



21 Alex Simeon Janvier

CM PNIAI RCA WS 1935 – 2024

Canuck Gift Horse

acrylic on linen, signed and on verso titled and dated 1981
48 x 72 in, 121.9 x 182.9 cm

PROVENANCE

Gallery Moos, Toronto
Dr. Luigi Rossi
Estate of Dr. Luigi Rossi

EXHIBITED

Art Gallery of Calgary, *The Alberta Biennial Celebrates the Work of Alex Janvier*, September 7, 2007 – January 5, 2008

ALEXANDRE SIMEON JANVIER, who passed away on July 10 of this year, left a prodigious legacy as an artist and human being. Born in 1935 on the Denesūliné reserve of Le Goff, Cold Lake Indian Reserve (now Cold Lake First Nations), Janvier witnessed much change in Canada with regards to government policies impacting Indigenous peoples. His own experience, from his time as a young art student to becoming an internationally respected artist, is a case in point.

Janvier attended Blue Quills residential school, and although he was accepted into the Ontario College of Art (now Ontario College of Art and Design University), the Indian agent denied his request to relocate to Toronto for his post-secondary education. Instead, in 1956, Janvier began his art studies in Calgary at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology. Even while living off-reserve for art school, Janvier faced harassment by law-enforcement officers demanding to see his pass.¹

When prime minister John Diefenbaker pushed through Indigenous suffrage legislation in 1960, effective on July 1 of that year, this became the moment when Indigenous artists had the necessary freedom of movement and political agency to make their mark on society and on the contemporary art scene. As Canada welcomed the world for Expo 67 in Montreal, Indigenous artists played a pivotal role while also using art as a tool for activism and education. As part of the committee assigned to the Indians of Canada Pavilion at the world's fair, Janvier was also commissioned to paint a large mural, *Beaver Crossing Indian Colours (The Unpredictable East)*.

The title of *Canuck Gift Horse*, completed in 1981, is a wry statement given the personal and collective costs that government policies and broken treaties have had on Indigenous peoples. Compositionally the work is vibrant and lyrical, with the constant centrifugal motion that Janvier's precise curvilinear brush-strokes generate. He developed this style in the 1960s, with aesthetic maturation demonstrated by the 1970s. Janvier

was not one to want his work to be overintellectualized. Referring to the origins of his compositions, he said, "It is simple, from nature, from my surroundings, I try to stay close to my heart."²

Works such as *Canuck Gift Horse* are like a bird's-eye view of the topography of the land Janvier knew, Cold Lake First Nations and the surrounding territory. It suggests tributaries flowing through the soil and a dance of the elements, including the whipping of wind and tongues of fire. The forms also metamorphose into fish and birds or other life forms, all connected through the unbroken lines of his brushwork. The painting is on linen, a material that Janvier used at times in place of canvas, including works in the 2016 retrospective for the National Gallery of Canada: *Saddle Trip* (1977, collection of Canadian Museum of History), *Grand Entry* (1980, collection of the Art Gallery of Alberta) and *Fly, Fly, Fly* (1981, collection of Remai Modern).

From state dignitaries to the children, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, that he touched through his art workshops, Janvier left an indelible mark on art in Canada. As he has said, "Art saved me in those residential schools."³ *Canuck Gift Horse*, as with his entire body of work, illustrates the alchemizing capacity of his art. With its fluid, meandering trails of artfully balanced warm and cool tones, this large canvas takes us on a mesmerizing journey into Janvier's singular artistic vision along with his intuitive mastery of "spiritual colour and spiritual colour knowledge."⁴ Among his many awards are the Alberta Order of Excellence in 2018, Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2008, and the Order of Canada in 2007. Janvier also received several honorary degrees, including in 2016 from the Ontario College of Art and Design University, a full-circle moment, deserved and owed, for this artist, activist and educator.

We thank Leah Snyder, digital designer and writer, The L. Project, for contributing the above essay. Snyder writes about culture, technology and contemporary art; she is a regular contributor to the National Gallery of Canada's *Gallery* magazine and other Canadian art publications.

1. "Canada 150: Artist Alex Janvier on Discrimination after Residential Schooling," Canadian Press, June 14, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nl3P-4zBTUM,00:22>.

2. "Alex Janvier Paints the Vast Landscape of Indigenous Life," *Globe and Mail*, September 21, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3clUf6YEyO,00:20>.

3. *Ibid.*, 1:30.

4. Greg A. Hill, in *Alex Janvier: Modern Indigenous Master* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 2016), by Greg A. Hill et al., exhibition catalogue, 18.

ESTIMATE: \$50,000 – 70,000