

# BLACK HISTORY MONTH

KING HERITAGE & CULTURAL CENTRE

---

FEBRUARY 5, 2024

---

## REPAINTING CANADIAN ART HISTORY

Canadian history has largely been recorded through a white lens and it seems so too has the history of Canadian visual art.

Researching the history of Black settlers in York Region, and much of Canada, is not an easy task (see BHM newsletters 2023, volumes I and II). Non-white Canadians were often overlooked and blatantly disregarded in the historic record. Black individuals may be found in census records, assessment rolls and photographs, if you really look carefully, but representation in the early arts community is more difficult and very few works of art are known.

Since art education was racially segregated and generally available only to those of the middle and upper classes, well into the 20th century, many aspiring Black artists were self-taught. Art supplies were pricey and time to create may also have been limited.

Historically, Black artists had to hide their true identities in order for their talent to be recognized. Unfortunately, “Passing for white” opened more doors and ensured more artistic success.

---

### First Known African Canadian Male Artist

Generally accepted as the earliest known Black Canadian artist, George H. McCarthy (1860-1906) was in fact bi-racial. Born in Shelburne, Nova Scotia, to a shipbuilding family, there is little known about his art training and interest in the arts.



Colour-tinted photograph

Although more is known about Robert S. Duncanson (1821-1872), who was another Black artist now believed to have been American, the earliest known surviving painting by an African Canadian is attributed to George McCarthy. *View of Town of Shelburne (1885)* is a landscape depicting his town of his birth, that includes some notable landmarks of the local Black community such as the oldest Canadian Baptist Church.

continued



View of Town of Shelburne (1885)

McCarthy's family was successful in the shipbuilding business and many members displayed an entrepreneurial spirit. His sister Anna, was the first Black teacher to obtain a first class license in Nova Scotia and his brothers were successful in their own businesses. From a modern perspective, one wonders if their lighter complexion opened more doors.

### **First Known African Canadian Female Artist**

Born Black and female in the community of Africville, Nova Scotia, there is little known about the life and art of Edith Hester MacDonald Brown (1886-1954). She is believed to have attended art school in Montreal and started painting before her marriage to William Henry Brown Jr.

Working in oil, she is believed to have been a prolific painter; tragically, only four pieces of her artwork are known to have survived, the earliest of which she painted at the age of twelve.

The rest are believed to have fallen victim to political unrest in Halifax when the government forced citizens of Africville off their land - much property and many possessions were destroyed in the process.

The four surviving paintings are now owned by the artist's grand-daughter.



Sweet Peas, 1911 (now lost)

---

Although currently, little is known about early Black visual artists in Canada, there is undoubtedly more to learn. As research continues, perhaps more artists and their work can be highlighted - and Canadian art history can be repainted.