



J. E. H. MACDONALD
GRAPHIC DESIGNER

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Bookplate, The Arts & Letters Club, c. 1919 [10]

James Edward Hervey MacDonald (1873–1932), a member of the Group of Seven and a central figure in the establishment of a distinctive Canadian expression in painting, is widely celebrated as one of Canada’s greatest landscape painters. His contribution as a graphic designer has received less notice, despite his having worked in that profession for several years before taking up painting. The current exhibition highlights MacDonald’s versatility and skill in graphic design through a selection of books and bookplates, advertising brochures, exhibition catalogues, magazines and posters.

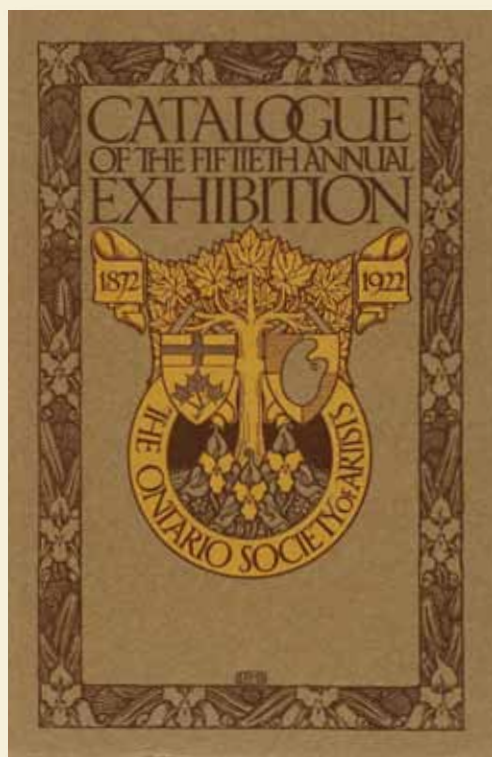
Born in Durham, England, MacDonald immigrated with his family to Hamilton, Ontario, in 1887. He received his first instruction in art at the Hamilton Art School, attending night classes given by John Ireland (1854–1915) and Arthur Heming (1870–1940). His career in graphic design began in 1889, when he was hired as an apprentice at age sixteen by the Toronto Lithographing Company. Five years later he joined the staff of Toronto's leading commercial art studio, Grip Printing and Publishing Company, working mainly as a draftsman producing advertising layouts, illustrations and lettering.

In 1900 MacDonald submitted catalogue covers and bookplates to the Ontario Society of Artists' Applied Art Exhibition. That same year he produced his most successful early design, a four-page, hand-lettered and hand-decorated booklet entitled *A Word to Us All: Being a Message for Canadians* [1], which contained a poem on the Boer War. The booklet, printed as a souvenir facsimile volume by Ryerson Press in 1945, reflects MacDonald's early admiration for the British designer William Morris (1834–1896), while also showing his dedication to native Canadian motifs, a recurring feature in his work throughout his career.

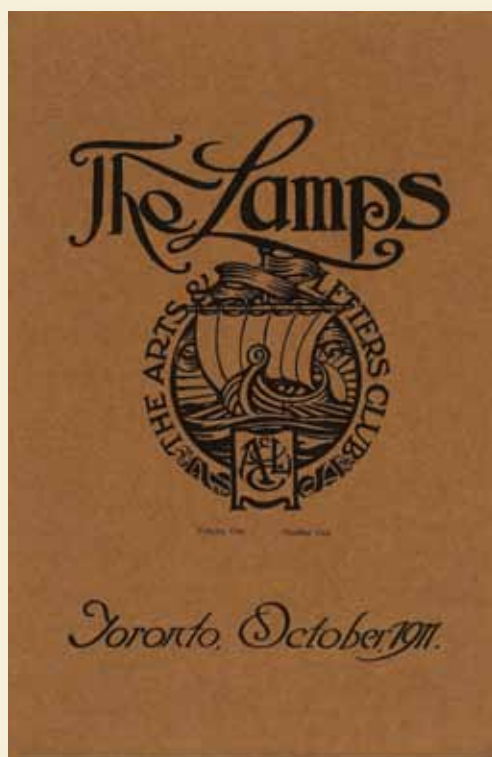
Although MacDonald had little formal art training, his drawing skills improved significantly after he joined the Toronto Art League in 1903. The League stressed the importance of drawing from nature, and MacDonald followed this tenet with enthusiasm, taking frequent sketching trips around Toronto with fellow members such as J.W. Beatty (1869–1941) and Charles W. Jefferys (1869–1951). One of the League's lasting accomplishments was an annual calendar, first issued in 1893, that allowed members to display their versatility. Not long after joining the group, MacDonald drew designs for the February and April pages of the League's calendar for 1904 [2].

From 1904 to 1907 MacDonald worked at Carlton Studio in London, England, with Thomas Garland Greene (1875–1955), Archibald Abernathy Martin (1876–1954) and Norman Mills Price (1877–1951) – former colleagues from Grip and the Toronto Art League – producing book covers under the supervision of A.A. Turbayne (1866–1940). The experience allowed MacDonald to develop further his knowledge of Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts design principles; upon returning to Toronto he rejoined Grip as chief designer. Examples of MacDonald's work during this period include a booklet promoting Lawrence Park Estates – a suburban garden district of Toronto [3] – and travel brochures for Canadian Northern Steamships and Canadian Pacific Railway [4, 5].

While still working for Grip, MacDonald was drawn to a circle of artists and art enthusiasts who would later form the Arts & Letters Club in Toronto. By then widely acknowledged as one of the country's best designers, MacDonald was invited by the group to design the cover for a booklet entitled *A Gathering of the Arts*, which celebrated the initial meeting to discuss the formation of the Club in 1908. A short while later he designed the first list of Club executives and an official crest. He continued to take an active role in creating printed and other material after formally joining the group in 1912, producing illustrations and cover designs for the Club's magazine *The Lamps* [7, 8, 9], additional executive lists, an official bookplate [10], and various invitations and broadsides [11].



Cover design, *Catalogue of the Fiftieth Annual Exhibition 1872-1922*, Ontario Society of Artists [23]



Cover design, *The Lamps*,
The Arts & Letters Club, October 1911 [7]

In late 1911 MacDonald was persuaded by colleagues at the Arts & Letters Club to leave Grip and pursue a career in painting. Unable to support his family on painting alone, he continued to work as a freelance designer, producing such works as the poster *Canada and the Call* [31] for a 1914 exhibition sponsored by the Royal Canadian Academy for the Patriotic Fund, bookplates for Basil George Morgan [14] and Dr. James MacCallum [15], and a membership certificate for the Ontario Association of Architects [32]. His financial situation improved significantly in 1921, when he was hired by the Ontario College of Art as a permanent design instructor. With a steady salary, MacDonald was increasingly able to select commissions based on personal interest.

Magazine illustration provided a reliable source of income for MacDonald throughout his career. In the years following his first illustration commission – a decorative arboreal border for a poem by Ethelwyn Wetherald published in the May 1901 issue of *Canadian Magazine* – MacDonald provided numerous cover designs, decorative headings, illustrations and advertisements for such magazines as *Canadian Courier*, *Canadian Magazine*, *Construction*, *Maclean's* [12] and *Saturday Night*. Beginning in 1917 he served as art director and produced designs for the University of Toronto student/faculty journal *The Rebel* and its successor, *The Canadian Forum*. Designs for the former include an illustration for his article “The Terrier and the China Dog,” published in 1918, and a standard cover for issues published in 1919–20.

MacDonald regularly began accepting commissions for book designs (including dust jackets, covers, endpapers and title pages) after the First World War, initially from J.M. Dent & Company, and later from McClelland & Stewart, Ryerson Press, and Louis Carrier & Company. Most of those designs were for Canadian titles published by McClelland & Stewart, including Emily Pauline Johnson’s *Legends of Vancouver* [19], Isabel Ecclestone Mackay’s *Fires of Driftwood* [20], Marjorie L.C. Pickthall’s *The Wood Carver’s Wife* [21], and Grace McLeod Rogers’ *Stories of the Land of Evangeline* [22], to name a few.

MacDonald also provided catalogue covers for several important exhibitions of Canadian art held during the 1920s: *The Fiftieth Annual Exhibition* of the Ontario Society of Artists, Toronto [23]; the Canadian Section of Fine Arts at the *British Empire Exhibition*, London, England [24, 25]; and the *Exposition d’art canadien* at the Musée du Jeu de Paume, Paris [26, 27]. Each of these prominently displayed Canadian motifs, including a maple tree and trilliums in the case of the Toronto catalogue. In designing the London and Paris catalogues, MacDonald worked closely with Eric Brown, the first director of the National Gallery of Canada, who played a central role in organizing the three exhibitions.

Lettering, calligraphy and illumination preoccupied MacDonald from the start of his career. His skill with those techniques is especially evident in the nine various executive lists he produced for the Arts & Letters Club [28], as well as in later illuminated books, such as *On Account of Defries* [29] and *In Memoriam to R.F. Gagen* [30]. The first of those two books was executed by MacDonald over a two-year period to acknowledge the retirement in 1924 of Robert L. Defries, the first treasurer of the Arts & Letters Club; the second, to honour the long-standing contribution of Robert Ford Gagen (1847–1926) to the Ontario Society of Arts.

Philip Dombowsky, Assistant Archivist

CHECKLIST

Unless otherwise noted, all items are from the National Gallery of Canada. All designs are by J.E.H. MacDonald.

- 1 J.E.H. MacDonald. *A Word to Us All: Being a Message for Canadians*. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1945. Title page.
- 2 Toronto Art League. *A Calendar for the Year Nineteen Hundred and Four with Drawings Illustrating Some of the Characteristic Landscape Features of Canada*. Toronto: The Musson Book Company, 1903. Page for February.
- 3 Dovercourt Land, Building and Savings Company Limited. *Lawrence Park Estates: A Formal & Artistic Grouping of Ideal Homes*. Toronto: Grip, 1909.
- 4 Canadian Northern Steamships. *The Atlantic Royals: Royal Edward, Royal George*. Toronto: Grip, 1910.
- 5 Canadian Pacific Railway. *Place Viger Hotel, Montreal*. Montreal: Canadian Pacific Railway, 1911. Cover design.
- 6 The Sheridan Nurseries Limited. *A Garden Manual and Catalogue*. Sheridan, Ontario: The Sheridan Nurseries Limited, 1928. Cover design.
- 7 The Arts & Letters Club. *The Lamps*. Vol. 1, no. 1. Toronto: The Arts & Letters Club, October 1911. Cover design.
- 8 The Arts & Letters Club. *The Lamps*. Vol. 1, no. 1, n.s. Toronto: The Arts & Letters Club, June 1912. Cover design. Courtesy of The Arts & Letters Club, Toronto.
- 9 The Arts & Letters Club. *The Lamps*. Toronto: The Arts & Letters Club, December 1919. Cover design. Courtesy of The Arts & Letters Club, Toronto.
- 10 Bookplate for The Arts & Letters Club, Toronto, c. 1919.
- 11 Broadside for *The Beggar's Opera or An Executive Year*. Toronto: The Arts & Letters Club, 1926. Courtesy of The Arts & Letters Club, Toronto.
- 12 *Maclean's*. Confederation Jubilee Number, July 1917. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.
- 13 Drawing for Dr. James MacCallum bookplate, c. 1919. Graphite, black ink and gouache on ivory wove paper, mounted on grey laid paper.
- 14 Bookplate for Basil George Morgan, c. 1914. Courtesy of The Arts & Letters Club, Toronto.
- 15 Bookplate for Dr. James MacCallum, c. 1919.
- 16 Bookplate for Elizabeth Nairn Robertson.

- 17 Bookplate for Toronto Public Library, 1919.
- 18 Bookplate for Doris Huestis Mills, c. 1925. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Edward P. Taylor Research Library & Archives, Toronto.
- 19 E. Pauline Johnson. *Legends of Vancouver*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1922. Designs for dust jacket and endpapers.
- 20 Isabel Ecclestone Mackay. *Fires of Driftwood*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1922. Design for endpapers.
- 21 Marjorie L.C. Pickthall. *The Wood Carver's Wife*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1922. Designs for dust jacket and endpapers.
- 22 Grace McLeod Rogers. *Stories of the Land of Evangeline*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1923. Designs for dust jacket and title page.
- 23 Ontario Society of Artists. *Catalogue of the Fiftieth Annual Exhibition 1872-1922*. Toronto: Ontario Society of Artists, 1922. Cover design.
- 24 British Empire Exhibition. *Canadian Section of Fine Arts*. London: British Empire Exhibition, 1924. Cover design.
- 25 British Empire Exhibition. *A Portfolio of Pictures from the Canadian Section of Fine Arts*. London: British Empire Exhibition, 1924. Cover design.
- 26 Drawing of catalogue cover for *Exposition d'art canadien, Musée du Jeu de Paume*. Paris: Musée du Jeu de Paume, 1927. Pen, brush and black ink with gouache in sepia and white on card.
- 27 Musée du Jeu de Paume. *Exposition d'art canadien*. Paris: Musée du Jeu de Paume, 1927. Cover design.
- 28 Executive list for The Arts & Letters Club, Toronto, 1915-16. Coloured inks on parchment. Courtesy of The Arts & Letters Club, Toronto.
- 29 Illuminated book, *On Account of Defries*, 1924-26. 34 leaves of wove paper, casebound in tooled leather.
- 30 Illuminated book, *In Memoriam to R.F. Gagen*, 1926. 8 leaves of Japanese paper, casebound in tooled leather.
- 31 *Canada and the Call*. Toronto: Rous and Mann, 1914. Poster for *Exhibition of Pictures Given by Canadian Artists in Aid of the Patriotic Fund*.
- 32 Certificate for the Ontario Association of Architects, 1920. Courtesy of the Ontario Association of Architects, Toronto.

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Cover: Poster, *Canada and the Call* (detail), 1914 [31]