

# *Flying the flag*

Artist Marion Anderson  
expresses her love  
for country – and  
countryside – with  
Canada-One-Five-Oh!

STORY BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM  
PHOTOGRAPHY • TOMASZ ADAMSKI





If artist Marion Anderson won the lottery, she would buy the farmland near her New Dundee home to save it from being developed one day.

Then, she and the other rural residents who are her friends would be able to keep enjoying the countryside's rolling hills, flowers and trees that provide so much inspiration for Anderson's art.

"I would buy the four corners of New Dundee just to make sure they'd always stay farms," Anderson says as she looks out the windows of her studio to the backyard

and land sloping down to a pond and Alder Creek. No fences between neighbours mar the view.

It breaks her heart to drive past farmland that has been gobbled up by subdivisions. She avoids those routes if she can.

Anderson is an accomplished acrylic and watercolour painter who grew up on a farm in Kent County. She wishes she could do what English writer, artist and conservationist Beatrix Potter did after Potter's success with "The Tale of Peter Rabbit" and other animal stories.

"Beatrix Potter did so well with her story-books that she could go to farm auctions and outbid developers," Anderson says. "There are her tracts of land in England that will be forever farmland."

Recently, Anderson celebrated Canada's 150th anniversary and her passion for the country and the rural community with an exhibit called "Canada-One-Five-Oh!" at Homer Watson House and Gallery in Kitchener.

The exhibit featured 150 clay maple leaves, painted in shades of red, yellow,

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*"I use my walks to figure out things. I walk along and I'll be so thoughtful about ideas, ideas, ideas, and I'll look up and say, 'Where the heck am I.'"*

MARION ANDERSON



Marion Anderson painted the leaves for Canada-One-Five-Oh! the colours of the Maple Leaf tartan jumper she wore as a little girl in 1967, the centenary of Canadian confederation.

green and white, and mounted on small, amber-coloured birch panels on which Anderson painted tree branches.

When the clay leaves were assembled on the gallery wall, they gave the effect of a large Canadian flag. The exhibit included bowls that she'd also fashioned out of the clay leaves.

Beginning in 2014, Anderson collected more than 150 maple leaves on her daily walks in the countryside. In her basement, she pressed the leaves while they were still fresh into clay and cut them out.

They were fired at Dundee Pottery in New Dundee before Anderson painted them the colours of the Maple Leaf tartan jumper that she wore as a little girl in 1967, the centenary of Canadian confederation.

It was the year of Expo 67, the world's fair in Montreal that her parents visited, of Bobby Gimby's rousing "Ca-na-da" centennial theme song and parties across the country.

The jumper still hangs in her closet, beside her older brother's Maple Leaf tartan jacket.

In 1967, Anderson was in Grade 2 and driving with her brother, John, to the official closing ceremony of her one-room schoolhouse, S.S. No. 12 Botany. From then on, she would attend a new school in Ridgetown.

On the way, they passed the house of their aunt and uncle. There, on the front lawn, their relatives had mowed the grass in a pattern resembling the stylized



centennial symbol.

It was a year of celebration, tinged with sadness over the closing of a country school to which she had walked every day on a gravel road.

"That stuck with me," says Anderson.

For her art, Anderson's friends helped on a Sunday afternoon to seal and paint the birch panels the amber colour in her tartan. Once that was done, she painted the clay leaves, and mounted them. Then she set the painted leaves on tables to create the flag pattern, climbing a ladder several times to see if she'd succeeded.

Anderson's idea made an impression when Homer Watson House and Gallery asked artists to offer proposals to celebrate Canada's 150th anniversary.

"Most people did landscapes, and Marion is good at landscapes. But she took it one step further, like she always does," says Faith Hieblinger, gallery curator. "I love the way she thinks. She thinks of the end product and we figure out how it can work in the gallery."

Once Hieblinger had arranged and hung the 150 leaves on the gallery wall – a pains-

taking, two-day effort involving 10 picture rails and a balancing feat – the exhibition stopped people in their tracks.

"It was enormous and intricate at the same time," Hieblinger says. "It took everybody's breath away when they walked into the room."

Anderson, a fit-looking 57-year-old with short brown hair and intense brown eyes, has the energy of a whirlwind as her five-foot, six-inch frame strides across the studio. She is describing a series of exuberant, impressionistic spring floral paintings that wait for delivery to Gallery Double T in Waterloo. The gallery has represented her for more than two decades.

On this day she has already been for an hour-long walk on a cold, windy day and, later, she'll host a watercolour painting class at her studio.

Small wonder that some of her floral paintings look like fireworks. Anderson is always moving, always thinking, always creating. When she returns from her walk each day, she grabs a slip of paper to write down her thoughts.

"I used to carry paper and pencil, but

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I didn't like to stop and write," she says. "I use my walks to figure out things. I walk along and I'll be so thoughtful about ideas, ideas, ideas, and I'll look up and say, "Where the heck am I?"

Anderson's art is influenced by her surroundings – by the beauty of the creek that runs below the house she has lived in for more than 20 years; by Chantry Island and its lighthouse off Southampton where she stays at a cottage and teaches art; by Inglis Falls near Owen Sound where she rides with her partner, New Hamburg farmer Ken Bean, on his Harley-Davidson motorcycle. "I will not live long enough to create all the stuff that is happening up here," she says, pointing to her head with a laugh.

At the side of Anderson's home, a door opens into Alder Creek Studio, a bright, spacious room with oak floors, skylights and large windows that provide a mesmerizing view of the creek.

Anderson designed and built the studio, where she paints and teaches, in 2004. More recently, she remodelled the upstairs of her home to include the doors from the now-demolished farmhouse in which she grew up with her parents and five siblings, early supporters of her creative ventures.

"This is Louise's door and Jean's door and Mom and Dad's," she says, showing a visitor the five-panel, pine doors.

Anderson had intended to build the studio in 2014 after her retirement as a visual arts teacher and department head in Waterloo Region high schools for 30 years, but the loss of two friends to cancer made her decide not to wait.

Time has been on her mind lately as she works on a new series of paintings with the working title, "20/20, Sight Seeing."

"At my age, I start to recognize how quickly time is flying by," she says. "I was sitting at my son's wedding in January and thinking: if they have a child, will I be at

the wedding?" She has two adult sons, Nicholas, 28, whose wedding it was, and Gregory, 25.

After growing up in a family that encouraged her art-making, and after serving as a craft director at a summer camp, Anderson knew she wanted to teach art. She earned a bachelor of arts from the University of Windsor, a bachelor of education from the University of Western Ontario in London, now called Western University, and took a visual arts honour specialist course from the University of Toronto. In 1994, she received a master of education from Western.

"My mom and dad believed in education. There are 11 degrees amongst six farm kids," she says, adding that her father finished Grade 6 and her mother finished Grade 12.

In her own artistic practice, her award-winning paintings have been featured in many juried exhibitions and are in private and corporate collections, including Homer

Watson House and Gallery and the Centre for International Governance Innovation in Waterloo. Her paintings have also been exhibited on the walls of the Kitchener-Conestoga Rotary Club's annual "Dream Home," which the public tours as part of the fundraising lottery.

While still teaching high school, Anderson became known for her floral and architectural watercolours rendered in pixel-like shapes. They involve the application of tight, straight edges on top of the "looser" watercolour painting, she says.

A combination of influences produced the unique style – the computer art classes she taught; her classroom's proximity to a stained-glass class at Jacob Hespeler Secondary School in Cambridge; and by her family's old quilts that she keeps at her home.

The style shows both the flamboyant aspect of her skills, and control and discipline – qualities she possesses as an artist and businesswoman.

Though she still teaches painting classes featuring the pixelated shapes, Anderson has moved to creating mixed-media works and to oils, painting bold florals that seem to burst from the canvas. "The movement idea represents how fast time goes and the fragility of flowers," she says.

"I switched to oils because in the art world, they're high in the hierarchy of materials. There's the concept of the value of time."

She's also working on a mixed-media acrylic series for "Lift," an art program of Robert Langen Art Gallery that features works from local artists in space at Wilfrid Laurier University's campus library.

She continues to teach art, in her studio, at Colour Paradise greenhouse in Mannheim where she and her students are surrounded by the flowers they paint, at a cottage and the art school at Southampton Arts Centre where she has instructed adult students for many years. The arts centre also represents her.

Her "20/20, Sight Seeing" series will be large acrylic and mixed-media paintings featuring elements she sees every day during her walks wearing the bright orange vest her husband gave her for safety along the country roads. She soaks in "the shadows of trees, the water and the sounds, the birds and critters."

She's collecting bits of rusted metal and other discarded pieces she finds on the ground, as well as keys and old sheet music that she will incorporate into her art.

Hieblinger is looking forward to being surprised by Anderson's next project.

"She's always taking the next step," Hieblinger says. "I saw a piece in Etobicoke and fell in love with it and didn't even know it was Marion's."

"She has forewarned me that she's coming with a proposal. I'm excited," Hieblinger says. "I know it will be totally different from what she has been doing."

"She is constant, and always new." 

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**Wendy Strub**  
Senior Vice-President & Director  
Investment Advisor

**Lori Hill | Cathy Kehayas**

wendy.strub@canaccord.com  
WendyStrub.com