free!"¹

Style

- Influences – While in Europe in the 1950s he studied the work of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder who became his most important influences, joining other unsettling artists like Francis Bacon and Francisco Goya.
- Unique style of outlining the drawing with a ballpoint pen, using coloured pencils for texture and adding details in pen.
- Careful examination of his drawings reveals images full of realism with minute details of things like cots, clothes and even insects
- Throughout his career Kurelek preferred to paint on panels (often Masonite)

These hard Masonite panels allowed him to paint with precision and work the surface with pencil or strategically scrape away paint to render texture and detail. The panels also allowed him to easily prepare supports of unusual proportions or edit unsatisfactory portions of paintings by sawing them off. (Source - Loch Gallery website)

Influences

Hieronymus Bosch



Pieter Bruegel the Elder



Bosch – Surreal, fantastical imagery – 1450-1516 - Dutch

-The Garden of Earthly Delights - 1510

-The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things (attributed to Bosch)

Bruegel – 1525-1569 - Dutch

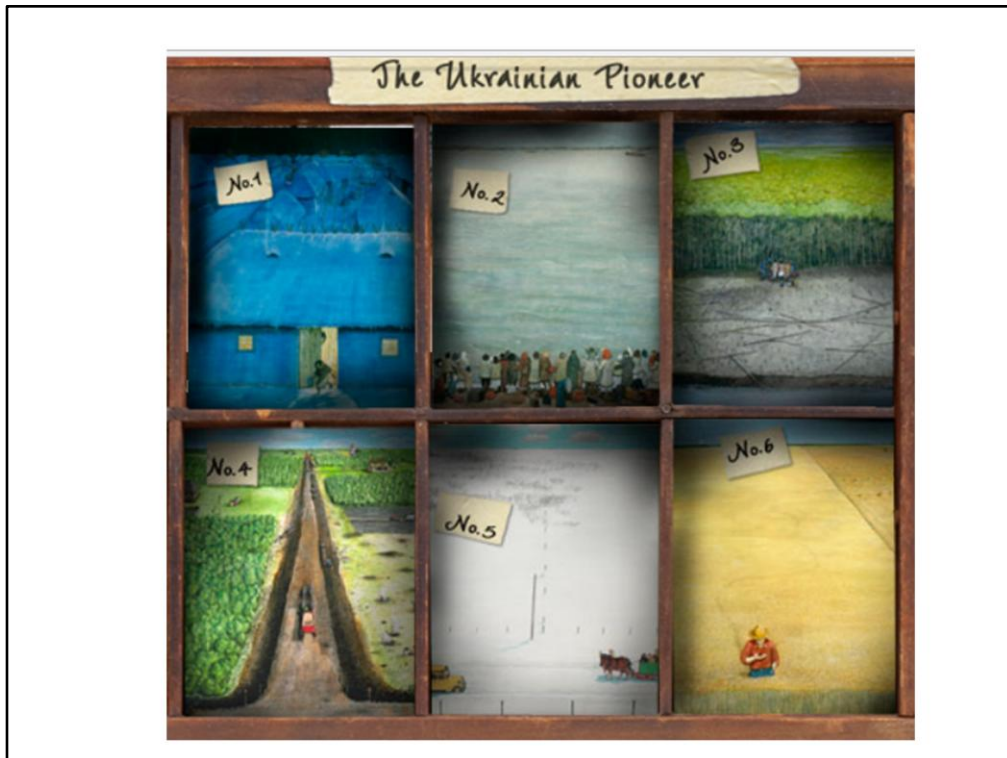
-Winter Landscape with Skaters and Bird Trap - 1565

-Triumph of Death - 1562

Example of Trompe d'œile – 1950s



His trompe d'œil paintings of the 1950s are fine renderings of plain things that tease us with the illusion of money for the taking, and appeal because our senses are fooled into thinking the crinkled paper and fisherman's fly will rustle and jab if we get too close. They show Kurelek's early promise, virtuosity and humour that remained as his career developed in the early 1960s and his technique evolved to accommodate increased demand and his drive to create. (Gregory Humeniuk, Toronto, August 2016)



The body of Kurelek's work alternates between farm scenes of innocence and wonder, apocalyptic visions of the end of the world and biblical stories involving lessons of morality. Sometimes disturbing, sometimes naïve and joyous, his work is extremely personal and moving.

National Gallery – 1971/76 – transfer from Houses of Parliament

Winter Play



Children Making Snow Angels (1967)



Rink Making (1971)



Canadian Storm Trooper (1974)



Making a Snowman



Children Playing in the Snowbank



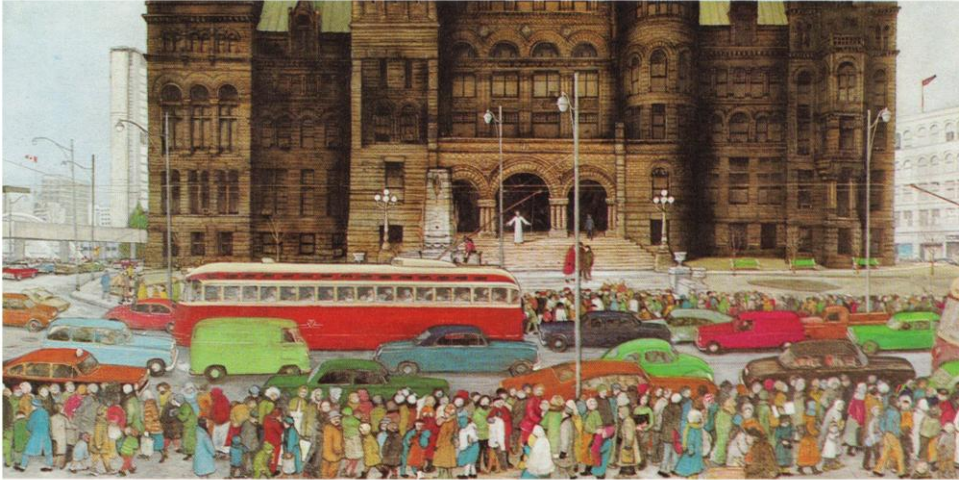
Rink Making in Manitoba

Kurelek wrote and illustrated many children's books such as "*A Prairie Boys Summer*" and "*A Prairie Boys Winter*". He had a plan to do girl's versions before his untimely death. *A Prairie Boy's Winter* and *Lumberjack*, won the New York Times award for best illustrated children's book of the year in 1975.

He also provided the illustrations for other authors works such as W.O. Mitchell's *Who has Seen the Wind*.

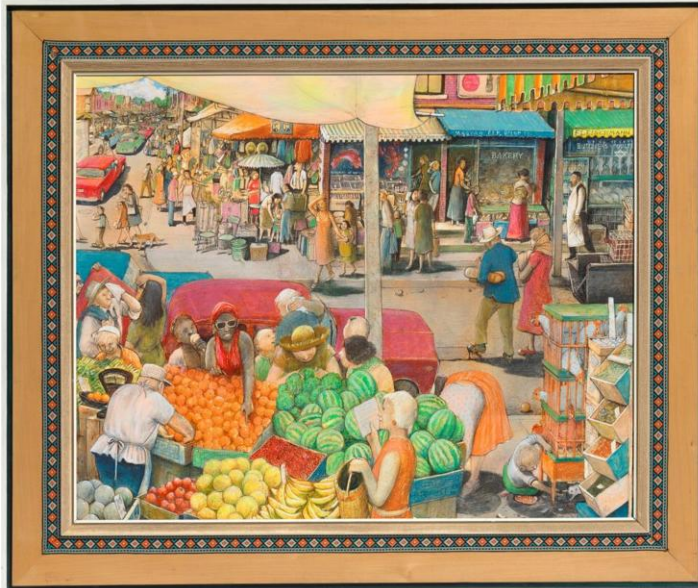
I particularly like the top right image of the Canadian Storm Trooper – Trump beware!

Toronto, Toronto



That is Jesus on the steps, ignored by the masses hurrying past

Hot Day in Kensington Market



-Part of Kurelek's O Toronto series

-Notice the framing which WK would do himself - His "day job" from 1960-1970 was working as an art framer for his agent and gallery owner Av Isaacs

-This painting was sold on May 29, 2018 for the second highest price ever for a Kurelek painting of \$472,000

Harvest of Our Mere Humanist Years



1972 from his Toronto series – typical of some of his more surreal paintings

In the painting [*Harvest of Our Mere Humanism Years*](#) the artist weaves several dystopian motifs current at the time of his working (1972) into a composition that is truly fantastical.

The giant hollow grasshopper, pile of books dressed in professorial garb, and green dish containing chocolate replicas of university buildings in the middle distance of this picture express Kurelek's fear that higher education, though valued so highly by millions of Canadian parents, in fact did not aid their children's search for individuality and significance.

The papers and television sets that people are glued to as they wander around the landscape, entirely oblivious to the danger represented by the chasm that has opened up in the ground.

The people queuing around Toronto City Hall, their crowding becoming greater and their burdens heavier the longer they wait, and their waiting simply ending in death, comprise a strong statement of what Kurelek, a faithful Roman Catholic, saw as the futile 'harvest' of modern secularism – a restatement, perhaps, of the theme he had taken up in *Behold Man Without God* (1955).

For Kurelek, the ultimate symbol of this futility was the atomic bomb, here depicted hanging by a thread over City Hall, unnoticed by all bar one person in the throng.

Source - <http://museumofthemind.org.uk/blog/post/shades-of-kurelek-2>

Balsam Avenue After Heavy Snowfall - 1972



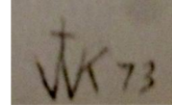
Popular image from his Toronto collection – much more accessible than some of his darker works

Shows William and his four children in the foreground. The composition is as the street would have been seen by his wife Jean from their home

Rev. Bruce McLeod described to me picking up a painting he had commissioned from this house in the early 1970s

Religious Influence

- Raised in the Ukrainian Orthodox church but lost faith and became an atheist as a young man
- Through the influence of a nurse in London WK became interested in Roman Catholicism
- Receives religious instruction in the Roman Catholic Church in London
- Paints the Passion of Christ series based on Matthew
- Painted many Church murals
- Cross motif signature



Kurelek did not initially want to sign his paintings, claiming that he was simply the instrument of God. His agent, Av Isaacs, convinced him to come up with the anagram shown above

While in London, Kurelek wore down the priests with probing theological questions, a restless urgency to establish proof of God's existence. Two encounters sealed the deal: the rigour and eloquence of Thomas Aquinas's systematic theology calmed his skeptical mind, and a pilgrimage to Lourdes warmed his restless heart. His eye pain vanished, the depression receded, and he felt a moral urgency to heal the rift with his father. (Brett Granger, *The Walrus*, 2015)

He famously said "No religion: No Kurelek. And no Kurelek: No farm paintings." He hoped eventually to devote himself entirely to religious subjects. But he remained a pragmatic prophet, striking a deal with his Toronto art dealer, Av Isaacs, to alternate one exhibit of "secular" works with each religious one.

Passion of Christ

Matthew 27:26



AND ABOUT THE NINTH HOUR JESUS CRIED
OUT WITH A LOUD VOICE , ELI , ELI , LAMMA
SABACHTHANI ? THAT IS, MY GOD , MY GOD ,
WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME ?

In 1972 WK exhibited his 160 piece *The Passion of Christ* series at St. Vladimir Institute in Toronto.

Each painting depicted a verse from the New Testament book of St. Matthew

Olha and Mykola Kolankiwsy purchased the entire series for permanent display at the Niagara Falls Art Gallery (on McLeod Road). WK specified that the paintings can never be resold.

St. Thomas More College, Saskatoon



One of many church and public building murals he completed. This one at the University of Saskatchewan

WK Connection to St. Stephens-on-the-Hill

- The connection was through Very Rev. Dr. Bruce McLeod, first minister at SSOTH from 1958-1965, who met WK at the Isaacs Gallery in about 1960. They became friends.
- During the six weeks of Lent in both 1962 and 1963 Rev. McLeod persuaded WK to exhibit paintings from his *The Passion of Christ* series in the Sanctuary
- Rev. McLeod's family, later in 1965, commissioned the Zacchaeus painting with St. Stephens in the background

Rev. McLeod does not have a clear memory of how the commission came about but suspects that his first wife Jewel may have arranged it with Bill Kurelek.



This painting was titled Suburban Church when it sold at Sotheby's in 2003. The seller, Rev. McLeod, does not remember hearing it referred to by this name or any other name prior to the sale

Notice the crab apple tree, the tiny spruce trees (half emerald half olive) beside the path and the parking lot on the south side of the church

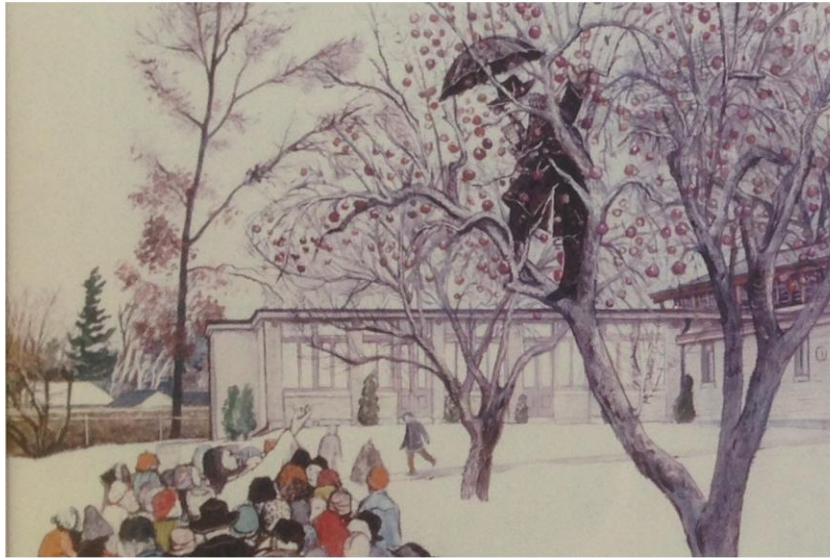
Also Zacchaeus in the tree and Jesus among the parishoners

This painting was displayed as part of a major William Kurelek Exhibition at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa

David Silcox, who grew up in Lorne Park, was the CEO of Sotheby's when the painting was sold for \$30,000 in 2003. Sotheby's had been one of my clients between 1975 and 1987 and I also knew David at the time.

I have arranged for a reproduction of the painting to be printed, framed and hung in the Sandy Grant Room at St. Stephen's on-the-Hill United Church

Jesus & Zacchaeus, Luke 19:5



“And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for today I must abide in thy house”.

In Western Christianity, the gospel pericope concerning Zacchaeus is the reading for a [Dedication](#) of a Church or its anniversary, appropriate perhaps in this 60th anniversary year for St. Stephen's.

Zacchaeus, or **Zaccheus** ([Hebrew](#): “pure”, “innocent”), was a chief [tax-collector](#) at [Jericho](#), mentioned only in the [Gospel of Luke](#). A descendant of [Abraham](#), he was an example of [Jesus](#)' personal, earthly mission to bring salvation to the lost. Tax collectors were despised as traitors (working for the [Roman Empire](#), not for their Jewish community), and as being [corrupt](#).

Because the lucrative production and export of [balsam](#) was centered in Jericho, his position would have carried both importance and wealth. In the account, he arrived before the crowd who were later to meet with [Jesus](#), who was passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. He was short in stature and so was unable to see Jesus through the crowd (Luke 19:3). Zachaeus then ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree along Jesus' path. When Jesus reached the spot he looked up at the sycamore tree (actually a sycamore-fig [ficus sycomorus](#)), addressed Zacchaeus by name, and told him to come down, for he intended to visit his house. The crowd was shocked that Jesus, a religious teacher/prophet, would sully himself by being a guest of a sinner.

Source - Wikipedia

Luke's Gospel, Chapter 19

(New International Version)

1. Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.
2. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.
3. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd.
4. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.
5. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."
6. So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.
7. All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."
8. But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."
9. Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.
10. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Only after reading Luke 19 does the painting make sense

Zacchaeus' Clothing

- Why is Zacchaeus wearing a business suit, hat and umbrella?
- I looked for metaphorical implications but the clothing may just be a current day method to depict a tax collector
- It may also be a nod to his good friend and neighbour on Balsam St., William McElcheran, whose famous bronze sculptures show an eerie resemblance
- It may also have been based on a self image. See how he paints himself on Balsam Street



This McElcheran 15 inch x 11 1/2 inch x 5 1/4 inch sculpture displayed above sold at auction for \$11,000 in November 2015

In the sculpture the umbrella is furled

Rev. McLeod has suggested that perhaps he is portraying the Minister "Up a Tree" yet again

The Family of Man - 1972



This painting was commissioned by Very Rev. Dr. Bruce McLeod, who appears in the foreground of the painting. Jesus is walking on the water in the background

It depicts the sinking ship of the world with a brick wall separating the haves from the have-nots. The back end is sinking, but none will survive.

Rev. McLeod hung this painting in his office for many years and then donated it to Emmanuel College of Victoria University, Toronto in 2007. In his remarks at the dedication ceremony he commented that:

“someone once said artists are God’s spies. They have better eyes and ears than we do. They show us things in God’s world that, without them, we might have missed.”

He goes on to conclude:

“My hope and prayer is that for years to come, some students, passing, may pause before it, linger, and be impaled, as I have been, by the passion of Kurelek’s message, and the good news of the Christ who is coming, and who always sends his spies ahead.”

Kurelek Monument - Manitoba



2015 - Kurelek monument in Manitoba - highways 7 and 67, near Rockwood where he spent a good part of his youth

Rev. McLeod, who first met William Kurelek in 1960, describes him as a shy but a very kind and spiritual man.

He routinely gave away paintings as gifts, lived modestly, and donated generously to a wide variety of charities, particularly those related to the third world. He even purchased the house beside his own in the Beaches for use by refugee families.

Happily he also reconciled with his father in later life.

He died of cancer in 1977 at the age of 50. His body of work included over 2,000 paintings, many murals, countless prints and 11 books which provided an ongoing income for his wife when he passed.

Biographies:

Someone with Me by William Kurelek, 1977 (autobiography)

Kurelek by Patricia Morley, 1986

Breaking Free: The Story of William Kurelek by [May Ebbitt Cutler](#), 2002

William Kurelek: Painter and Prophet by Michael D. O'Brien, 2013