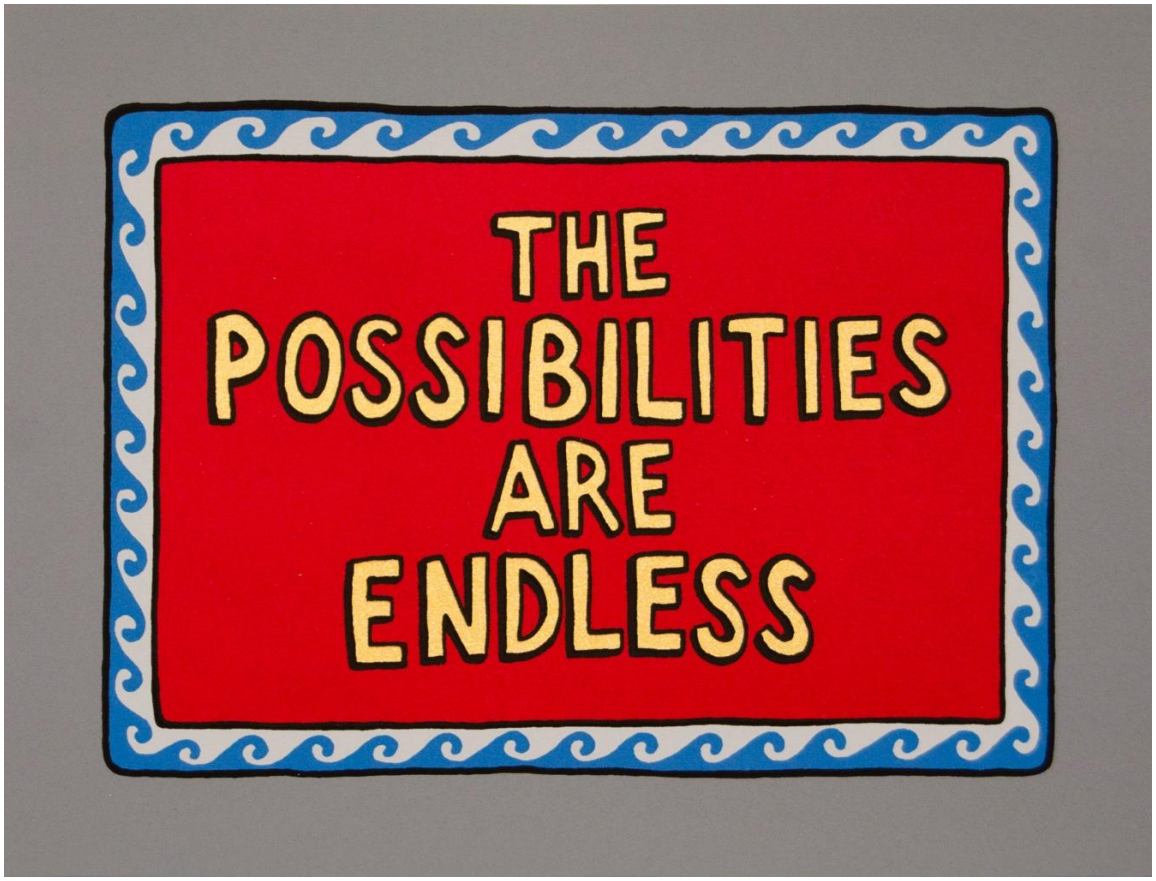
Holding Patterns: the long view

A Look Inside the McIntosh Gallery Collection

September 25-December 6, 2025

What does it mean to be a collecting institution in the contemporary moment?

This question settled at the forefront of *Holding Patterns: the short view—Recent Acquisitions from the McIntosh Gallery Collection* on view from April 5-July 11, 2025. This is the kind of question that doesn't have a single answer, instead it serves as a guiding force that prompts more questions. It is an invitation to look deeper and to dream up a future that is not yet in reach. It provides the space to reimagine what collections could become, what we want them to accomplish, and what must be prioritized to achieve this vision. As the McIntosh Gallery undertakes a fulsome collection audit and review this is one of the key questions that has come to direct our work.



Jamie Q, *The Possibilities are Endless*, 2012, 6-colour screen print. Purchase, Saward Memorial Fund, 2012. Collection of McIntosh Gallery, Western University.

Holding Patterns: the long view—A Look Inside the McIntosh Gallery Collection visualizes one part of the complex process that is reviewing the collection. Taking a wider perspective, it turns to collection data to zoom out and consider the collection from a birds-eye view. It is an attempt to look at the collection as a whole, to get to know it better.

When an artwork enters a museum collection it is accessioned—the process of taking legal ownership over an object. Through this process, a unique object ID number is created, linking the object to the information that the gallery knows about it. This is the first of many data points that are created to identify, track, care for, and share information about objects in the collection. Critical to this data generation is cataloguing. Cataloguing is the process of recording and managing information about objects in a collection. These details can be basic, like an artwork title, the date it was produced, or the artist who made it. They can also be more complex, like detailing how an object was created, its significance and exhibition history, or a record of its past ownership.[1] These details are gathered from a variety of sources and updated over time, permitting the gallery to document the many stories an object holds. The process of cataloguing is never totally complete. There is always more to learn about an object.

This data is frequently stored in collections management software systems designed to record the many details of the life of a museum object. With a collection of well over 4,000 objects, we have a lot of data. In early 2025, as the gallery set out to conduct a review of the collection, we began by considering how we could come to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the collection as a whole. Through this question, the analysis of collection data emerged as a critical wellspring of information capable of revealing broad trends related to the collection.

Our inquiry began with general questions about how the collection has emerged over time; what factors have most prominently influenced its development; and how various time periods, materials, and artists are represented. While the answers to some questions materialized from the data and generated new paths of inquiry, others proved to be stickier, requiring alternative research strategies and provoking new questions about how data has been recorded (or not).

While the collection review is far from complete, this exhibition assembles initial findings that emerged from the data analysis. From these trends, a fuzzy image of the collection is taking shape. Despite its ill-defined edges, this image informs the research that is yet to come as we set priorities that will guide how we collect, care for, and interpret the collection in the years to come.

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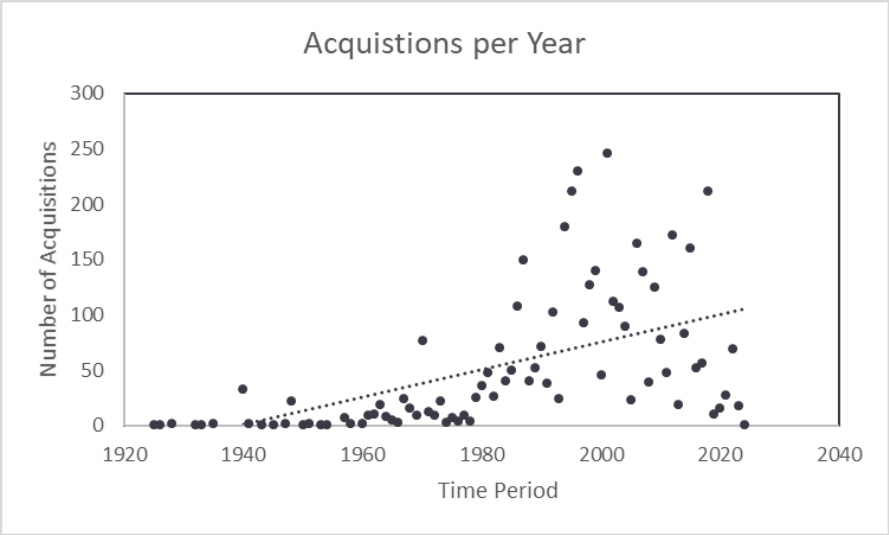
[1] This is commonly referred to as provenance.

The West Gallery presents a pair of intersecting timelines. The selected works have been carefully laid out to present a proportional snapshot of the collection. Collapsed on top of each other, these timelines make trends in acquisitions and artwork production simultaneously legible, with each artwork symbolizing roughly 4% of the collection.

Object ID numbers, the first piece of data recorded about an object, track the history of new acquisitions. Formatted in two parts, the first four digits of the ID number capture the year the piece was acquired, while the second four digits track objects based on the order they entered the collection that year. Visualizing this data, the gallery is organized by time period, labeled and demarcated with paint. It is clear from first glance how the density of collecting has developed throughout the institution's history, peaking in the 1990s and early 2000s.

A closer look at acquisition data illustrates that even within periods of heavy collecting activity, the volume of new acquisitions fluctuated year over year. Often, time periods with many new acquisitions were the result of large-scale donations from significant donors. A practice that became increasingly common in the 1980s, as the focus on building the collection through donations solidified and acquisitions began to balloon.

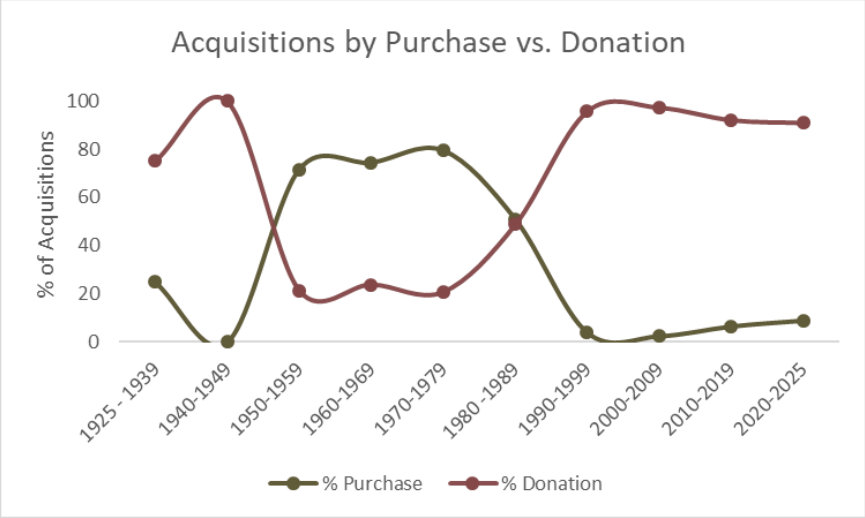


A second more subtle, yet equally important, timeline also plays out. A web of intersecting lines link each piece to the period in which it was created, illustrating the proportion of artworks produced at different times. As the coloured paths converge, they reveal how well different periods have been collected. While the collection has significant holdings that were produced in the 1960s (burgundy) and 1990s (dark green), with each period accounting for about 11% of the collection, the 70s (olive) and 80s (navy) stand out as the most densely collected periods, making up 21% and 26% of the collection respectively. Here, the data illustrates strengths in the collection that clearly define its shape. On the other end of the spectrum, time periods before 1960 and after 2000, are least represented, with each period accounting for 5% or less of the collection. Illustrated in grey, these periods almost disappear

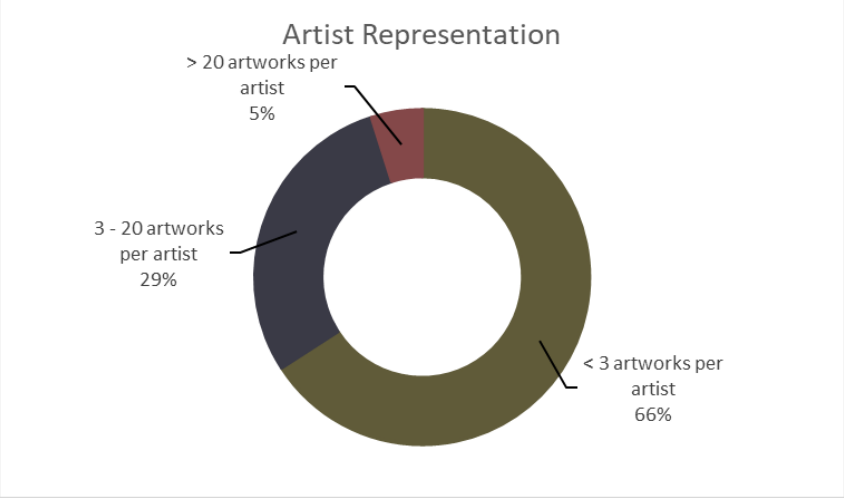
into the gallery floor, representing weaknesses in the collection that begin to look more like anomalies than trends. Most notable is the lack of contemporary practices in the collection, highlighting a key area that would benefit from focused future development.

It can be challenging to illustrate data through artworks. There is often a disconnect between the data and the pieces to which it corresponds. Tools like tombstone labels help bridge this gap by listing some essential details alongside each artwork. These extra datapoints go beyond the trends illustrated by the arrangement of the works, adding more information for visitors to explore and piece together. These strategies are paired with graphs included on select extended labels that more clearly illustrate trends in the data. Some clarify patterns in acquisition and production dates, while others address different questions equally critical to the broader collections review, such as:

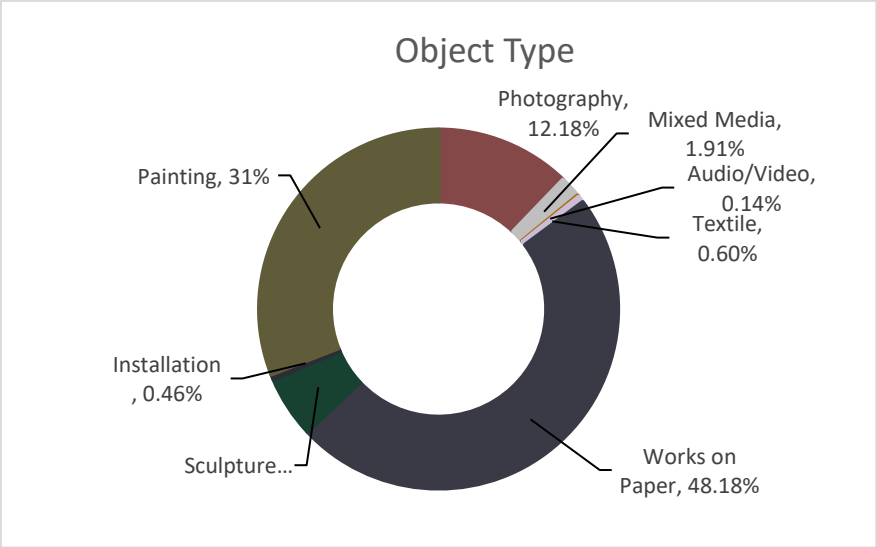
How have acquisition strategies changed over time?



How well-represented are the artists in the collection? How many works do we have per artist?



And what is the breakdown of artistic approaches, or object types, represented in the collection?



In the East Gallery, works are organized by "Object Type," a category assigned to help group different kinds of art objects. As seen above, this data makes the artistic breakdown of the collection incredibly clear. Nearly half of the collection can be categorized as works on paper, which includes drawings, prints, collages, and other paper-based works. Painting, including watercolours, is the next largest category, followed by photography, sculpture, and mixed media. The exhibited works follow this breakdown, with each piece representing about 3% of the collection. Tombstone labels also include each object's object type, helping to make sense of the material breakdown in the space.

The prevalence of works on paper is consistent with what we already know about early collecting practices at McIntosh Gallery, which took a special interest in contemporary drawing. Beyond an acquisition committee with an affinity for drawing, drawings were often acquired because they were less expensive than other media or more historical pieces. Additionally, they were easier to store since they could be kept flat and unframed. Even today, drawing remains a key focus of the gallery's collecting priorities. The practical attributes that make drawing appealing to collect also extend to other forms of works on paper that can also be stored flat and unframed in archival-grade solander boxes or map drawers, which comprise much of the gallery's storage. As a nod to these storage conditions, the map drawers in the exhibition feature additional works on paper, presented as they would be in the vault. Visitors are invited to look inside to experience the full scope of the collection's works on paper.

Looking closely at object types also highlighted the need to review how object type categories are defined and assigned to objects in the collection. The result was clarified definitions and procedural adjustments that directly inform the concurrent collection audit, a process that entails physically reviewing every object in the collection to confirm its location, condition, basic data, and additional work required to care for the object or complete its associated object record. While questions about

object type prompted a refinement of our data practices, there are other instances where we simply did not have the data to answer some of our questions.

As museums confront biases in past collecting practices, people want to know who is represented in collections. Traditionally, collection data has focused on the details of the physical object rather than demographic information about the artist. This leaves gaps in knowledge, and the McIntosh Gallery collection is no exception. As the collecting policy has shifted to explicitly prioritize the acquisition of artists who have historically been underrepresented in the collection, there is a lack of data to understand the extent of current gaps in representation and the recent impacts of efforts to collect differently.

For years, McIntosh Gallery has been committed to advancing gender parity in the collection by prioritizing the acquisition of work by women artists. When this goal was set, a custom data field was created to record gender information—the gallery's only demographic datapoint. At first, this field reduced gender to a binary. But, as collecting priorities have expanded to include the acquisition of both women and gender diverse artists, methods of data collection have also been adapted. When new works are acquired, staff consult with the artist to record the language that they feel best reflects their gender identity and lived experience. With over 700 artists in the collection, ensuring this data is accurate continues to be a work in progress.

Despite efforts towards gender parity, women and gender diverse artists currently only represent 18% of the collection. The East Gallery offers an opportunity to confront this lack of representation and reflect on the broader challenge of demographic gaps within collection data. Beyond the absence of data, there are also important practical questions about how to responsibly and inclusively collect demographic data. Situating these challenges at the forefront, the selected works in this section of the East Gallery break with the exhibition's otherwise very proportional curatorial methodology to showcase additional works by women and non-binary artists. While the rest of the exhibition maintains a proportionally accurate gender split, with 10 of 55 works on view produced by women or gender diverse artists, here that representation is doubled, highlighting a longstanding gap in the collection.

As McIntosh Gallery continues to refine its data practices through the collections audit and review, we are also exploring how to develop new demographic fields capable of capturing the contents of the collection and ensuring that we have the necessary data to answer questions that are critical to the collection and its future.

While *Holding Patterns: the short view* zoomed in on the collection to focus on recent acquisitions and what they have taught us about collecting practices at McIntosh Gallery over the past five years, *the long view* takes the opposite approach. Zooming out to get a birds-eye view of the more than 4,000 artworks, it takes a more holistic snapshot of the collection. From here, the multi-year process of the

collection audit and review continues. It is long and labour-intensive, but through this process, we have the opportunity to think critically about collecting practices that are often slow to change and meaningfully bring them into the present. We must never stop asking *what it means to be a collecting institution in the contemporary moment.*

Rachel Deiterding

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