

In her autobiographies, Doris McCarthy did not linger much on the unfairness or inequalities that women faced in her time. She seems to have had a very matter-of-fact and practical view of these matters, even in unfair circumstances. With or without acknowledging it, her lifestyle and ambitions went against the expectations of women at the time, and she stands out as a woman artist who produced a vast amount art work all over the world, throughout her life, in spite of gendered boundaries.

At a young age Doris McCarthy was able to exercise freedom not any different from her brothers – in an interview with Susan Crean for *Canadian Art*, she stated “my family was not patriarchal and I didn’t grow up feeling defensive about being a girl.”¹ Her father often took her out on the canoe, on portage trips, and even recruited her to help re-shingle the roof of their cottage when she was just fourteen years old.² She would maintain this handiness and grit throughout her life; for example, when she built Fool’s Paradise with little help, and maintained it on her own for decades following.

In her twenties and onward, her adventures were unimpeded by any visible gender biases. McCarthy and her fellow female friends seem to have enjoyed a great deal of ease while traveling and painting around the world. Her first overseas trip was to New York and England in 1935, for which McCarthy and friend Noreen “Nory” Masters spent months saving money and deliberating on which locations to visit.³ They spent nearly a full year in England studying at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, and in McCarthy’s accounts she notes many kind people they encountered, even some friends they made, and of course the great art knowledge she gained.⁴ She certainly went on these trips with a calculated purpose in mind, but remained relaxed and open to new experiences as well.

McCarthy would continue to travel in this fashion throughout her career, most notably her year-long solo trip around the world in 1961, during which the artist visited more than sixteen countries.⁵ While there may have been instances that McCarthy does not discuss where her being a woman caused her grief while travelling, it was not a topic of her writings or paintings. But it is very clear that she led an unconventional, inspiring life of adventure. As an artist, McCarthy worked throughout the modern period, a time of great social change. The years following the First World War were marked by the suffrage movement, and the reform of many male-dominated areas including law, education, public health, and employment.⁶ McCarthy was still very young at this time, but women artists who were at the centre of this

¹ Susan Crean, “The Female Gaze: A Voice of Her Own: Doris McCarthy writes as energetically as she paints,” *Canadian Art* (Fall 1990): 18.

² Doris McCarthy, *A Fool in Paradise: An Artist’s Early Life*, (Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 1990), 50-51.

³ McCarthy, *A Fool in Paradise*, 162-163

⁴ McCarthy, *A Fool in Paradise*, Chapter 14

⁵ Doris McCarthy, *The Good Wine: An Artist Comes of Age* (Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 1991), 68-103.

⁶ Veronica Strong-Boag, "Early Women’s Movements in Canada: 1867–1960," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.

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[https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/early-womens-movements-in-canada#:~:text=%E2%80%8BWomen's%20movements%20\(or%2C%20feminist,as%20labour%20and%20health%20rights.](https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/early-womens-movements-in-canada#:~:text=%E2%80%8BWomen's%20movements%20(or%2C%20feminist,as%20labour%20and%20health%20rights.)

initial movement include Prudence Heward and Paraskeva Clark. At times they were held back professionally due to marriage, pregnancy, and children, and tackled subject matter that reflected issues of race and gender.^{7,8} McCarthy notes in her interview with Crean that she “accepted the fact that [her and her peers] were the first generation of emancipated women. And there was no reason [they] couldn’t be artists too,” noting that she was aware of the differences between her opportunities and that of her predecessors.⁹

That is not to say that McCarthy’s generation did not still face many barriers regarding gender. For example, the policy for female instructors at the Central Technical School was that once they were married, they were dismissed from their position. McCarthy witnessed this often during her career there, and this influenced her decision to never marry; however, she described such occurrences as not much more than a shame.

There is one recorded moment when McCarthy’s gender was held against her was when she applied for membership with the Ontario Society of Artists (OSA). After accomplishing the necessary criteria of three consecutive acceptances to the OSA’s Annual Juried Exhibition, she was turned away because she was young and a woman.¹⁰ She complained but accepted this decision; it was reversed in 1944 after she held a very successful solo exhibition at the Victoria College women’s residence in Toronto. Twenty years later she would be the first woman elected to full presidency of the OSA.¹¹

Following the Second World War, there were still feminist movements - namely challenging the wage gap, erasure of female politicians, and lack of equal job opportunity - but they were not as effective as the suffrage movement, and did not head such definitive changes.¹² Relied upon during the war to fill traditional male jobs, most women were laid-off after men returned from the war. For McCarthy, this meant giving up her senior painting classes, as she was demoted back to her initial position teaching younger grades.¹³ It was not until the 1960s and 70s that women began to see larger changes; specifically, statutory maternity leave, and rules against discrimination on the basis of sex or marital status in hiring, firing, training and promotion.¹⁴

The sheer ambition and effort that McCarthy exuded in her everyday life, undeterred by these sexist challenges, makes her stand out as a great woman artist. Her immense range of style

⁷ Christine Boyanoski, “Clark as a Woman Artist,” in *Paraskeva Clark: Life and Work*, (Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2016). <https://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/paraskeva-clark/significance-and-critical-issues/#clark-as-a-woman-artist>

⁸ Julia Skelly, *Prudence Heward: Life and Work*, (Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2015) see esp. “Race and Gender,” “Feminism and Post Colonialism.” <https://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/prudence-heward/significance-and-critical-issues/#race-and-gender>

⁹ Crean, 18.

¹⁰ McCarthy, *A Fool in Paradise*, 233.

¹¹ McCarthy, *The Good Wine: An Artist Comes of Age*, 112-113.

¹² Veronica Strong-Boag, “Early Women’s Movements in Canada: 1867–1960.”

¹³ McCarthy, *A Fool in Paradise*, 242, 245.

¹⁴ Mary Morison, “Looking Back: Women’s History in Ontario Teaching Federations,” Magazine of the Elementary Teachers Association of Ontario (ETFO), Summer 2016. Excerpted by Mary Morison from “*It’s Elementary: A Brief History of Public Elementary Teachers and Their Federations.*” Barbara Richter, ETFO, 2008. <https://etfovoice.ca/feature/looking-back-womens-history-ontario-teacher-federations>

and context, considering she even painted across the world, and for most of her 100 year life, is something many woman artists did not have the resources to do. This leaves in question the greater erasure of Doris McCarthy from early Canadian landscape painting history. Her rarely receiving recognition from Canadian painting surveys or institutions like the National Gallery of Canada can certainly be seen as a gendered bias in the art world. In most early accounts of Canadian Painting, the Group of Seven (all men) seem to take up the most space. And there is no doubt that McCarthy was equally as talented and well versed as these early Canadian landscape artists.