

Did you know?

A series of articles exploring the region's rich history

It can be easy to drive past a road sign daily without ever giving much thought to how the place got its name. A new series of articles called "Did you know?" will explore some of the notable people, places and events that have shaped the Valley. To launch this series we ask, "Did you know how Kurelek Road got its name?"

Did you know how Kurelek Road got its name?

KATRINA BOGUSKI
Gazette staff

COMBERMERE – Kurelek Road is named after the renowned Canadian painter and writer William Kurelek, who had a cottage and art studio at the end of the road in the 1970s.

Although he fit the image of the starving artist in the 1950s, his work now fetches considerable sums from top-rate auction houses. He has collectors throughout Canada, and he is well known in Europe.

In November 2016, his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was expected to sell for an estimated \$300,000 to \$350,000. Instead, the 26 x 23½" oil on board sold for \$531,000 CDN including the auction premium. The sale was at Heffel's Fall 1st Session auction on Wednesday, November 23, 2016 in Toronto.

Heffel Fine Auction House, which also maintains offices in Vancouver, Calgary, Ottawa and Montreal, has attracted significant bids on the works of a number of other notable Canadian artists in addition to Kurelek. These include Emily Carr, Lawren Harris, Tom Thomson, A. Y. Jackson and Jean-Paul Riopelle.

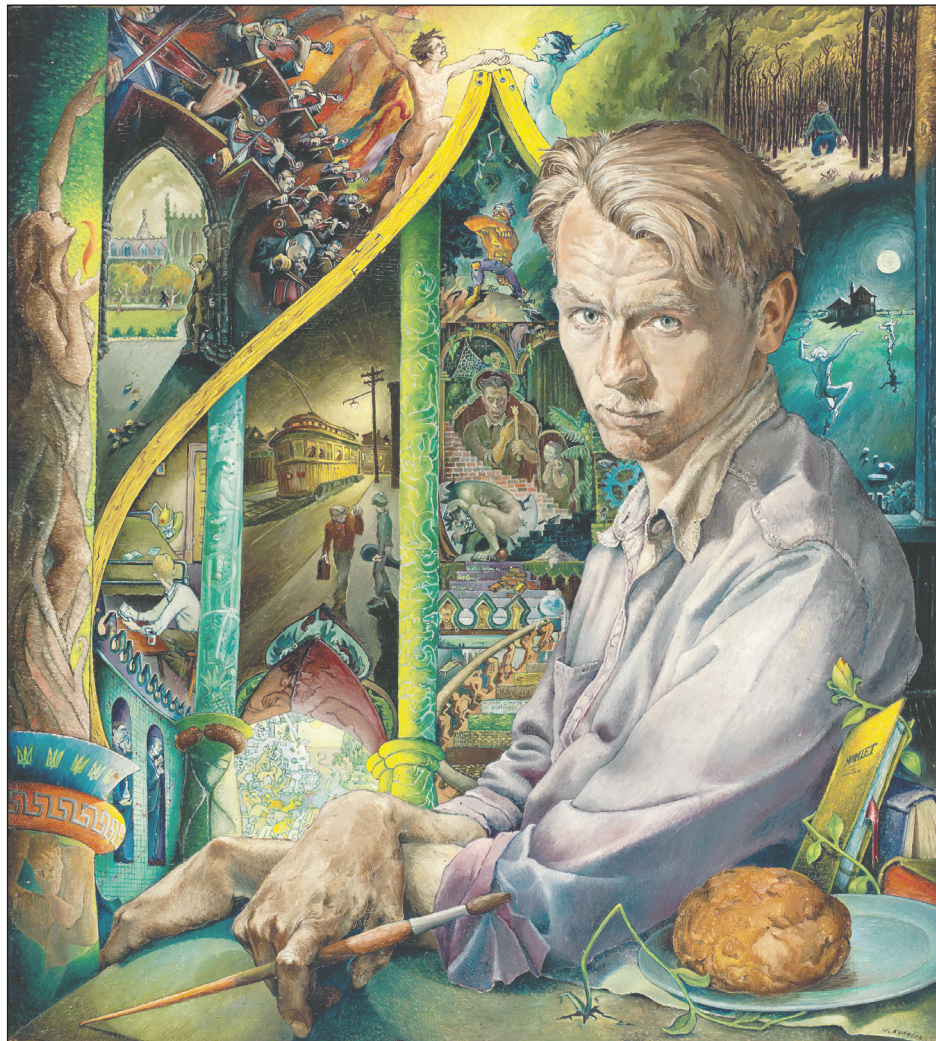
CBC news reported in 2017 that Heffel sold Jean-Paul Riopelle's work for a record-breaking price. The headline for CBC's the online article said, "Final sale price of \$7,438,750 makes it Canada's second most expensive work of art."

The most expensive Canadian painting, *Mountain Forms*, a Lawren Harris work from 1926 depicting the Rocky Mountains, was also sold by Heffel Fine Art Auction House. The CBC reported, "The overall price, with commission, was \$11.21 million, more than double the previous record-holder."

In addition to these record breakers, a representative from the auction house said that Heffel has sold more than 200 works by William Kurelek at auction since 1995. Several works by Kurelek went for substantially more than their estimated values. These works include, *Our Carolers in Western Canada*, which sold for \$383,500; *King of the Mountain* for \$380,250; and *Frozen Jack Rabbits* \$301,250. All of the figures are in Canadian funds, and include the buyer's premium.

Rebecca Rykiss of Heffel Fine Art Auction House in Toronto says, "Kurelek's works are deeply personal, incredibly detailed, and very expressive of his upbringing, religion and Ukrainian heritage. He is famous for depicting his observations of life on the prairies, every day interactions with his community and other aspects of Canadian life."

When asked if she knows if more of Kurelek's paintings will be auctioned anytime soon, Rykiss replied, "Absolutely – Heffel will be offering a number of important works by Kurelek at auction this fall, including the standout example, *Old Dufferin Street Market, Winnipeg*. The work is an incredibly detailed representation of a market scene



William Kurelek's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* sold for \$531,000 by Heffel in 2016. Photo submitted by Heffel

in Winnipeg, and is sure to excite Kurelek collectors. The estimate is \$100,000 to \$120,000 and it will be offered at Heffel's fall live auction on November 20, 2019."

Rykiss told *The Valley Gazette* in an email, "Major exhibitions (specifically, an important retrospective that began at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 2011), documentaries and other publicity have heightened exposure for Kurelek in the last decade. William Kurelek's market has been very strong in recent years, with heavy competition for his works at auction"

The artist's profile on the Heffel website says, "The body of Kurelek's work alternates between farm scenes of innocence and wonder, apocalyptic visions of the end of the world and biblical stories involving lessons of morality. Sometimes disturbing, sometimes naïve and joyous, his work is extremely personal and moving."

Kurelek's writing can also be very personal. His biography, *Someone With Me*, recounts some very intimate details of his life, beginning with his time when he was in and out of psychiatric wards in England. He had voluntarily admitted himself to the care of doctors in the hope of finding relief for his severe depression and for a psychosomatic eye pain that returned to him regularly while he was painting.

This exposure of private thoughts and intimate moments is especially surprising given the artist's extreme shyness. Despite

a variety of treatments including electric shock therapy, Kurelek ultimately found the cure for his psychological woes in religion. He had been raised nominally Ukrainian Orthodox, became an atheist as a young man, and eventually converted to Catholicism.

In the foreword to his autobiography, published by McClelland and Stewart, William's widow, Jean Kurelek wrote, "I do know he wanted this book to help others find the peace of mind as he had. He firmly believed that the true story of his conversion to Catholicism after his hospitalization would inspire others with hope and perhaps joy. Since that time, in one way or another – in his paintings, his public talks, and now in this book- he has been trying to bring this message to anyone who would listen."

If the book aspires to instil hope and joy in the reader, its early chapters start out more grimly. In chapter two, Kurelek describes a work he painted while a psychiatric out-patient at an English hospital called Maudsley.

He wrote, "I represented myself as if, having captured my parents and stripped them, I had mutilated their bodies with a butcher knife and strung them from the rafters by their tongues and other organs."

He adds, "I heard later that even the most hardened doctors were shocked when Dr. Cormier showed them the picture. Yet no matter how intensely I painted out my accumulated store of fears, hates and disillusionments, they



Kurelek Road in Combermere leads to William Kurelek's former cottage and farm

still remained with me as an immense psychological burden."

Ridding himself from this psychological burden was the driving force of Kurelek's early adulthood. Once he was free from the burden, his later mission shifted to sharing with others how he did it.

Kurelek was born March 3, 1927 in Alberta, and he spent much of his childhood farming in Manitoba. The harsh conditions immigrant farmers faced during the years of the Great Depression were intensified by Kurelek's unhappy home life. Kurelek believed much of his mental illness stemmed from the difficult relationship he had with his parents, especially his father.

Kurelek said, "My amateur psychological knowledge said there must have been some traumatic experience in my past which had trapped me in this pit; if I could just grope my way back to it then I might be in a position to set myself free."

His works are prized for their complex religious and psychological imagery and for their depiction of everyday life in rural settings. Kurelek's own life was marked by much suffering due to traumas experienced in childhood, and lengthy episodes of depression and schizophrenia.

A *Globe and Mail* article from 2012 reported, "In 1969, the Canadian artist William Kurelek told the American filmmaker Robert M. Young: 'First of all, I would like to state quite categorically that I don't believe I was ever mental ... I wasn't mental.'

Toward the end of his autobiography, Kurelek wrote, "People insist on thinking of me as a pessimist and I insist with equal emphasis that I'm not. I'm not a pessimist because I believe the story of my comeback to normalcy and success will dispel still further the social stigma that lingers on about psychological illness. I believe those who suffer mentally, both in hospital and out, will take hope from the

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fact that someone like themselves – a real person with a real name- did eventually recover. Not only it is possible for them to recover, it is possible to take advantage of and put to work the suffering they are going through.”

Besides his works that deal with religious and psychological themes, he also produced several series of painting on distinct ethnic groups in Canada. These groups include Polish, Ukrainian and Jewish communities. Kurelek himself was of Ukrainian decent. His father came from Ukraine and his maternal grandparents did too.

According to the Niagara Falls Art Gallery, which houses the largest collection of Kurelek paintings, “His exploration of Canadian life did not stop with his nostalgic remembrances but continued with illustrations of life across Canada among the various ethnic and regional groups. Books that were produced from these paintings include “Kurelek’s Canada,” “The Polish Canadians,” and “Jewish Life in Canada”.

Kurelek painted over 3,000 works and had a long-time association with the legendary art broker Avrom Isaacs of the Isaac’s Gallery in Toronto. Their working relationship was described by the Jewish Ukrainian Initiative as “remarkably successful and enduring partnership formed by the artist William Kurelek (1927-77), and the art dealer Avraam Isaacs (b. 1926) – a seemingly unlikely pairing of very different personalities who nevertheless developed a relationship that transcended not only their ethnic and religious backgrounds, but their wildly

dissimilar world views.”

Kurelek’s first view of Ontario created a strong memory. He wrote, “I’ll never forget the astounding impression Southern Ontario made on me when I first beheld it by train. I must have been on a B.M.R. high for I was rushing from window to window trying to drink it all in and not miss anything. Having grown up on the monotonous prairies, this was like eating a banana split after years of plain bread and butter. It was so beautiful, so warm, so quaint, so lush, so picturesque, so civilized, so interesting, so mature-I could have gone on and on stringing adjectives together in praise.”

MV Councillor Ernie Peplinski was among the Ontarians who were painted by Kurelek. He painted Peplinski behind the counter of his former store in Combermere. The painting appears as an illustration in the book, *They Sought a New World –The story of European Immigration to North America*.

Kurelek would come into Peplinski’s store often when he was at his cottage in Combermere. The former Kurelek property known as “Regina Pacis” (Latin for Queen of Peace) is now one of the residences for Madonna House priests.

Some of the long-time members of Madonna House still remember William Kurelek visiting there in the 1970s. Rejeanne George remembers Kurelek as a very shy man who bit by bit became more at ease with the community. She said, “It was clear that he had a gift as an artist.”

His 1965 oil on masonite painting called *Hope of the World* depicts a farm house which had been turned in to a “poustinia.” The word poustinia is Russian for “desert” and is a simple house used for prayer and contemplation. During the Second Vatican Council, the poustinia was used



Sign on William Kurelek’s former cottage reads “Regina Pacis Queen of Peace”. The former cottage is now a residence for Madonna House Priests.

to pray especially for intentions related to the council. The main Madonna House can be seen in the background. It is just another example of how the local people and settings influenced Kurelek’s work.

Dr. Debra Attenborough told *The Valley Gazette* in an email that the Niagara Falls Art Gallery was constructed beginning in 1972 by Ohla and Mikola Kolinewsky who were fans of Kurelek. They purchased a number of works from the artist “including the 160 piece *The Passion of Christ*” and built the gallery “as a celebration of his artwork.” Before his death, Kurelek would come out with his family during the summers as the artist in residence.

Attenborough said, “There are three things of William Kurelek’s that receive the most attention, *The passion of Christ* series, his painting *All things betray thee who betrayest me*, and the Bomb Shelter Studio”

In addition to his paintings, the gallery

also has “the bomb shelter studio” built by Kurelek. The threat of nuclear war loomed heavily on the thoughts of the artist. However, he believed that “Man is not the boss,” and that ultimately God was in control of whether or not the world continued.

William Kurelek’s son Stephen recommended several resources for people who want to learn more about his father. He includes: Andrew Kear’s new book called *William Kurelek Life & Work* (www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/william-kurelek). Patricia Morley’s biography *Kurelek* and Kurelek’s longer autobiography *Someone with Me*.

There are also two documentaries on William Kurelek that Stephen recommends. These are The 10 minute NFB film *Kurelek* (www.nfb.ca/film/kurelek/) and the refurbished 1970 documentary called *The Maze*. This documentary can be accessed through the website www.kurelek.ca.



Combermere resident and MV Township Councillor Ernie Peplinski is among the many Canadians who were featured in paintings by Kurelek. Peplinski is shown here holding Kurelek’s book *They Sought a New World The Story of European immigration to North America*. Kurelek painted a scene of Peplinski working in the Valley Market in Combermere.



Kurelek’s painting *Old Dufferin Street Market, Winnipeg* will be offered at Heffel’s fall live auction on November 20, 2019. It is estimated it will sell for \$100,000 – \$120,000.

Photo submitted by Heffel