



27 William Kurelek

ARCA OC OSA 1927 – 1977

Starting Flywheel Tractor

mixed media on board, initialed and dated 1969 and on verso titled and dated on the labels
14 × 30 in, 35.6 × 76.2 cm

PROVENANCE

Galerie Agnès Lefort, Montreal
Collection of Janet Braide, Toronto
By descent to Mrs. Braide's daughter, Martha Braide, Zurich

LITERATURE

Tobi Bruce et al., *William Kurelek: The Messenger*, Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2011, reproduced page 121
Robert M. Young and David Grubin, directors, *William Kurelek's The Maze*, 1969 and 2011, featuring this painting

EXHIBITED

Winnipeg Art Gallery, *William Kurelek: The Messenger*, September 29 – December 31, 2011, traveling in 2012 to the Art Gallery of Hamilton and Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, catalogue #53

On verso is the following text by William Kurelek:

For some reason I associate my plowing days with cloudy overcast skies. I was hopeless mechanically so even when I learned to start the tractor myself if it stopped for some reason (out of gas perhaps) I might “flood” the carburator [sic]

and then spend seemingly hours turning that flywheel till I had blisters all over my hands. It was our first really new tractor—a John Deere, and pulled 3 or 4 furrows. Plowing was done round the field instead of in strips as here in Ontario. I would be on the tractor going round and round a big field for days, the only break in the monotony being the lifting of the plow at the corners while I did a pretzel turn. Sea gulls would follow to snap up worms and grubs turned up by the plow.

WITH WRY BATHOS, *Starting Flywheel Tractor* uncovers an elemental showdown that captivated William Kurelek, and to which he returned throughout his career. The narrative genre scene depicts a microcosm of human toil—a farmer struggling to start his tractor—set adrift against the vast backdrop of the Canadian Prairies. The painting is, however, no mere lesson in farm humour or agrarian nostalgia. Humanity and nature, soil and grass, earth and sky—the picture's stark contrasts underline the deeper metaphysical and theological dualisms that concerned the devoutly Christian artist: finitude and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal, good and evil.

Kurelek was born east of Edmonton in 1927, into a family with roots tracing back to the village of Boriwtsi in the Ukraine. His parents met, married and had their first three children, including William, the eldest, in Alberta before the family relocated to a dairy farm north of Winnipeg in 1934. Kurelek's formative years in rural Manitoba were a far cry from where his life would later take him. He studied history and literature at the University

of Manitoba, and then enrolled at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto. Unsatisfied with the instruction and the OCA's formal setting, Kurelek hitchhiked the continent, spending time at an artists' colony in Mexico before boarding a ship to England. Overseas for nearly a decade, he underwent psychiatric treatment for ailments he had developed as a teenager and converted to Roman Catholicism. When his health improved, Kurelek visited numerous art museums throughout Europe, where he saw the work of Pieter Bruegel, Matthias Grünewald, Hieronymus Bosch and other Northern Renaissance artists who would exert a lasting impression on his creativity, outlook and identity.

Back in Toronto by 1959, a virtually unknown artist, Kurelek's star began its meteoric rise. He received his first solo exhibition in 1960, at the Isaacs Gallery. His paintings were soon being acquired by major institutions across North America, including the National Gallery of Canada, Art Gallery of Ontario and Museum of Modern Art in New York. Although his work throughout the 1960s betrays decidedly European aesthetic roots, his subjects are overwhelmingly of Western Canada. Moreover, while he made regular sketching trips to Alberta and Manitoba as an adult, Kurelek's landscapes convey the mood of memory—the Prairies of his youth. Even in the last year of his life, by which time he had lived in Toronto for nearly two decades, Kurelek's lingering impressions of Western Canada were vivid. “Its enormity,” he wrote in 1977, “dwarfs and dominates life, all life, both man and animal, whether it crawls, walks, or flies over its surface.”¹ *Starting Flywheel Tractor* relays something of the region's enduring, almost primordial, influence on Kurelek.

Starting Flywheel Tractor is part of his *Prairie Farm Work* series, 21 panels completed and exhibited at Montreal's Galerie Godard Lefort in 1969. The series is one of several the artist produced over his lifetime that explore the dignity, gruff slapstick and Sisyphean relentlessness of farm life and labour, including *Farm and Bush Life* (1962), *An Immigrant Farms in Canada* (1964), and *Farm Humour* (1971). This painting depicts a farmer wrestling with the flywheel mechanism to manually start his engine. The tractor—likely a John Deere from the 1930s or 1940s—hauls a plough, which churns the soil in preparation for seeding. The scene contrasts the minutiae of the lone man's task-driven focus and effort with the fruit of that focus and effort: the vast open patchwork of fields that surrounds him. While seemingly light-hearted, *Starting Flywheel Tractor* delivers one of the artist's favourite darker reminders: even while the earth seems to have been subdued by human ingenuity, even while machines have increased work efficiency, we remain imperfect and vulnerable. Nature may be beautiful, but such beauty is, in Kurelek's words, “just so much mockery to the farmer whose crops she has flooded out” or, indeed, whose tractor will not start.²

We thank Andrew Kear, head of collections, exhibitions and programs at Museum London and co-curator of the traveling 2011–2012 exhibition *William Kurelek: The Messenger*, for contributing the above essay. Kear recently authored the Art Canada Institute publication *William Kurelek: Life & Work*.

1. William Kurelek, quoted in Joan Murray, *Kurelek's Vision of Canada* (Oshawa, ON: Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1982), 72.
2. *Ibid.*, 71.

ABOUT THE PROVENANCE

STARTING FLYWHEEL TRACTOR has a noteworthy provenance. In addition to having been featured in the 2011 retrospective and publication *William Kurelek: The Messenger*, it is being offered for auction by the family of Janet Braide MFA (1926–1987), a noted Canadian art historian, curator, author and collector. Mrs. Braide, who was a student and mentee of J. Russell Harper, received her first curatorial assignment in 1979 from the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston. Her work resulted in a major retrospective of the work of William Brymner, a contribution that was recognized in the 2010 publication *William Brymner: Artist, Teacher, Colleague*, dedicated to her memory. She also curated the first major exhibition of the work of Anne Savage, a founding member of the Canadian Group of Painters, for the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (1979) and was working on a book about the printmakers Caroline and Frank Armington at the time of her death. The Janet Braide Memorial Fund, established by her family, provides annual support for the work of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in the field of Canadian historical art.

Mrs. Braide was a very popular teacher of art history at McGill University and introduced countless young and mature students to the love of fine art. She was also an avid collector of Canadian art and brought both her academic perspective and diverse interests to collecting. She was an early supporter of the printmakers of Cape Dorset, a great friend and mentor to Ted Harrison, and she and her husband, David I.W. Braide, built up a collection that included works by Ken Danby, Angus Trudeau, Jori Smith and, of course, Kurelek, because, as she would say, “Above all, buying art must be about buying what you love.” She loved to get to know the artists whose work she purchased, and she maintained friendships, mentorships and correspondence with many emerging and established artists over the years.

This work is in the original frame made by Kurelek.

ESTIMATE: \$100,000 – 120,000