

Major retrospective celebrating artist Alex Janvier at McMichael

Until Jan. 21, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection presents the extraordinary works of Alex Janvier, one of Canada's most acclaimed contemporary artists.

Organized by the National Gallery of Canada (NGC), the Alex Janvier exhibition celebrates this innovative artist's lifetime of creativity, and recounts his love of Dene culture and devotion to the re-empowerment of Indigenous art. As the largest and most comprehensive retrospective on the artist to date, this exhibition establishes Janvier as an important figure in the development of modern Indigenous art in Canada.

"The McMichael is a preeminent institution that continues in its efforts to present an all-encompassing picture of the Art of Canada, particularly contemporary Indigenous art," Ian DeJardin, executive director of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, commented. "The cultural importance of Alex Janvier's work is outstanding, and our hope is to build greater awareness of his impact while broadening knowledge and visibility of an overlooked part of Canada's cultural heritage."

Through more than 100 remarkable paintings and drawings chosen from a prolific 65-year career, the exhibition features works from both private and public collections across Canada, and includes well-recognized masterpieces completed by the artist alongside an incredible installation of 34 circular paintings – a constellation of Janvier's works spanning more than 35 years that can be viewed as a metaphor for the cycle of life.

Well known for his ability to merge cultural aesthetics in his pioneering work, the artist's unique paintings – with their brilliant colours, calligraphic lines and conjoined abstract and representational imagery – combine Dene and Suline iconography with Western art styles and theoretical techniques, such as modern abstraction and automatic painting.

Organized by Greg Hill of NGC, this touring exhibition also highlights Janvier's integral role in the advancement and celebration of Indigenous art in mainstream Canadian culture.

Janvier was a founding member of the Indian Group of Seven, officially known as Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. (PNIAI). Formed in 1973, PNIAI members were dedicated to raising the profile of Indigenous artists.

"Janvier is one of the most important artists in this country in part because of how he has come through the adversities of his childhood and has turned these into strengths," Hill said. "He found a way to exist in the space between a strong family unit and an imposed educational program designed to assimilate him into the dominating culture."

Janvier was born Feb. 28, 1935, in Le Goff Reserve, Cold Lake Indian Reserve (now Cold Lake First Nations), Alberta, and is of Dene Suline and Saulteaux descent. As a Member of the Order of Canada, Alberta Order of Excellence and Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, he has achieved distinguished success and global recognition for his groundbreaking contributions. With a distinct style of painting firmly rooted in the cultural soil of Canada, his long and abundant career has added much to the nation's cultural fabric.