

Bertram Brooker: This Tremendous Arc

Imaginative and inventive, Bertram Brooker (1888-1955) was a British-born Canadian artist of prodigious talent with an insatiable curiosity for all of the arts. His practice, as evidenced in the selection of drawings in *This Tremendous Arc*, invokes the disparate disciplines of literature, drama and music, and looked beyond the immediate context of Canadian art during his era, dominated by the Group of Seven. Deriving inspiration from the European avant-garde, Brooker took stylistic cues from Cubism, Vorticism, Art Deco and Art Nouveau.¹ Working against the popular artistic style of his era—one which championed a heroic understanding of Canadian identity through landscape paintings—Brooker’s practice expanded the breadth and diversity of modern Canadian art.² Although Brooker’s significant contributions to the arts were largely overlooked by his contemporaries, his legacy grows increasingly relevant in the contemporary moment as artists embrace multi-hyphenate practices. These drawings from the MacLaren’s Permanent Collection present Brooker’s grand vision that art is intertextual, porous and always anticipating an emergent future that reflects on the momentous past.

Often described as “a man of all the arts,”³ Bertram Brooker was a multifaceted artist and the roles that defined him—art critic, novelist, poet, essayist, playwright, screenwriter, amateur actor, choir singer, copywriter and adman—profoundly inspired his visual practice. *This Tremendous Arc* illuminates one aspect of Brooker’s prolific career. Inspired by canonical literature, his ink and pencil illustrations in this exhibition embody the syncretic nature of his practice. Spanning three decades of artistic production, the works tread between realist and non-objective representations, encompassing Brooker’s re-imaginings of literary masterpieces, among them the Book of Kings from the Old Testament (c. 960–c. 560 BCE), Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) and Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866). These haunting illustrations narrate the tragedies and triumphs found in their written counterparts. The exhibition borrows its title from a phrase Brooker uses in “When We Awake!”—a significant Canadian art criticism essay found in the *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada* (1929)—to describe art as a dynamic force that looks to the past as it anticipates the future:

Art and literature on the grand scale is never narrowly contemporary. It gathers its energies from the heroic exemplars of a past time and leaps forward ... Its essential grandeur is in this tremendous arch from past to future which swings high over the dwarfed concerns of the “present” of each generation that catches up to it.⁴

Brooker’s practice was ahead of its time. These illustrations reveal a cross-pollination of influences attuned to art movements stemming from global modernisms of the early 20th century, including the European avant-garde.⁵ As a self-taught polymath, Brooker synthesized diverse influences into his work, writing that the “artist sees in wholes what the layman sees in parts.”⁶

As an illustrator for advertisements, Brooker’s expertise in narrative form and mastery of draftsmanship informed his art practice. Advertisements were a “motivator of society,”⁷ a visual stimulant, and Brooker understood their potential to express human desire.⁸ Ad commissions presented a fertile ground for experimentation; Brooker used the psychological impact of dramatic black-and-white contrasts and their ability to evoke particular narratives and emotions.⁹ This is evidenced in Brooker’s *Abah’s Death (Elijah Series)* (1929) and *Before Earth & Sea Were Made (Bible Series)* (1926), where stark contrasts and precise lines charge the imagery of victorious battle scenes and clamorous storms with a heightened sense of dynamism. Movement was of great interest to Brooker; he once distinguished himself from his more traditional contemporaries by stating “whereas most artists paint nouns or objects, I have attempted to paint verbs—or movements—activity.”¹⁰

¹ Paul Russell, “Canada’s first abstract painter featured in special exhibition,” at *Toronto Star*, September 12, 1970.

² James King, “Is This Art Canadian? James King on Bertram Brooker,” (Lecture, Art Canada Institute, Toronto, Ontario, December, 4, 2018), <http://aci-iac.ca/watch/is-this-art-canadian-james-king-on-bertram-brooker>.

³ Thomas R. Lee, “Bertram Brooker 1888-1955,” *Canadian Art* XIII, no.3 (1956): 287. In this article, Lee cites Toronto art critic Augustus Bridle as the first individual who referred to Brooker as “a man of all the arts.”

⁴ Bertram Brooker, “When We Awake! A General Introduction,” *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada 1928–1929*, ed. Bertram Brooker (Toronto: Macmillan, 1929), 15-16.

⁵ James King, *Bertram Brooker: Life & Work* (Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2018), 70. Brooker was aware of the Armory Show in New York City, an international display of modern art that included works by leading exponents of European modernism, among them Marcel Duchamp, Constantin Brancusi and Wassily Kandinsky.

⁶ Bertram Brooker, “Seven Arts,” December 8, 1928.

⁷ “Mavor Moore in Conversation with Maria Tippett,” in *Provincial Essays* #7, ed. Jennifer Oille Sinclair (Toronto: Phacops Publishing Society, 1989), 89.

⁸ Bertram Brooker, “Feelings will Produce Impulses Much Quicker than Thoughts,” in *Marketing*, October 15, 1938, 58.

⁹ James King, *Bertram Brooker: Life & Work* (Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2018), 78.

¹⁰ Thomas R. Lee, “Bertram Brooker 1888-1955,” *Canadian Art* XIII, no.3 (1956): 288.

For Brooker, music articulated a language of movement, and he aspired to translate the “path or climax or culmination” of its dynamic forces into imagery.¹¹ His *Elijah Series* was inspired by German composer Felix Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* oratorio (1846), a tempestuous and prayerful orchestral piece that narrates major episodes in the life of Elijah, a prophet from the Old Testament.¹² The distorted and unsettled landscape of *Fed by the Ravens (Elijah Series)* (1923) employs vorticist¹³ tropes—angular and cascading line work—rhythmically animating a desolate desert scene where Elijah was kept alive by the miracle of ravens feeding him bread and meat.¹⁴

Brooker considered his *Crime & Punishment Series* to be among his most outstanding body of illustrations.¹⁵ These ink drawings narrate Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky’s literary masterpiece *Crime and Punishment* (1866), a tale of moral depravity and redemption centered on Rodion Raskolnikov, a destitute law student who murdered a deceitful pawnbroker and her stepsister, resulting in Raskolnikov’s mental collapse and his eventual atonement. In describing the series, Brooker comments, “My *Crime and Punishment* drawings are unlike anything I have done so far—more realistic in one way, and yet quite abstract in another way. They are more contrasty than ever, with terrific black areas, and very large faces, mostly in the deep shadow.”¹⁶ Brooker’s dramatic enlargement of the characters’ faces is demonstrative of his ability to translate literary prose into emotionally-charged imagery influenced by the conventions of silent cinema.¹⁷ Brooker was, in fact, engaged in silent cinema; he began writing detective film scripts in 1912 and opened a silent movie theatre with his brother in Neepawa, Manitoba.¹⁸

In illustrating the “mood or emotion” of the characters as they confronted their moral crises, Brooker presented thrilling scenes of delirium and psychological anguish. Raskolnikov’s ruthless crime is depicted in *Axes (Crime & Punishment Series)* (c. 1933), where his axe lunges violently and reverberates across the picture plane, insinuating the slicing of flesh. The brevity and sharpness of the line work charges this drawing with psychological intensity. Raskolnikov justifies his crime by believing himself to be impervious from the reach of law, a delusion which he reconciles against Napoleon Bonaparte’s own evasion of legal punishment in the aftermath of his brutal military invasions. This feverish illusion is rendered in *Napoleon (Crime and Punishment Series)* (c. 1933), where Brooker uses a meticulous stippling technique to merge ghastly portraits of Napoleon and Raskolnikov into one nightmarish entity that overlooks the decimation of the Egyptian army during the Battle of the Pyramids.

Similarly, Brooker’s *Ancient Mariner Series* (1930) illustrates scenes from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), a poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a progenitor of the British Romantic movement. Brooker’s extravagant and exacting technical draftsmanship in these works expresses the profound tragedy of a repentant mariner who shot an albatross and sailed to the solitary edges of the world in a journey of moral penance. Devoid of human presence, the dreary seascapes of *Ice Bound Ship* and *Ghost Ship* (both 1930) from Brooker’s series convey a foreboding sense of misery. *Ice Bound Ship* illustrates the aftermath of a storm, which swept and stranded the mariner’s ship in the frigid waters of the Antarctic Ocean. The icebergs are depicted as loose, stylized geometric forms, evoking the hard and angular line work of the Art Deco movement.¹⁹ *Ghost Ship* renders the mariner’s ruinous encounter with a haunted vessel, where the phantoms of “Death” and “Night-mare Life-in-Death” gamble for the souls of the crew. Against the backdrop of a sunrise, beams of light illuminate the skeletal ribs of the ship as it looms over still waters. Oppressive clouds and sinister waters are rendered through dense lines, conveying nature’s cruelty and sublimity. This is a scene of anticipatory terror, where the uneasy contrast between light and darkness presages the imminent death of the mariner’s crew.

In the haunting *Ancient Mariner* illustrations, Brooker’s streamlined geometric forms, characteristic of his abstract style, loosen at the precipice of figuration, imbuing the two-dimensionality of the picture plane with intense depth and shadow. Brooker’s interest in merging opposing representational modes derived profound inspiration from Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald, a Winnipeg artist and later member of the Group of Seven who synthesized sensual realism with loose abstraction in his paintings and drawings of trees.²⁰ Upon meeting FitzGerald in 1929, Brooker’s artistic style marked a critical juncture,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 289.

¹³ Vorticism was a short-lived British modern art and literary movement founded by artist Percy Wyndham Lewis in London in 1914. This movement was reflected in various artistic disciplines, including visual art, literature and graphic design. In the visual arts, Vorticism employed the stylistic tropes of hard-edge and angular lines, inspired by Cubism and Futurism.

¹⁴ Paul Russell, “Canada’s first abstract painter featured in special exhibition,” at *Toronto Star*, September 12, 1970.

¹⁵ Brooker to FitzGerald, undated facsimile correspondence with J.J. Gibbons Limited Advertising letterhead. Found in artist files at the MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ James King, *Bertram Brooker: Life & Work* (Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2018), 80.

¹⁸ Robert Fulford, “History ignores man of all arts,” at *Toronto Star*, March 28, 1981.

¹⁹ Stephen Godfrey, “Art nouveau in swirling geometry: Verbs on paper give action to the eye,” in *Globe & Mail*, April 29, 1978.

²⁰ Joyce Zemans, “The art and Weltanschauung of Bertram Brooker,” in *artscanada* #176/177, February/March (1973): 65-68.

reflecting a pronounced interest in figurative and organic forms.²¹ The thrusting tree trunk and tentacular branches in *Tree Trunks no.11* (1932) employ surrealist tropes in their evocation of contorted, fleshy limbs. *Leaf Detail #3* (1950) is a late pencil drawing that affirms Brooker’s enduring interest in synthesizing abstraction with realism. In this work, Brooker strips the leaves of ornamentation, reducing them to the simple elements of delicate lines and soft shades.

In his writings, Bertram Brooker employs the poetic metaphor of a tree—a subject of fascination for both him and for FitzGerald—to implore artists to view art as a culmination of movements that are rooted and intertwined in a rhizomatic network of histories.²² Artists, Brooker believed, must see beyond the “eccentricities of the age they live in” and respond to “the colossal proportions” of an art historical continuum which is “like a giant tree going down into the deep past and branching into future infinity.”²³ A tree can germinate from a single seed, much like an arc emanates from a point of origin. Brooker’s career can be thought of as an arc, a dynamic curve that joined the points of figuration and abstraction, art and literature, past and future. This exhibition is a reflection of his legacy—a cumulative force of artistic influences—that here finds its expression in the drawings of humanity’s triumphant literary epics.

—Noor Alé

Bertram Brooker was born in Croydon, England in 1888 and emigrated to Canada with his family in 1905, settling first in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba. In 1920, Brooker permanently settled in Toronto, where he would work as an artist, author and adman. His works are held in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; and the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, among others. His works were exhibited at the Winnipeg Art Gallery; the Arts & Letters Club, Toronto; and the Art Museum at the University of Toronto. Brooker published three novels, *Think of the Earth* (1936), *The Robber* (1936) and *The Tangled Miracle* (1949). Brooker received the first Governor General’s Award in the category of fiction for his novel *Think of the Earth* in 1936 and a Silver Award from the Association of Canadian Advertisers in 1951. The artist passed away in Toronto in 1955.

²¹ James King, *Bertram Brooker: Life & Work* (Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2018), 16-17.

²² Bertram Brooker, “When We Awake!: A General Introduction,” *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada 1928–1929*, ed. Bertram Brooker (Toronto: Macmillan, 1929), 16.

²³ Ibid.

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