

# ROBERT MICHENER



## LOOKING BACK

Key Paintings 1960–2010  
from the Collection of the Artist

cover image: ULYSSES SIGHTED BY THE PHAEACIAN MAIDENS •1963 • oil on linen • 66" x 75"

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October 23–November 18, 2010

i a n t a n *gallery*

Vancouver BC

Canada

## A Quiet Rebellion

*The din of the dusty world and hemmed-in human habitations are what human nature habitually abhors; conversely, haze, mist, and the haunting spirits of the mountains are what the human nature seeks, and yet can rarely find.*

*Guo Xi, Chinese Painter (ca. 1020–1090 A.D.)*

A Robert Michener retrospective is long overdue. The painter has been a local fixture for nearly forty years, and his achievement, somewhat undervalued, is a long and distinguished one. This is not an all-encompassing retrospective, the main restriction is one of space—the painter’s preference is for monumental scale, and a full retrospective, bringing together major works in public and private collections, would require a large public venue. Many important canvases are missing here, notably the Howe Sound and Badlands series of the seventies, and much of the work for which Michener is best known, the farm paintings of the eighties.

Nevertheless, this exhibition reveals a committed and idiosyncratic artist, who has followed a personal vision diametrically opposed to the theory-based approach of contemporary practice. This exhibition features work from the artist’s collection, as early as 1960, and shows a remarkable journey from strident abstraction to lyrical, tender representation.

The painter was born in Preston, a small town in southeastern Minnesota. A painted barn on the town’s outskirts announced “1,400 friendly folk welcome you to Preston.” The painter admits his youth was often lonely and he spent much of his free time hiking, hunting and fishing in the surrounding countryside. His memories of the area’s limestone cliffs, hills and streams would later inspire and guide his mature landscape paintings, in particular the gorge paintings of the nineties.

After graduating from Hamline University, and a stint in the Army, Michener entered the University of Minnesota to undertake a Master of Fine Arts degree in painting. His advisor was Walter Qurt, a controversial New York artist in the 1930s and 40s. Qurt theorized that Western civilization and art were biased in favour of the rational and aggressive (masculine) potentials within human nature. He felt that society needed a paradigm change in favour of gregarious and cooperative (feminine) potentials, and that art had an important role in this cultural transformation. Qurt’s ideas meshed with those Michener had brought with him from an undergraduate course based on *The Meeting of East and West* in which philosopher F.S.C. Northrop advocated a synthesis of the premises underlying Eastern and Western civilizations. That course also sparked Michener’s enduring interest in traditional Asian art.

However, the influence of Chinese and Japanese painting and later Indian and Islamic art was slow to take hold. The first chapter in Michener's artistic development was decidedly expressionistic. Viewers familiar with Michener's mature style may be shocked at the aggressiveness of *Man Against Red* (1960) which shows a Soutine-like assault on the human figure. In spite of the painting's aesthetic power, Michener would be quick to point out that expressionist work in general can be seen as symbolizing a dominating relationship between artist and subject.

The 1960s saw Michener continuing to experiment in an abstract figurative style. In spite of some dated aspects, *Bathers* (1966) presents a delightfully warm and open arena in which to celebrate the luxury of open air bathing. The idealism inherent in this work, and in later idylls, may have been influenced by Albert Camus's essay *The Rebel*, which had a deep impact on the young painter. Camus believed that all art was an attempt to "remake" the world, giving it the order and style it usually lacks. The encompassing idea that art is not a direct reflection of the world, but rather is a model, or blueprint of the artist's desire for something more harmonious or evocative, struck Michener as undeniable.

The 1970s saw more experimentation and shifts in subject matter. In *Looking Eastward* (1971) the painter began to develop his mature artistic themes. The mountains, the trees, the clouds, and even colour are not rendered realistically but rather become "symbols" of observed reality. Like Chinese painting the view-point is variable—not quite an aerial view but something more ambiguous and playful.

The Howe Sound series followed, with its soaring views of ocean and cliff, and then the Badlands series of monumental landscapes inspired by the wilds of South Dakota. Early in the 1980s, the artist became fascinated with the pictorial possibilities of small, family farms. Meadows, orchards, barns, livestock and fences are all rendered with scrupulous care. Comparisons to a "primitive" tradition (from Henri Rousseau to Grandma Moses) are inevitable, but unfair, given the visual sophistication at work. Michener's work might be considered too pretty, if it were not for the unfailing rightness and necessity of forms that convinces you that his paint-on-canvas world is real.

The farm series was successful both in aesthetic and commercial terms. But again the painter grew restless, feeling that his motif had run its course. A difficult period of introspection followed, resulting in an unexpected and delightful series of river and gorge paintings inspired by his youthful memories of the Root River Valley. Here, space feels intimate, but again the viewer's position is hard to gauge. We are above, in front and inside the space at the same time. In *Trees, Cliffs, Swallows and Angler* (2001) a tiny fisherman is surrounded by limestone cliffs but the reflections of these cliffs on the surrounding water creates a puzzle as to where shapes and planes fit in space. It is this ambiguity that creates tension and engages the viewer. As in the farm paintings, we have a sense that every leaf and tree is exactly where the artist wants them to be. Man's relationship to nature is one of subordination and respect, rather than of exploitative domination.

Michener's most recent series sees him returning to themes from his artistic beginnings, again exploring the theme of figures and bathers in the wilderness. *Idyll II* (2009) presents a stylized arena where three nude figures relax among boulders and cliffs. Colour here feels synthetic, especially the tart emerald green of the grass under the figures. In *Mountain Conversation* (2008) white clouds again become symbols, more like puffs of cotton wool than realistic objects.

These are challenging paintings, given the artificiality of their contents. Some viewers may miss the straightforwardness of the farm series, but Michener is never an artist to rest on his laurels or to paint for a market. Part of his quiet rebellion is a refusal to repeat himself, and to see every week, month and year as a new artistic challenge.

In an age of instant gratification, sensory overload, and domination of the television screen with its lurid hues and shuttle of bright images, Michener's work may seem out of place and time. This is so, only because his art stands in direct opposition to the values our society currently embraces. To take the time to absorb the engaging perspectives, the elegant lines and the soft greens and blues is to reveal a painter whose interest in depicting a better world is a deeply-felt and honest one. His paintings repeatedly invigorate and nourish.

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Like most artists of my generation my artistic beginnings are in abstract expressionism. Next came a period of abstract figurative work, this almost violent, abstract symbol for a figure is an early example.

I turned away from the strident, aggressive character of this painting in my fifty year quest to create gentler, more feminine paintings of humans within nature.

1. MAN AGAINST RED • 1960 • oil on linen • 53" x 40"



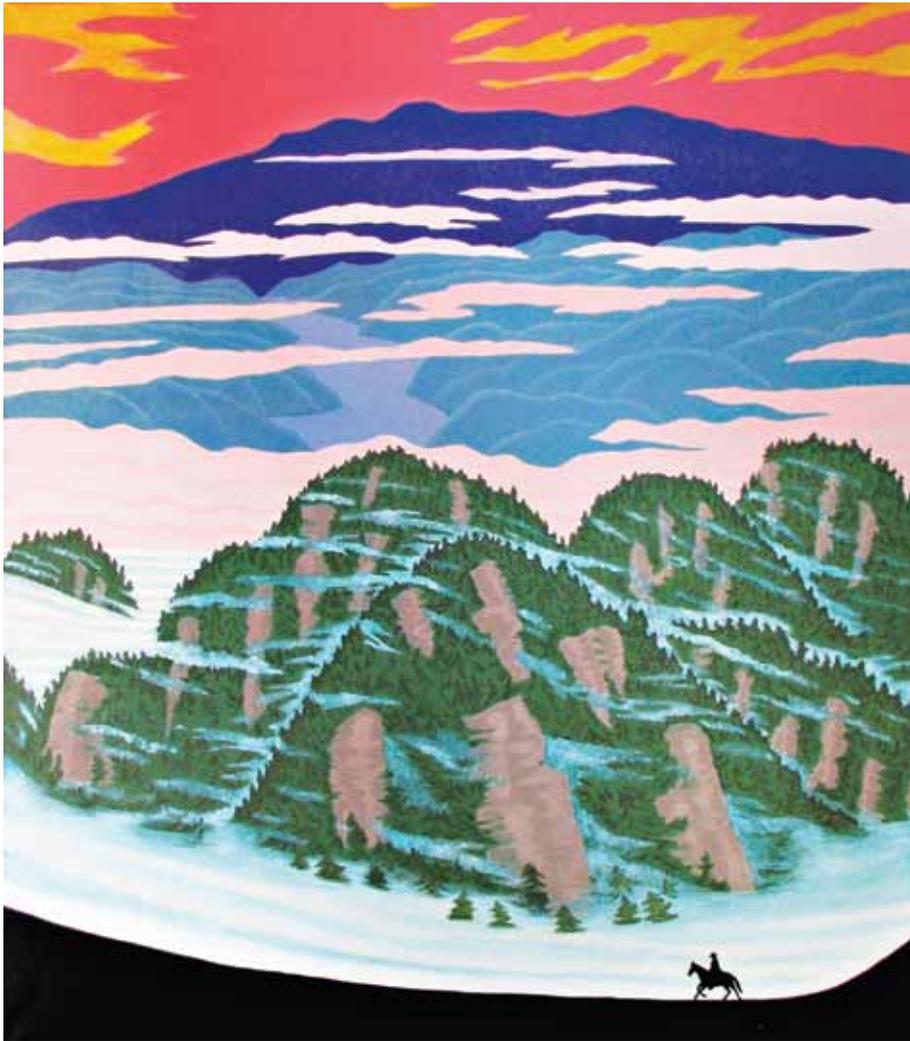
As my direction became more representational, I looked to Cezanne's and Renoir's bather paintings as the most recent in the Arcadian tradition. The word derives from Arcadia, a mountainous state in ancient Greece, whose inhabitants dwelt in bucolic harmony with the earth and its creatures.

2. PASTORALE • 1963 • oil on linen • 53" x 58"



The Arcadian tradition began in ancient Greece and extended with long interruptions through Poussin, Rubens and on to Cezanne. Often nude figures are prominently depicted, in action or repose, in a harmonious balance with the natural environment. This tradition remains an integral part of my painting.

3. BATHERS • 1966 • oil on linen • 60" x 60"

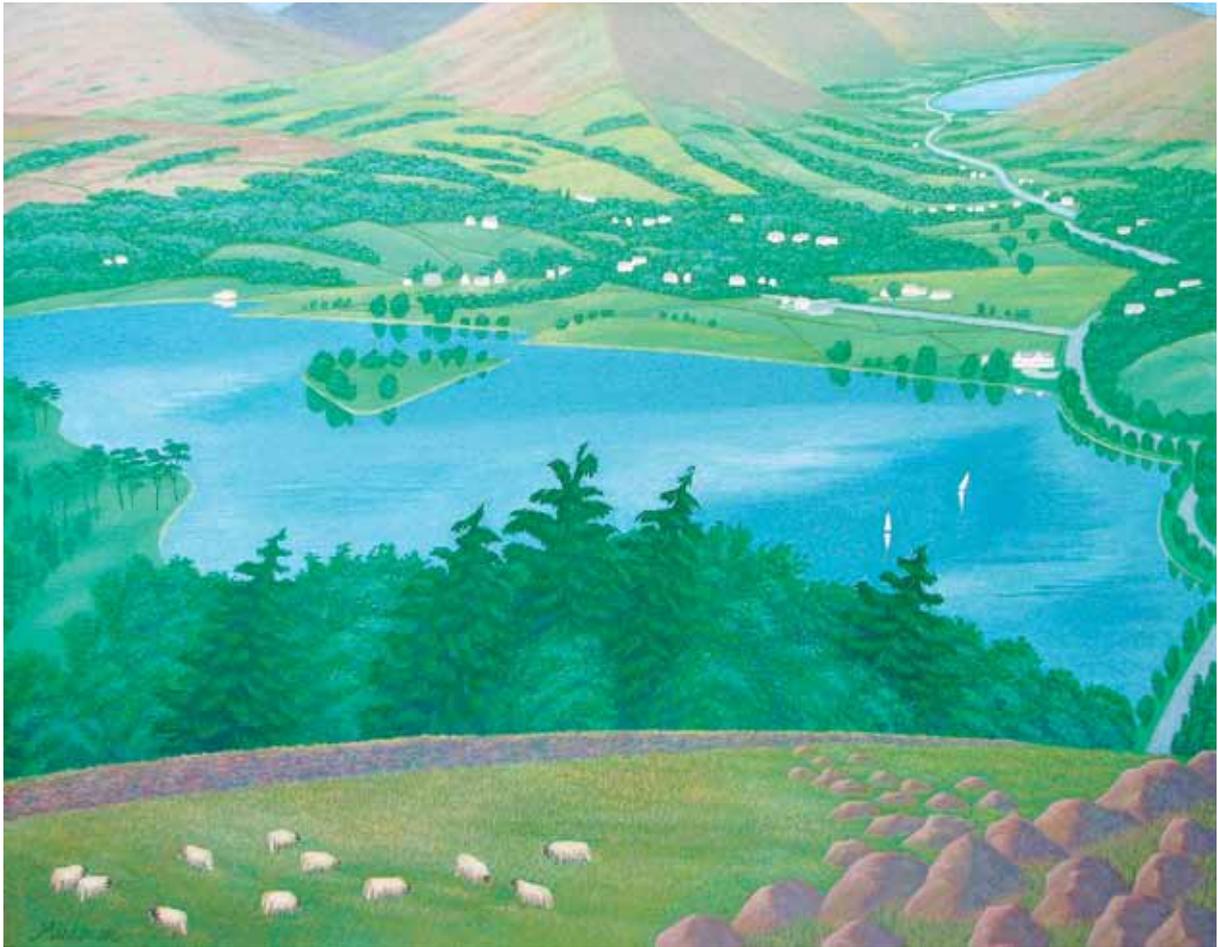


*“This is not a landscape based on a sketch but like all Michener's work a landscape of the imagination filled with nostalgia and fantasy. The ring of mountains are as unreal as paper cutouts and the whole big canvas, of which man forms an inconspicuous part, is energized by the sweeping rhythms of the natural order.”*

– Joan Lowndes,  
*Vancouver Sun*

An equally strong influence on my painting has been traditional Chinese and Japanese painting. Here the figures are often tiny and seem imbedded within the natural world.

4. LOOKING EASTWARD • 1971 • oil on linen • 78" x 68"



*“We see man working in the environment ... Michener is telling us that we need the land, that we need nature. We need to utilize it in such a way that it is not destroyed for future use, either by ourselves or by our children ... The estrangement of man from nature is regarded by Michener as the central ‘life problem’ of contemporary civilization.”*

– Mary Fox, Curator, Burnaby Art Gallery

5. GRASMERE, LAKE DISTRICT, UK • 1987–92 • oil on linen • 40” x 51”

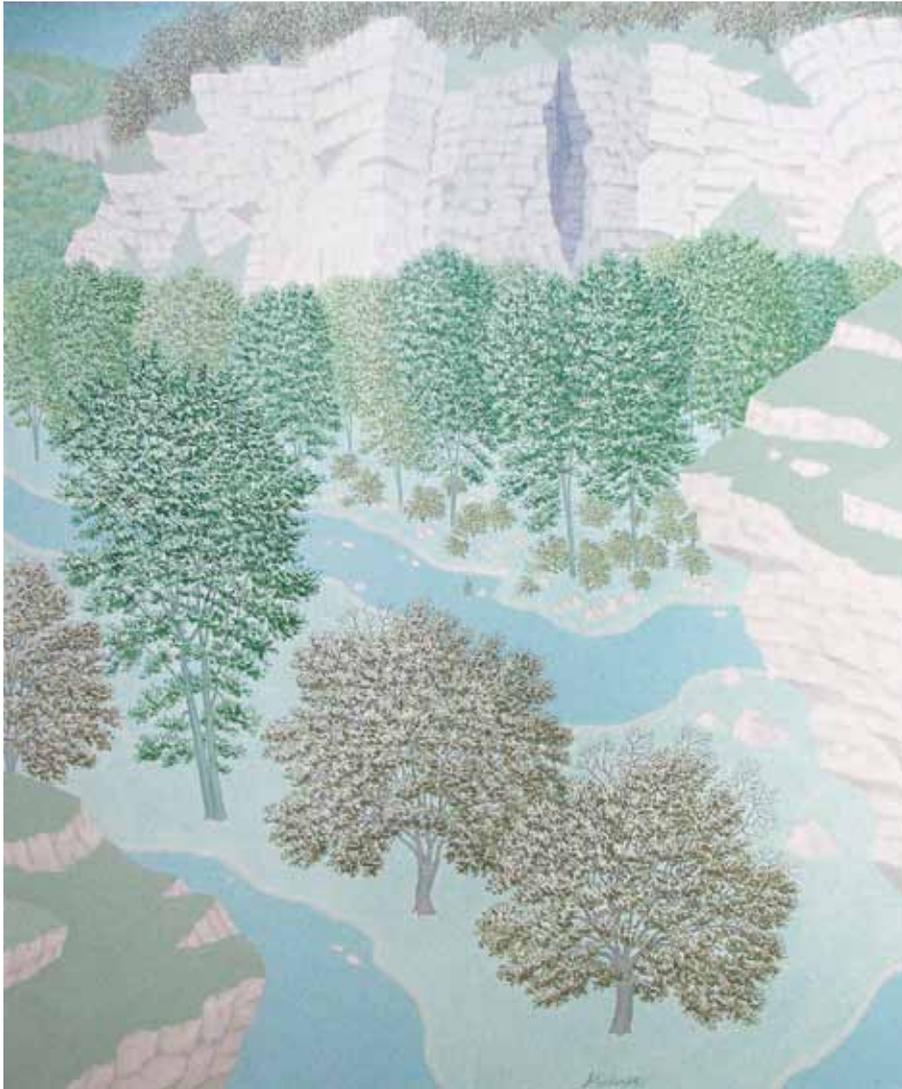


*“Robert Michener’s farm paintings ... are like a large format Book of Hours where man’s activities within nature are lyrically stated. This harmony finds its expression in a carefully limned harmony of tone, with everything basking in the same light and where nothing seems out of place or obtrusive.”*

– Roget Boulet, Curator,  
Burnaby Art Gallery

My paintings of small family farms may evoke feelings of nostalgia, but sometimes we must look back to rediscover values that we need to embrace if there is to be a future. We must learn to live gently with the land.

6. SPRING PLOWING II • 1991 • oil on linen • 50" x 40"



*“Michener has taken the nostalgic features of his childhood in Minnesota and fused them, quite surprisingly, with the delicacy of colour and detail of Chinese landscape paintings. The effect is subtle but extraordinary—East meets West in what amounts to visual hymns of humanity and the natural landscape.”*

– Alex Browne,  
*Peace Arch News*

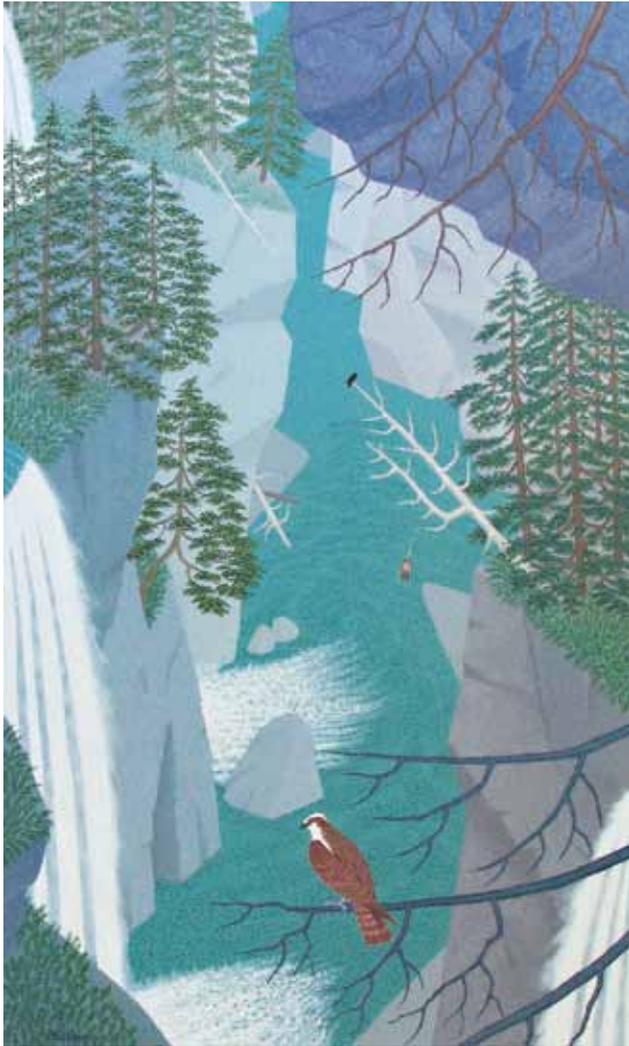
7. FISHERMAN IN THE WILD • 1995 • oil on linen • 60" x 50"



*“The Gorgeous Gorges are interactive experiences that encourage viewers to enter Michener’s spatial logic, to view the landscape both aurally and from the diminished advantage of the human figure or marker he has placed as a small-scale reference to the enormity of his illusionary strategy.”*

– Paula Gustafson, *Asian Art News*

8. TREES, CLIFFS, SWALLOWS AND ANGLER • 2001 • oil on canvas • 45” x 60”



*“In all his landscapes, the fisher (and sometimes bather) is made minute within the grandeur of the cliffs and river banks. The planes of colour Michener fashions to create the land and the dappled patterns of vegetation envelope the figure.”*

– Liane Davison, Director, Surrey Art Gallery

For me, the gorges have become a metaphor, a close up vision of wild nature. The lone angler symbolizes a vanishing personal and private experience with wilderness. As most fly fishers practice catch and release, this sport is not destructive to the environment.

9. THREE FALLS WITH OSPREY, CROW AND ANGLER • 2001 • oil on canvas • 60" x 36"



*“His work challenges the perception of viewing. He creates an illusion by arranging elements found in landscape, the land, water and sky, trees and rocks in a way which the viewer is led to play within these elements and interact with them on an emotive and intellectual level. The viewer is to be a participant in the process and interact with nature’s dance.”*

– Paula Gustafson, *Asian Art News*

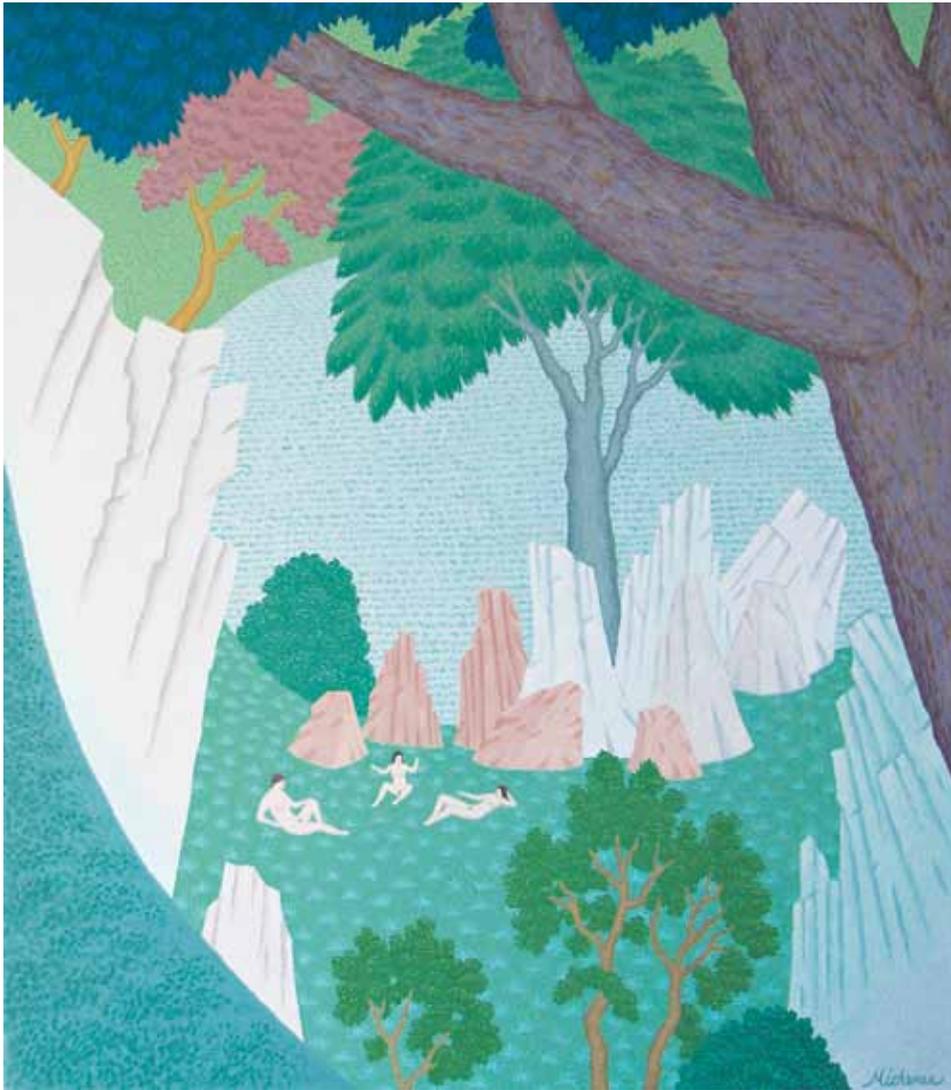
10. FROM A GULF ISLAND CLIFF • 2001 • oil on canvas • 60” x 45”



*“Michener creates visual symbols that articulate the gentle and reciprocal relationship that is possible between humanity and the rest of nature. He sees his work as practical metaphors for a new way of feeling and living with the world, to suggest a reverence for all life, yet not religious. ‘If my paintings seem to hearken back to a bygone era to a reality not open to most people living in an ever-increasing urban environment and social world, I can only say that it is so. I project an ideal symbol.’”*

– Christine Lawrence, Surrey Art Gallery

11. MOUNTAIN CONVERSATION • 2008 • oil on linen • 50" x 64"



*“Michener takes the idea of nature as nurturer one step further by showing the wilderness as an almost feminine environment of delicate tracery and playful illusion.”*

– Paula Gustafson,  
*Artichoke*

12. IDYLL II • 2009 • oil on linen • 54" x 47"



I paint figures in landscape because the basic problems confronting humanity today result from unworkable basic conceptions concerning the nature of man and his relationship to the rest of nature. The figure in landscape motif symbolizes this relationship.

13. FOUR BATHERS • 2010 • oil on linen • 50" x 44"

## STATEMENT

My primary expressive intention is to create visual symbols which manifest a gentler, more reciprocal relationship between humans and nature; therefore, my central motif has been people in landscape.

Sometimes, in keeping with the traditions of classical humanism, the figures are prominent in the natural setting. More often, the figures are small and imbedded in nature, as in traditional Chinese and Japanese painting.

I want my paintings to show what the world might look like if the "feminine principle" were embraced. To achieve this, I have set aside traditional "realistic" representation in favor of an imaginative transformation of the landscape motif. I have found it essential to disavow scientific perspective, as a convention which establishes a separation between the viewer and the motif. In my paintings I playfully manipulate three-dimensional space. Nothing conforms to our ordinary perceptions, yet everything is recognizable. Trees form articulated patterns. Cliffs are simplified. Everything represented is designed to participate in a dynamic, abstract structure. The viewer is drawn into an interactive and empathetic relationship with the motif.

I believe the greatest issue facing humanity is our relationship with nature. I also believe art can have a transformative social role. My paintings are my dream of a possible future. They express a gentle, intelligent and caring involvement with the land. They are about an attitude, perhaps like that of a good gardener.

## BIOGRAPHY

Robert Michener was born in 1935 in the small, farming community of Preston Minnesota. The hardwood covered hills, limestone cliffs, and fertile valleys of that area, along with the mountains and coasts of British Columbia, have been a rich visual and emotional source for his landscape paintings.

Michener received a BA degree from Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1957 and an MFA degree in painting from the University of Minnesota in 1962.

Michener taught art at the University of Minnesota, Western Washington University and the University of Cincinnati. He immigrated to Canada in 1973 to teach at the Vancouver School of Art (now the Emily Carr University of Art and Design) where he retired from teaching in 1999.

Michener's work has been shown in more than twenty solo shows in Canada and the United States as well as numerous two artist, group exhibitions and competitive shows across North America and Europe. His works are included in more than two hundred public, corporate and private collections in Canada, the U. S. and Europe.

Michener's studio and home are in Surrey, B.C., where he lives with his wife, painter Ann Nelson, and their daughter Suzanna.

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1962 University of Minnesota, Minneapolis
- 1966 Western Washington State, Bellingham
- 1967 Macalester College, St. Paul, MN
- 1969 University of Minnesota, (Morris)
- 1971 University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH
- 1974 Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati
- 1975 Equinox Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1977 Equinox Gallery
- 1979 Equinox Gallery
- 1981 Equinox Gallery
- 1983 Burnaby Art Gallery, Burnaby, B.C.
- 1983 Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge
- 1983 Equinox Gallery
- 1985 Waddington & Gorce Inc., Montreal, QC
- 1986 Equinox Gallery
- 1988 Equinox Gallery
- 1988 Waddington & Gorce Inc.
- 1990 Equinox Gallery
- 1993 Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, B.C.
- 1994 Buschlen- Mowatt Gallery, Vancouver
- 1998 Surrey Art Gallery, Surrey, B.C.
- 2000 John Ramsay Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
- 2001 Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C.
- 2002 Ballard Lederer Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.

## SELECTED TWO ARTIST SHOWS

- 1970 Bradley University, Peoria, Illinois
- 1972 Georgia Southern College, Statesboro
- 2008 Ian Tan Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.

## COLLECTIONS

- Government of Canada, Dept. of External Affairs
- Canada Council Art Bank
- British Columbia Provincial Collection
- The Vancouver Art Gallery
- The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria
- The Surrey Art Gallery
- Simon Fraser University
- Ring House Gallery, University of Alberta
- University of Minnesota
- University of Minnesota, Morris
- University of Cincinnati
- Kamloops Art Gallery
- University of Lethbridge
- Franklin Marshall College, Lancaster, PA
- Vancouver General Hospital
- Saint Paul's Hospital
- The British Columbia Development Corporation
- Shell Canada Ltd.
- British Columbia Central Credit Union
- Guaranty Trust Company of Canada
- Inland Natural Gas Company Ltd.
- Thorn Ridell and Company
- Canarim Investment Corporation
- Petro Canada
- Okanagan Helicopters
- Phillips, Hager and North
- Eye Care Center, Vancouver
- Teleglobe Canada
- Peerless Carpets Inc., Bram Garber Collection
- Fletcher Challenge Canada Ltd.



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