"The Artistic Development of Frank Mikuska"

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Frank Mikuska was a member of the generation of students who experienced the incorporation of the School of Art into the University of Manitoba first hand. He was also one of the students who was most deeply affected by the new artistic tendencies that were being encouraged at the School of Art within the University. While he has not received the recognition that some of his contemporaries have, he is to be recognized as one of the most important artists working in Winnipeg during the 1960s and 70s. During this period he experimented with a range of media, and his art, while it does not necessarily represent what was current in the leading art centres of the day, is innovative in many respects and is of consistently high quality.

Mikuska was born in Winnipeg in 1930, the third of four children. His parents immigrated to Canada from Slovakia in 1923. Originally, his parents wanted to move to the United States; however, there were quotas limiting the number of Central Europeans immigrants, and they had been filled by the time that Frank’s parents arrived in Canada.[[1]](#footnote-2) Initially, his father worked in the forestry industry in Northwestern Ontario. The family finally settled in the community of Point Douglas, one of Winnipeg’s oldest neighbourhoods, and this is where Frank spent his youth.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Neither of Frank’s parents engaged in artistic activity, and therefore, he was not exposed to very much art at home. However, because he was raised in a religious household, he was exposed to liturgical imagery. His family attended the Roman Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception which was richly painted on its interior. Although the building no longer survives, Frank recalls being awestruck by the images on its walls.[[3]](#footnote-4) This was the only art that he had access to during his youth. He also attended the church’s parochial school. A nun teaching there noticed his aptitude for art and both encouraged him and supplied him with materials.

Mikuska was held back two years in elementary school because he was not proficient enough in English to move forward. In high school he became frustrated with the curriculum and the emphasis placed on reading.[[4]](#footnote-5) In an interview recently conducted with Oliver Botar, Mikuska does not specify why it is that he struggled so much with language and reading. However, one should note that while his father became quite fluent in English, his mother resisted learning the language and neither of them emphasized reading in their household.[[5]](#footnote-6) In any case, halfway through his grade ten year, Frank dropped out of school.

His decision to enroll in the Winnipeg School of Art at the age of 17 was precipitated in part by the death of his brother, who had been employed at Manitoba Hydro [was this the name of the company at the time?] and was electrocuted while working on ground lines during a rainstorm in 1947.[[6]](#footnote-7) In the aftermath of this accident, Frank’s parents pushed him to find something meaningful to do that was not dangerous. He decided to enroll in the Winnipeg School of Art because he felt that he did not really have any aptitude for other things. His parents supported his decision and paid for his classes. His somewhat spontaneous decision to enroll in the School of Art can be seen as one of the most important decisions of his life.

In 1947 the School of Art was under the direction of Joseph Plaskett, who had studied art in Vancouver, as well as in New York with Hans Hofmann at the Art Students’ League.[[7]](#footnote-8) According to Tony Tascona, who also studied under him, Plaskett was very much influenced by Hofmann and taught his students “…the elements of abstract art based on colour.”[[8]](#footnote-9) However, Mikuska recalls that the style of teaching at the time was still classical: students were instructed to draw still lifes and plaster casts of antique sculptures, and the focus was primarily on naturalistic depiction.[[9]](#footnote-10) When he began studying art, Mikuska found it very challenging. Despite this he was motivated to continue working and was very interested in learning about art.[[10]](#footnote-11) He took classes with the British sculptor Cecil Richards – who continued to teach sculpture at the School of Art when it was taken over by the University of Manitoba – and Edna Tedeschi. It is important to note that at this point, Mikuska still had not really come to adopt Modernist tendencies in his art. He must have had some exposure to Modernism since there were several abstract paintings hanging on the walls at the School of Art, such as Bertram Brooker’s *Sounds Assembling*.[[11]](#footnote-12) However, he does not remember being affected by these artworks, in part because he found them difficult to comprehend.[[12]](#footnote-13)

In 1959, Albert Gibson, President of the University of Manitoba, initiated a merger between the University and the Winnipeg School of Art.[[13]](#footnote-14) Following this, there was a distinct shift in the way that art was taught at the School, and the type of art that students were encouraged to look at and produce. This shift was precipitated in part by the arrival of William Ashby McCloy, who became the Director of the School in 1950.[[14]](#footnote-15) McCloy was trained at the University of Iowa and recruited several of his fellow Iowa graduates to work alongside him in establishing the new program at the University of Manitoba: Richard Bowman, John Kacere, and Robert Gadbois. McCloy was enthusiastic about modernizing the School and his attitudes affected both staff and students. Mikuska recalls that there was a profound shift as a result of the transition, stating that “the attitude was different. We were being flooded with ideas and images that we had never thought about.”[[15]](#footnote-16)

Mikuska was also affected by the change that occurred in the learning environment at the School of Art. Prior to it being taken over by the University of Manitoba, it was relatively easy to enroll – a not insignificant factor for a high school dropout. Once it became part of the University, however, new standards were put in place, and this was reflected in the classroom. He states in his interview with Oliver Botar that “All of the sudden, I caught on [to the fact that] everything I presented was open to debate and criticism.”[[16]](#footnote-17) The environment that they fostered was one of constructive criticism and encouragement, and it is clear that in it, Mikuska was able to both thrive and explore new artistic ideas.

While Mikuska studied with several of the new professors, it was Robert Gadbois who inspired him first and foremost. Gadbois was interested in commercial art and initially Mikuska felt that he could learn something practical from him.[[17]](#footnote-18) Like many others, Mikuska was hoping to find employment once he completed his education. Despite the fact that he approached his education from a perspective of practicality, Mikuska was nonetheless inspired by the ideas that Gadbois was presenting in the classroom. Like his colleagues, Gadbois was well aware of the changes occurring in the art world, and he integrated this knowledge into his teaching. It was at this point that Mikuska began to explore abstraction in his work and he attributes this change in his own artistic attitude to the shift that had occurred at the School of Art. While it is certain that he was indirectly exposed to Modernist art earlier on (e.g. to Bertram Brooker’s *Sounds Assembling*), he does not recall having had any appreciation for it before the arrival of the Americans.[[18]](#footnote-19)

Mikuska was exposed to the art of all of the American teachers at the School and it was the work of Richard Bowman that he considered to be the most abstract.[[19]](#footnote-20) In fact, Mikuska recalls that Bowman’s work was the first completely abstract art that he had ever seen. Bowman studied art at both the Institute of Art in Chicago and at the University of Iowa. While in Iowa, he studied under the influential modern graphic artist Mauricio Lasansky. Bowman was working in an abstract mode early on. For example, in his lithograph print *Kinetograph 4* created in 1950, Bowman explores abstraction through the use of graphic lines and flat colour (Fig. 1). Mikuska also remembers being inspired by the work of John Kacere whose work was Abstract Expressionist in style. In fact, he still sees qualities in his own work that reflect the work that Kacere produced while he was teaching at the School of Art.[[20]](#footnote-21) However, it is important to note that Mikuska’s exposure to the artwork being produced by his teachers was mostly limited to classroom demonstrations and the work that he saw while visiting their homes.[[21]](#footnote-22)

Mikuska was part of a dynamic group of students during the early 1950s. Takao Tanabe, Ivan Eyre, Bruce Head, Don Reichert Winston Leathers, and Don Strange were all attending the School at the time. These artists would become some of the most important figures of the Winnipeg and Western Canadian art scene during the 1950s and 1960s. The relationship between the students was one of both friendship and competition.[[22]](#footnote-23) It is clear that this was an exciting period at the School of Art, and the innovation that was encouraged is directly reflected in Mikuska’s art.

While Mikuska worked with a range of media at the School of Art, he became most interested in printmaking, and experimented extensively with different printing techniques. In his experimentation, he was able to explore Modernist themes and styles. While he claims to have been trying to develop his own imagery, he does state that artists such as Joan Miró and Amedeo Modigliani influenced his aesthetic.[[23]](#footnote-24) Mikuska attributes the similarity of some of his work to that of Miró to the lines that he achieved using a technique that he calls “lift drawing”. He claims to have invented the technique, and attributes the soft lines and sketchy quality to the fact that he drew on the back of the paper while it was placed on an ink plate.[[24]](#footnote-25) While I was unable to locate any lift drawings from his time as a student, a print he created in 1992 using this technique demonstrates the similarity that the linear quality in his work in this medium has to some of Joan Miró’s prints (Fig. 2). Mikuska eventually abandoned lift drawing, and pursued different printmaking techniques. He became enamoured with coloured inks, and it was in using these materials that he began to develop his singular aesthetic.

After graduating from the School of Art, rather than pursuing a career as an artist, Mikuska chose the more practical path of working as a graphic designer. In 1955, a year after its inception, he began working as an apprentice for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), and specifically as an apprentice for the new television division, where he was responsible for a number of tasks such as transferring images into black and white, as well as storyboarding, and making graphics for both shows and commercials. For a visual artist, CBC television was a desirable place to be employed at the time, and Mikuska worked alongside several of his colleagues from the School of Art – Bruce Head, Dave Strang, and McCleary Drope.[[25]](#footnote-26) Mikuska was eventually able to secure a permanent position at the CBC as a graphic designer, and he worked there for 37 years.

The work that he did while at the CBC was in many respects creative. Although he considered it to be separate from his art, he incorporated many of the techniques and styles that he learned while at the School of Art into his graphic design. In fact, some of his design work won critical acclaim. For example, in May 1968, he received a gold medal at the 5th annual exhibition of advertising and graphic design for “…his artwork on three of CBWT’s station breaks.”[[26]](#footnote-27) In 1968, he was also awarded a Prix Anix for an animation that he worked on (alongside Dave Strang) of R. Murray Schafer’s *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*.[[27]](#footnote-28) He also received an award for some promotional images that he made for the Royal Winnipeg Ballet.[[28]](#footnote-29) As a designer at the CBC, Mikuska was very successful, and he thrived creatively. Later on in his artistic career, he even incorporated some of the techniques that he used as a graphic designer into his art, specifically his use of repeated forms using collage and drawing (Fig. 3).

Although Mikuska was working full time as a designer at the CBC, he continued to make art. The art that he produced from the late 1950s onward is diverse in style and content and it is clear that Mikuska loved to experiment, both with media and with his imagery. He has worked quite continuously in an abstract style, and since his days as a student, he never lost interest in working with printer’s inks. Alongside Tony Tascona, Bruce Head, and Winston Leathers, Mikuska developed a technique that is now known as “ink graphics”. In a catalogue that was published to coincide with an exhibition of their work at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 1962, the technique is explained by Ferdinand Eckhardt:

The primary material for ink graphic is highly finished paper. The ink or paint can be applied with a roller, a brush, a patch, or even with the fingers, and this gives a basic design which, however, can be transformed in the next moment by rubbing it over with a wet sponge or a rag. The possibility of constant transformation is therefore most significant in the making of ink graphics. It leaves the artist with every possibility for unrestricted fantasy.[[29]](#footnote-30)

In short, the technique is based on the application of printers ink to a paper support. Because printer’s inks are fairly transparent, all of colour layers are visible, and the images take on an extraordinary chromatic richness. The paper support lends the image a softness that is not necessarily achievable when painting on board or canvas.

Mikuska and his colleagues were attracted to this technique because of the qualities that they were able to achieve with it when they applied ink directly to paper. Mikuska was particularly interested in the way that the ink allowed him to create a sense of volume in his imagery.[[30]](#footnote-31) He was also attracted to the transparent quality of the ink, and the softness that it created in his image. All of these qualities are immediately visible in his ink graphic entitled *Cavity*, which he completed in 1960 (Fig. 4). This image has a soft, almost hazy quality, and the areas of colour seem to bleed into each other as in a watercolour. In the exhibition catalogue for the show “Ink Graphics,” Eckhardt emphasizes that Mikuska and his colleagues worked spontaneously with this medium and that abstraction was a direct and necessary result of the technique.[[31]](#footnote-32)

Mikuska has remained faithful to the technique of painting using printer’s inks. However, he has also explored its use on different types of surfaces. Some of his most interesting work from the mid-to-late 1960s was done on masonite and wood. It is important to note that Mikuska works completely spontaneously – he never uses a sketch as a guide, and describes his process as “intuitive”.[[32]](#footnote-33) The images he creates are abstract; however, they often include elements that are recognizable, such as curving lines that resemble the silhouette of a female figure. While he does work intuitively, his pieces are replete with meaning and are often focused on the concept of memory. In describing his work, he says that: “…people need a process that they can exercise -- a catharsis to regenerate the feelings that they have within them.”[[33]](#footnote-34) He refers to art as a type of language, and sees art making as a way of communicating his own understanding of the world.

These concepts are immediately apparent in the piece *Expansion*, created around 1967 or 1968 (Fig. 5). The work incorporates blue, red, black, white, and yellow inks. The way in which he layers the inks is immediately apparent: while the image is predominantly black, there are echoes of the other colours in even the darkest areas. In the upper left-hand corner there is a square “opening” through the layer of black, allowing the viewer to “see” into the painting and exposing the layers of colour that the black ink is “covering”. On the right hand side of the painting, there is a curvilinear form that vertically traverses the entire picture plane. This form recalls the silhouette of the human figure, although it is abstracted.

The dominant use of black gives the image a brooding, almost mournful quality, and the way in which it contrasts with the areas of bright colour adds a distinctive intensity to the overall composition. The title of the work is also significant. While Mikuska paints spontaneously, the titles of the works are deliberate and considered. He sees them as an extension of the imagery, and as a poetic guide.[[34]](#footnote-35) The title for this piece (*Expansion*) suggests that the work is centered on the concepts of growth and evolution. *Expansion* is open to interpretation: the meaning that the viewer derives from it is entirely dependent on his or her experiences and thoughts.

One might attribute the development of Mikuska’s abstract style largely to the impact of the American teachers at the School of Art. Thus, he become interested in working with colour in a way that is completely non-representational. For example, this work of 1959, (Fig. 6) is comprised of pure fields of black, blue, and red ink, which bleed into each other at the centre of the composition. He is hesitant to state that he was influenced by any particular style of art, and seems to want to emphasize that he was coming to abstraction entirely on his own. However, this image recalls work being done between 1945 and 1960 in the United States by colour field artists such as Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Ad Reinhardt, and Barnett Newman.

Colour field painting was a style that developed alongside Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and 1950s. It developed out of an interest in early 20th century European Modernism and is characterized by large fields of flat colour painted onto a support such as canvas or wood. Generally speaking, the artists were focused on the relation of colours to each other, and emphasize composition and process.[[35]](#footnote-36) Annette Cox identifies Clyfford Still as the first American artist to begin working with this style, when he abandoned all direct references to Surrealism in his work in the mid to late 1940s.[[36]](#footnote-37) His paintings were “…large, totally abstract, and dominated by broad expanses of colour.”[[37]](#footnote-38) The work that Still created had a direct influence on the art of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko in the late 1940s.[[38]](#footnote-39) All three artists worked on very large canvases and by the 1950s, the colour-field painters were painting on wall-sized canvases.[[39]](#footnote-40)

This style spread to Canada by the late 1950s, and was discernable in the work of artists such as Jack Bush and Jock Macdonald. Despite the aesthetic similarity of this type work to that of Mikuska, he is still hesitant to say that his work was informed by the colour field painting that was being practiced by these artists. However, when his work is compared to that of Rothko or Still, there are similarities – the large areas of pure colour contrasted with darker tones of a similar hue for example. In his ink graphic works on paper, the soft and hazy delineation of forms is reminiscent of Rothko’s large canvases, such as his untitled painting created in 1968.[[40]](#footnote-41) His transparent colours resemble Rothko’s work, which was made up of “…warmly hued and softly modulated rectangles centered on the canvas and [floating] on an indeterminate ground.”[[41]](#footnote-42)

It is important to note that while his work is in some ways comparable to that of the colour field painters, there are several distinct differences as well. One of the primary features of colour-field paintings was their large scale. While the paintings of Rothko and Still often spanned entire walls, Mikuska’s images are comparatively small. As in the work of Robert Motherwell, but unlike the colour-field painters, many of Mikuska’s images contain figural elements, or echoes of something present in the composition that could be considered figural. For example, in Mikuska’s ink graphic *Cavity* there is a clear differentiation between figure and ground, he separates each colour or tonality with a relatively defined shape, and the composition of the painting is fairly complex. Rothko’s paintings are relatively simple in comparison. The palette in his artwork is much more simplified – he uses three tones that are in the same colour family – and he employs a simple rectangular form to define the different areas of colour.[[42]](#footnote-43)

Unlike the colour field painters, who mostly chose not to title their work and differentiated their paintings using a numerical system, Mikuska titles his work deliberately and also considers the title to be an important facet of the artwork. For example, he has entitled one of his paintings *Dante Revisited* (Fig. 7). This ink graphic, which was created in 1961, takes on a completely different meaning when the title is considered. Rather than simply being an abstract work in which the focus is on aesthetics and a rejection of imagery, the title suggests that the artwork is a representation of Dante’s – or Mikuska’s – interpretation of the afterlife. The red, orange, and black colour palette suggest that he is exploring themes related to the darker aspect of the afterlife, and this idea is further emphasized by the almost writhing modulation of the colours. Mikuska is not interested in completely rejecting representation in his work and he uses the title as a means of creating meaning.

After graduating from the School of Art and securing a job at the CBC, Mikuska continued to produce art in his spare time. He also maintained contact with his colleagues from the School of Art, in particular those working at the CBC. He exhibited his works in four of the highly successful Winnipeg Shows held at the Winnipeg Art Gallery (1957, 1958, 1959, and 1960), winning a drawing award in the last of these.[[43]](#footnote-44) This show was juried by Charles Comfort, Director of the National Gallery, and Professor Bertram Charles Binning of the University of British Columbia. In an article in the *Winnipeg Free Press* by Jean Brown concerning the show Brown stated that “both judges praised the quality of the work [in the show]...” and Professor Binning is quoted as saying that the work in the show suggests “the emergence of a strong prairie group.”[[44]](#footnote-45)

The idea of a Prairie group is important when considering Frank Mikuska’s artistic career. His relationship with other Winnipeg artists working alongside him was integral to his professional development. Mikuska was most closely associated with Bruce Head, Tony Tascona, and Winston Leathers. In fact, they are often referred to as the “Four Musketeers.” The four men graduated from the School of Art at roughly the same time, and they share similarities in their attitudes toward their work. They exhibited together extensively, both in Winnipeg and throughout Canada in the Western Canadian Art Circuit. However, Mikuska is hesitant to accept this moniker, in part because he never felt he was truly part of their group.[[45]](#footnote-46) There seems to have been a great deal of competition among them, and a certain amount of resentment because of the critical success that certain of them received – Tony Tascona in particular.

Tascona was the most successful of the Four Musketeers and he gained a great deal of critical acclaim and commercial success in Winnipeg throughout his career. He chose to abandon traditional in favour of industrial materials such as acrylic-based lacquers, aluminum, and enamels.[[46]](#footnote-47) In his work of the 1950s and 1960s, he was interested in exploring themes related to science and nature, and in particular “…representing the world on a molecular level.”[[47]](#footnote-48) After moving to Montreal in 1962 and coming into contact with *Les Plasticiens* (Guido Molinari, John Marok, Serge Tousignant, and Louis Comtois), he began to create artworks that were devoid of any representational subject matter and he became much more focused on geometry.[[48]](#footnote-49) He was invited to display his work at the Mira Goddard Gallery in Montreal in 1962, had two works purchased by the National Gallery in 1965, and also received several public commissions throughout the city of Winnipeg. His ability to both promote himself and succeed as an artist commercially seems to have caused tension among the “Four Musketeers.”

Mikuska exhibited in Winnipeg at the Grant Gallery, the Winnipeg Art Gallery and the Yellow Door Gallery alongside Head, Tascona, and Leathers, and his work met with favourable reviews in the local press. In a review of an exhibition of Mikuska’s and Leathers’ work at the Grant Gallery in April of 1964, the author perceptively states that “Mikuska seduces the imagination. His forms are not so much abstractions as phantoms of nature, incorporeal but sensual, elusive but strangely affecting.”[[49]](#footnote-50) It is clear from this statement and his award at the Winnipeg Show that Mikuska’s work met with at least some favourable press. He also toured extensively with the Western Canadian Art Circuit alongside Tascona, Head and Leathers, and had work displayed at various exhibitions throughout Canada.[[50]](#footnote-51) In 1961 he showed a painting exhibited at the Fourth Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Art at the National Gallery[[51]](#footnote-52) and he participated in Expo 67 at Montreal. Additionally, one of his pieces won a purchase award at the 1964 Annual Western Ontario Exhibit.

Despite Mikuska’s reticence in retrospect to accept that there was a strong connection between him and these three other men, in addition to appearing to the public together, they shared goals in their art making. All were interested in experimenting with the media that were available to them, and in exploring the boundaries of abstraction. Mikuska attributes the lack of a true connection between the four to the fact that some of them (notably Tascona and Leathers) more ambitious, and therefore more successful. Mikuska never really tried to promote himself as an artist, nor did he receive the same level of critical attention, despite the strength of his work.

In October of 1966, Mikuska had his first solo show, at the Yellow Door Gallery in Winnipeg. The gallery was owned and operated by Irene Walsh, a woman with significant knowledge of art who was interested in promoting modern art in the city.[[52]](#footnote-53) At this show, Mikuska exhibited ten of his ink paintings. He chose to display several of them on the floor of the gallery, mounted on stands (Fig. 8). Had there been more space available, Mikuska claims he would have exhibited all of the artworks in this way. His reason for choosing to display his work in this manner was straightforward: he wanted to allow the viewer “…to circulate the work and see it from all sides…”[[53]](#footnote-54) which would allow them to relate to the work the way he did when he was working on it. The exhibit met with favourable reviews in the *Free Press* and the *Winnipeg Tribune*. Cynthia Gunn stated that: Mikuska’s “…first show in Winnipeg proved interesting. He seems to be an artist to keep in mind.”[[54]](#footnote-55) Jan Kamienski’s article in the *Free Press* was equally positive and he was also impressed with the quality of Mikuska’s ink paintings: “The unique ink-painting technique employed by Mikuska gives the painting surface a pleasant evenness, without sacrificing the textures. They are gentle and often barely noticeable.”[[55]](#footnote-56)

Despite the fact that his work was well received in Winnipeg and throughout Canada (e.g. his purchase award at the 1964 Annual Western Ontario Exhibit), it met with some harsh criticism from Clement Greenberg when he visited Winnipeg in 1963 while on a tour of Western Canada. His main objection to Mikuska’s work seemed to be based upon his judgment that Mikuska was not a “big attack” artist. Greenberg defined a “big attack” artist as one “…with large and obvious ambition, with an aggressive and up-to-date style, and with a seriousness about himself that that makes itself known in his work as much as in his demeanor.”[[56]](#footnote-57) It is true that Mikuska, would be ill classified as “big attack”: his work is highly finished and while it is often brooding and dark, it is not aggressive. In response to his work, Greenberg stated that “Frank Mikuska…was trapped in an eclectic, catch-all, painterly conventionality…[that] was hard to label but easy to recognize.”[[57]](#footnote-58)

When considering the aesthetic principles that Mikuska employs in his paintings; however, it is surprising that Greenberg was so critical of his work. In his essay *Modernist Painting*, Greenberg stated that “…the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium.”[[58]](#footnote-59) Mikuska has certainly employed this tactic in his work: he has abandoned figurative imagery in favour of abstraction and is actively exploring the boundaries of the medium that he is using. By applying printer’s inks to paper and board in non-traditional ways, Mikuska achieved aesthetic effects similar to those of colour-field painters such as Rothko, Still and Newman, artists whom Greenberg regarded highly, praising the “physical openness of design…[and] linear clarity…”[[59]](#footnote-60) of their work. Greenberg asserts that clarity and openness in the work of these artists is not necessarily what makes them successful, rather it is the way in which these artists have emphasized these qualities at a time when other artists were working in an entirely different manner which renders them unique and worthy of consideration.[[60]](#footnote-61)

In 1973, Mikuska won a competition to complete a mural at the Windsor Library in Windsor, Ontario (Fig. 9).[[61]](#footnote-62) The fate of this artwork is important to consider when looking at Mikuska’s career, since it is indicative of his attitude toward art. The piece itself can be seen as a marked departure from his usual method of working, since it was a manufactured item based on a model he designed. It measured 9 feet by 15 feet and was installed at the top of an escalator in the Library.[[62]](#footnote-63) The consisted of a sheet of Plexiglas, backlit with florescent lights. Mikuska incorporated mirrored surfaces in the design, because he wanted viewers to be able to engage with the work personally and experience the reflection of their own movement.[[63]](#footnote-64) As viewers rose up the escalator, they were confronted by the work and the vision of themselves within it. This concept is connected to Mikuska’s interest in the way that the viewer experiences an artwork. Here, as in his show at the Yellow Door Gallery – where he displayed some of his paintings on the floor – the artist is trying to engage the viewer to interact with the artwork spatially. His theory was that people, when they saw themselves in the library installation, would move around it because they were attracted to and interested in the reflections.[[64]](#footnote-65)

In the late 1970s, a visitor to the library destroyed the artwork by throwing himself into it. Later on, it came to light that the individual had a mental disorder, and was disturbed by the piece. Mikuska was asked by the library’s director if he would like to replace the installation, however he refused. In recalling this decision, Mikuska stated that “the whole idea of stirring somebody to that point- leaving outside the psychological factors- was so profound that I couldn’t bring myself around to replacing it.”[[65]](#footnote-66) The fact that he refused to have the work reconstructed indicates the extent to which he takes his viewers’ responses to the artwork seriously. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that this installation no longer exists.

It seems fitting that Frank Mikuska’s work should be recognized as an important aspect of the development of Modernism in Manitoba. Many of his images demonstrate that he was not intimidated by the new concepts of Modernism and abstraction that he was introduced to at the School of Art in 1950. In fact Mikuska embraced these new ideas and actively applied them to his own work. He was also experimental, and employed new techniques – for example, the use of printer’s inks – to create his art. Many of his paintings are non-representational and are focused primarily on colour relationships: these are surely some of the finest abstract paintings executed in Western Canada. I would contend that his work is among the best created in Winnipeg during the 1960s and 1970s.

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2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Ann Cameron et. al., *Art in Winnipeg 1955-1959* Winnipeg: Gallery 111, School of Art, University of Manitoba, 1982, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Cameron, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Frank Mikuska, Artist, interview by Oliver Botar, Winnipeg, Manitoba, January 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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39. Ibid, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. This image can be viewed following this link: http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A5047&page\_number=17&template\_id=1&sort\_order=1 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Ibid, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. An image of this work is visible here: http://moma.org/collection/browse\_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A5047&page\_number=17&template\_id=1&sort\_order=1 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
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