



14 William Kurelek

ARCA OC OSA 1927–1977

Making Laundry Water in Saskatchewan, Winter

mixed media on board, initialed and dated 1968
and on verso titled on a piece of tape
11 ¾ × 14 in, 29.8 × 35.6 cm

PROVENANCE

Canadian Fine Art, Waddington's, December 10, 1999,
lot 203
Private Collection, Calgary
Private Collection, Toronto

WILLIAM KURELEK WAS fascinated, even obsessed, with work. From gritty portrayals of physical labour to harrowing

depictions of mental and spiritual toil, human industry was a deep well of meaning for the artist. Above all, Kurelek held an enduring respect for farm work. The manual chores of agrarian families and communities take centre stage in much of his oeuvre. *Making Laundry Water in Saskatchewan, Winter* encompasses Kurelek's profound feeling for the diverse, hardscrabble, unrelenting farm work he knew first-hand.

Kurelek was born just east of Edmonton, Alberta, in 1927. Both sides of his family traced their roots back to the Ukrainian village of Borivtsi. Dmytro Kurelek and Mary Huculak—the artist's parents—met, married and had their first three children including William, the eldest, in Alberta before relocating the family to a dairy farm north of Winnipeg in 1934. After studying Latin, English and history at the University of Manitoba, Kurelek moved to Toronto to study at the Ontario College of Art in 1949, but

dropped out after only two terms. A desire to pursue real-world adventure and outrun mounting psychological affliction drove him into a period of sustained transience. Kurelek hitchhiked to Mexico, spending six months at an artists' colony at San Miguel de Allende before returning to Canada. In 1952, after briefly reuniting with his family, he boarded a ship for England. Based in London for nearly a decade, Kurelek traveled throughout mainland Europe, visiting numerous museums where he encountered the work of Pieter Bruegel, Matthias Grünewald, Hieronymus Bosch, and other influential artists of the Northern Renaissance. Kurelek also underwent a dramatic personal reckoning. While in England, he attempted suicide and received sustained psychiatric treatment—which included electroconvulsive therapy—before converting to Roman Catholicism in 1957.

Upon his return to Toronto in 1959, Kurelek's star began its meteoric rise. He was hired as a picture framer for the respected Isaacs Gallery, where he also received his first solo exhibition to great and popular acclaim in 1960. It was a time when modernist abstraction was authoritative. Serious representational painting in North America was largely confined to the ironic and iconoclastic aesthetics of Neo-Dada and emergent Pop Art. Kurelek's charmingly idiosyncratic combination of illustrative realism, narrative didacticism, moral indignation, folksy sweetness and Bosch-like bizarreness quickly distinguished him among his contemporaries in Toronto. Before the artist's death in 1977, Kurelek's paintings were acquired by major institutions, including the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Ontario, as well as New York's Museum of Modern Art.

While he may have been based in Toronto for most of his professional life, as *Making Laundry Water in Saskatchewan* illustrates, Kurelek focused his artistic lens overwhelmingly on his Western Canadian roots. Drawing from personal memory, the lore of family and friends, and from direct observations made during regular sketching trips through the Prairie provinces, Kurelek captured the region's geographic enormity. He was also deeply attentive to the activities of people, often highlighting the labour of immigrant farming families from his parents' generation. Whereas the Canadian painting tradition, as it had been defined earlier in the twentieth century, had largely mobilized around the idea of an unindustrialized and underpopulated boreal wilderness, the agrarian landscape became, for Kurelek, a responsive stage on which the human victories and privations of life were celebrated and confronted.

Kurelek painted *Making Laundry Water in Saskatchewan* in 1968, between a series celebrating the struggles and contributions of Ukrainian immigrant women in Western Canada (*The Ukrainian Pioneer Woman in Canada*, 1968) and a series exploring the dignity, humour and relentlessness of farm life and labour (*Prairie Farm Work*, 1969). This roughly one-foot-square painting reads as a contemporary version of the Northern Renaissance vignette: a self-contained scene that could just as easily have been integrated within a larger painting. Framed in the barn-board Kurelek had begun sourcing from his parents' farm near Hamilton around 1964, it depicts a family group working in the middle of a barren, snow-packed field in mid-winter on the Canadian Prairies. A hunched, kerchiefed woman—a figure that hints at Kurelek's debt to artists from Bruegel to Stanley Spencer, Vincent van Gogh and David Siqueiros—stokes the bowels of a



Making Laundry Water in Saskatchewan, Winter in the frame made by William Kurelek

fiery jerry-rigged cauldron, which receives the blocks of snow harvested and heaved into it by two children.

The activity we witness—the preparation of hot water for laundering—is at once mundane and spectacular. Kurelek transposes a familiar domestic chore that modern North American viewers associate with the home to the middle of a field in winter. The painting succinctly underlines the artist's ennobling view of farm work. "It is by the sweat and toil of thousands of such unknown people across the agricultural west," Kurelek wrote in 1968, "that the country was developed before the full mechanization of the land."¹

We thank Andrew Kear, senior curator and head of Exhibitions, Collections and Programs at Museum London, for contributing the above essay.

This work is in the original frame made by Kurelek. The artist frequently used the *trompe l'oeil* effects of his frames to heighten and dramatize his paintings, which made them extensions of the scenes in their own right. Here, the painted white moulding extends the snowy landscape outwards, and it resembles a window frame looking outside. The edges of blue and green echo the colours in the painting, creating a chilly reflected glow.

1. William Kurelek, *The Ukrainian Pioneer Woman in Canada: A Series of Twenty Paintings by William Kurelek* (Toronto: Isaacs Gallery, 1968), exhibition notes, unpaginated.

ESTIMATE: \$50,000 – 70,000