

# Frank Panabaker - Biography

**Frank Shirley Panabaker (1904-1992)** was one of the major figures in twentieth century Canadian landscape painting, earning a considerable international reputation over a career spanning seven decades for his personal interpretations of Canada's vast and varied natural wonders, with a particular focus on southern Ontario. His many painting excursions took him not only to nearly all of Canada's provinces, but also included trips to historically significant regions of the British Isles, as well as visits to New England, the Caribbean (Nassau), and the island of Bermuda. Moreover, he is consensually acknowledged to have played a key role in the development of the visual arts in his native country.

Panabaker was born on August 16, 1904, in the town Hespeler, Ontario (now part of the city of Cambridge), which is situated approximately 25 miles west of Hamilton, a major provincial hub located on the far western tip of Lake Ontario and the city where Panabaker and his wife Katherine resided for most of their adult lives. Panabaker's father, the manager of the local woolen-mill and a former mayor of the town, early on recognized his son's talent for drawing, and in the summer of 1920 suggested to Frank that, rather than spending the summer pushing carts through the steaming-hot mill, he instead take a course in sketching that the noted painter of seascapes Farquhar McGillivray Knowles (1859-1932) would be teaching in town, at an old Mennonite church no longer used for worship. It was in this very church that young Frank had been given his initial opportunity to view original oil paintings. "I had no idea anyone could produce anything so beautiful," he later recounted in his autobiographical volume of stories, *Reflected Lights* (winner of the Toronto Women's Canadian Club Prize for Literary Distinction in 1958). "It was a thrilling moment, and seldom since have I experienced anything

like it.” Regarding his first formal attempt at painting — on the eve of starting the class taught by Knowles — Panabaker recalled: “I was supplied with the tools of the painter’s craft — a handsome box, colours like jewels, brushes, turpentine, oil, and panels — and thus excitingly equipped walked up the river road on a sunny morning, and sat down in solitude on the bank of the Speed River, and painted my first masterpiece. At the time I thought it was pretty good. My only audience was a red-wing blackbird.” Under Knowles ’tutelage’, Panabaker produced a small painting of a canoe on a riverbank, which he showed to his father, who himself had held aspirations of being an artist when he was younger. It was this painting that Panabaker believed convinced his father that he was worthy of being supported as a full-time art student following his graduation from the Galt Collegiate Institute in Galt, Ontario, where Panabaker was the valedictorian of the Class of 1921. Electing to enroll at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto, Panabaker studied under Arthur Lismer (1885-1969) and J.E.H. MacDonald (1873-1932), two of the most prominent artists in the country and original members of Canada’s famous Group of Seven. But for reasons never fully specified other than a desire to pursue something which at the time he felt was “more within my reach,” Panabaker temporarily abandoned his artistic education following a short period of matriculation at the Ontario College of Art. For a year he went to America and attended Valparaiso University in Indiana, where he studied a variety of subjects, including psychology, literature, and music, and sang in a vocal quartet that performed at local venues. Returning home, Panabaker was offered some words of advice from an old family friend named Homer Watson, who told him: “I am an old man and I am only just now beginning to get hold of a few things. I would like to start over.” Deeply affected by his interpretation of this message, Panabaker moved to New York City and began anew his quest for a career as an artist, enrolling in both the Art Students League and the Grand Central School of Art, where he logged over 50 hours per week of classroom time over a span of two years, using whatever spare time he had left to sketch in Central Park and around the downtown waterfront. His mentors during this

period included such notable artist/instructors as Edmund Greacen (1876-1949), Wayman Adams (1883-1959), George Ennis (1884-1936), and Arshile Gorky (1904-1948), Gorky being one of the principal figures in what was then the burgeoning Abstract Expressionist movement. One of Panabaker's paintings produced during this time earned First Prize in the "Drawing from Life" category at an exhibition at the Salmagundi Club, whereupon he became one of the youngest members ever to be elected to this prestigious organization.

From the outset of his professional career in the mid-1920s, Panabaker was determined to be a fully self-supporting artist, resolute in his belief that the only way to maximize his creative potential was to maintain "the freedom to work as he should," as art historian Grace Inglis put it in her catalogue to the 1995 Panabaker retrospective at the Art Gallery of Hamilton (the quote itself was referenced from a 1927 letter Panabaker wrote to his most important early patron, Walter Sampson, the President of Ontario Steel Products). Unfailing in his work-ethic, and aided immeasurably by the efforts of his wife, Katherine, Panabaker, according to Inglis, was in a position to do what most other artists were incapable of doing early in the previous century: make his living by painting. Elucidating on the early portion of Panabaker's career, Inglis wrote that "in addition to producing two or three paintings a week, he made his own frames, developed his own photographs, organized solo exhibitions around Southern Ontario, taught private classes, cultivated patrons, and explored new painting prospects as part of his normal routine. The Panabakers' frequently precarious financial position was not unlike many of their associates and friends during the Depression era, but was distinguished by continuous effort, and an apparently complete faith that painting, while an unruly mistress, would ultimately prove to be a reliable one." From the year 1927 — when Panabaker held his first solo exhibition at the Preston Springs Hotel in Preston, Ontario — through the mid-1940s, the Panabakers led a peripatetic life, marked by near-constant traveling, which necessitated, as Inglis put it, "living in borrowed homes for

sometimes a month or two between moves, boarding with friends and relatives, and stopping in tents, cottages, and cheap hotels . . .” Primarily traversing the wooded, country roads of Southern Ontario, the Panabakers made their way through the scenic regions of Haliburton, Muskoka, and Algonquin Park, whose rolling hills, verdant meadows, and pristine, freshwater lakes formed the subject matter of many of his pastoral landscapes. **But it was the series of paintings executed in and around Georgian Bay that many believe capture the essence of Panabaker’s personal artistic vision and serve as a hallmark of his oeuvre.** The Bay forms the northeastern arm of Lake Huron in Ontario and is itself a body of water of such substantial size (measuring 5,800 square miles) that it is sometimes referred to as “the sixth Great Lake.” Tens of thousands of small islands (collectively known as the “Thirty Thousand Islands”) lie in the Bay and are composed of granite rock formations and white pine forests; the area’s rugged beauty is known to have inspired the artists of Canada’s “Group of Seven,” and perhaps the Group’s foremost influence, Tom Thomson, produced a well-known work there, *Pine Island, Georgian Bay*. Over the years, Panabaker himself formed a deep personal as well as artistic attachment to this ancient, windswept region (Archeological records reveal the presence of native peoples dating back 11,000 years). Of the Bay, he wrote: “(It) never seems to change. There are a few more cottages each year, a few more boats, but everything else — the clear water, the rocky islands, the bent pine trees — are the same as they must have been for thousands of years. . . . Anyone who has once gone there never seems to tire of going back. Pine trees struggle for life in shallow pockets on islands of rocks.

For 50 or 75 years or more they cling to a depression in a bare rock by means of a thin patch of roots. Very few of them ever get a chance to grow straight. From the time they are seedlings they are shaped for their lifetimes by the great force of fall and winter storms and winds that sweep down across the Bay from the northwest. The little trees bend before these prevailing winds and

grow in twisted patterns of submission, and then there is the incredibly clear water. Nowhere else have I seen water so clear. You can see bass swimming way down below and when one takes your bait you can often watch others as they follow your fish to the surface - Nothing so nearly approaches perfection in my mind as a warm sunny day on a Georgian Bay island. I may be out painting a rocky, uninhabited island, and a gull or a tern comes along, or a crow flies from one island to another. Far away I can see the big tree where an eagle sits frequently, summer after summer. The water is blue and still — you can hardly believe that great storms drive over here. But when you look at the bent pine trees, so quiet now, but leaning over in fixed, twisted shapes, you know what the winds can be like.” These “fixed, twisted” pine trees buffeted by the wind are a recurring theme in Panabaker’s Georgian Bay series, moments of nature’s wrath frozen in time through his unique, neo-impressionist stylings. Another setting which proved to have a measurable impact on Panabaker’s legacy was Moraine Lake, a glacially-fed body of water in Banff National Park in the province of Alberta that is considered by many to be one of the purest and most beautiful lakes in the world, and whose majestic viewpoints were inaccessible in Panabaker’s time without the aid of horses and fully-loaded packs filled with gear. In *Reflected Lights*, Panabaker shared a story about a painting of his composed at Moraine Lake that had been accepted by the National Academy of Design in New York City for one of its annual exhibitions, and further honoured by being hung next to the painting that had won that year’s Altman Prize for Landscape Painting. Many years later, the woman who had purchased Panabaker’s composition ran into a friend of Panabaker’s on Cape Cod. Upon exchanging pleasantries, it came out that Panabaker’s friend — a retired banker — was a neighbour of his back in Ontario. The woman explained, “Years ago, I saw a painting of his in New York of Moraine Lake. I asked my father to buy it. But also at the time I wanted him to buy me a new car. He told me I could have my choice. I took the painting.”

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For many years following the onset of the Great Depression — until Panabaker had built a reputation deemed to be deserving of his work being represented at prominent galleries in Toronto and Hamilton — the Panabakers eked out a living by virtue of a small but devoted coterie of patrons, as well as a steady stream of personally organized exhibitions, held at such disparate venues as society shows, libraries, hotels, department stores, and vacant buildings, even the lobbies of banks and corporate offices (basically, wherever they could get permission to inexpensively display his work). A major breakthrough occurred in 1934, during a solo exhibition which the couple had organized at the old Birks Building in Hamilton (an architectural landmark that Oscar Wilde once called “the most beautiful building in North America”). Typical of the resourceful frugality that had enabled the Panabakers to persevere through difficult times, Panabaker had paid \$50 to rent space in the building for a one week period, and his wife Katherine purchased 20 yards worth of purple cheesecloth (at a price of 10 cents per yard) to adorn the walls and serve as a backdrop for the paintings, with a friend printing the catalogues for free. Over the first four days of the six day exhibition, eight paintings were sold, at which time Sara Delano Roosevelt, the mother of the sitting President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, happened upon the exhibition while visiting friends in the area. Intrigued by a small seascape composed in the Gaspé Peninsula of Quebec (a setting favoured by Ogden Pleissner), she purchased it for \$40. The next day, the *Toronto Mail and Empire* newspaper reported the sale in their morning edition, resulting in 18 more paintings being sold over the final two days of the exhibition. About a year later, a local clergyman who was visiting Panabaker at his home in Ancaster, Ontario (a historic village now part of Hamilton that was one of the first communities in Ontario to be settled by Europeans), explained to Panabaker that he was an old friend of the President’s dating back to the President’s days summering at the Bay of Fundy (located between the Canadian provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia), and that while he was visiting the White House that past Easter, he had noticed a painting whose style he

recognized displayed prominently in a private sitting-room; upon closer inspection, he realized that it was the Panabaker seascape that the President's mother had purchased. Reportedly, the painting hung in the White House for many years.

In addition to his painting expeditions throughout his native country, Panabaker took several trips abroad, including visits to historic, picturesque regions in the British Isles such as the Northumberland Hills in Northern England and Connemara in Western Ireland, where he sought out pre-industrial, Arcadian settings that appealed to his artistic temperament. He also traveled to Nassau, Bahamas, enjoying the mutability of conditions which he found there, such as “the way the rain comes down suddenly from an innocent-looking cloud and pours a barrel of water on your head, and then the sun shines again in a few minutes.” Though he was not an acolyte of the highly expressive colourations favoured by the Group of Seven, he was nonetheless enamored of the intense hues manifested in the Caribbean, particularly the “brazen, impossible colours of cerulean, cobalt, purple, and green.” The well-respected Canadian publisher, editor, and literary critic Lorne Pierce, who wrote the introduction for *Reflected Lights*, expressed his view that “(Panabaker's) studies of Bahamians — fishermen and sailors and such — are expertly modelled and interpreted with deep insight.” Another island locale whose unspoiled beauty was interpreted by Panabaker was Bermuda, to which he sojourned for the first and only time in 1934, staying at the American House Hotel and exhibiting in that year's annual Bermuda Art Association show (other artists whose work was featured in the show include John T. Coolidge, Jr., Helen Damroach tee-Van, and Mrs. L.P. Boudreau). The June 1934 edition of *The Bermudian* magazine described the small number of works Panabaker composed on the island as “skillful renderings of local scenes, done by a trained hand . . .” By that point in time Panabaker had attained a significant enough reputation in Canada that the *Ottawa Journal* newspaper, in its March 21, 1934 edition, published a news item announcing that the “noted Canadian artist”

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Frank S. Panabaker, along with his wife, had set sail the previous week from New York to Bermuda. Three years later, in its edition of July 24, 1937, that same newspaper, upon reviewing a recent exhibition, would refer to the then 32 year old Panabaker as “a skilled and versatile craftsman, who may be regarded as one of the rising men in Canadian art.”

From the period of the late 1930s to the early 1990s, Panabaker gained a reputation as a significant visual chronicler of the city of Hamilton, Ontario, and its environs. Known as the “Steel City” because of its strong relationship to the industry (producing 60% of the country’s steel), Hamilton also witnessed several notable historical events during this period, including the visit of King George VI and the Queen Mother in June 1939, in honour of which Panabaker gifted a painting of the Basilica, a landmarked church in Hamilton. He also painted the royal yacht, The Britannia, when it was docked in Hamilton Harbour in 1959 during a visit by Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip. Additionally, Panabaker also executed several variations of the historic Hamilton Farmer’s Market, as well as other important local venues, such as Gore Park. Many of his scenes of the surrounding Dundas Valley — now a geologically diverse conservation area — feature the same bucolic imagery as his work produced in the Canadian wilderness, the paintings imbued with a nostalgic aura representative of a bygone era when rural homesteads manned by hard-working farmers were a core constituency of the country’s economy; this romanticized version of Canadian life was particularly evident in wintry scenes emphasizing the spirit of Christmas, many featuring horse-drawn sleds making their way through the snow and quaint family dwellings preparing for seasonal celebrations. Early in his career, Panabaker had struck a deal with the Rous and Mann Publishing Co. and the Coutts-Hallmark Greeting Card Co. to annually execute paintings that would be reproduced as holiday-season cards and calendars, which eventually became ubiquitous throughout Canada. Later in Panabaker’s life, many of these scenes were turned into popular posters.

In his book, *Reflected Lights*, Panabaker shared some of his thoughts regarding the complexity of life of an artist: “There is one thing about painting which everyone who paints has noticed: It is the complete absorption of the painter in his work. He is unconscious of the passage of time — the continuous demands of the painting, the infinity of choice in the design, the drawing, and the colour, as well as the handling of the paint and the supreme effort to make the sketch or picture successful, to in effect make it the sum total of one’s knowledge and ability and experience — all of this completely erases from the mind any awareness of the extent of the passing minutes and hours; and then, you fail so often. But even with the failure something is learned. Paradoxically, the intense concentration that painting requires helps to keep the professional painter from getting any crazier than he normally is. But make no mistake about it: For the professional painter, painting is hard, concentrated, nervous work. And, of course, he can’t imagine himself doing anything else but paint and accept the consequences, whatever they are.” On the nature of who may (and who may not) potentially procure one of his paintings, Panabaker had this to say: “I have had thousands of exhibitions and thousands of people have been kind enough to come and see them. But never, in all my experience, have I been able to tell in advance the person who is going to buy a painting. Once, a little bent-over old lady came into one of my shows looking as if she might have been selling lead pencils on the street. She bought three paintings.”

Though Panabaker’s reputation is most assuredly forged from his landscapes, he executed many portraits. In Lorne Pierce’s estimation, Panabaker was “one of the few Canadian artists who can move from landscape to portraiture; his landscapes frequently contain both buildings and people, not casually indicated but properly developed, and with some substantial reason for their presence.” Furthermore, in terms of Panabaker’s legacy, Grace Inglis wrote: “As we recognize the skills required of the pleinair artist — of colour balance, tonal control, mixed with knowledge

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of paint behaviour and sensitivity to every mood of the landscape even under the most severe conditions — Panabaker’s special abilities will be more widely appreciated.” The fact that he was not one to develop and maintain extensive associations within the art world — he referred to himself as the “Group of One” — may also have had an impact on the extent of his recognition by the art historical canon to date. Preferring the company of a few kindred spirits to any group activity, Panabaker confined his companionship to his early mentor Farquahar Knowles, as well as friends and fellow artists Fred Brigden, Evan MacDonald, and Archibald Barnes.

Nevertheless, in addition to his membership in the aforementioned Salmagundi Club, he was elected (in 1942) an associate member of the Royal Canadian Academy, Canada’s premier honorary arts organization, comprised of the country’s most distinguished visual artists and designers; he was also a longstanding member of the Allied Artists of America, one of only a handful of Canadians to be elected to this group, which is a New York City-based national arts society primarily dedicated to furthering the cause of American artists; and, for six years (1959-1965), he served on the Board of Trustees of the National Gallery of Canada, one of Canada’s (and North America’s) premier art collections, with a world-class assemblage of Canadian, European, and American art dating back to the Renaissance. In 1996, Panabaker was inducted into the Hamilton Gallery of Distinction, which recognizes outstanding Hamilton citizens who have made significant contributions to the community. (The municipality also named a street in his honour.) Currently, Panabaker’s work is represented in many consequential private and public collections, including the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa); the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; the London Public Library; the Library and Archives of Canada (Ottawa); the University of British Columbia Library of Fine Arts (Vancouver); the Hamilton Public Library; the Vancouver Art Gallery; the Winnipeg Art Gallery; and the Art Gallery of Ontario (the final three listed venues serve as major provincial repositories for Canadian and international art).

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Frank Panabaker died in 1992 at the age of 87, putting a brush to canvas up until the final weeks of his life. "Those artists who were his most intimate friends had the deepest influence upon him, but no one ever did Panabaker's thinking for him," wrote Lorne Pierce in his introduction to *Reflected Lights*, words that perhaps now serve as its epilog. "He is no possessed man, grimly wrestling with his spirit in torment. His paintings clearly show that his chief interests are outside himself, and his best canvasses suggest an artist who has found his proper themes, developed his proper technique, and said with easy grace what he felt was essential to say at that particular time and in that particular place."

**Frank Panabaker was an old family friend with Hubert Beckett (1892-1967), Hamilton based portrait photographer and song writer/musician and Thomas L. Beckett (1927 - 2014) of Beckett Gallery. Beckett Gallery represented Frank Panabaker from 1966 - 1995 and Thomas G. Beckett (b 1960) of Beckett Fine Art continues to represent Frank Panabaker. Please contact Thomas Beckett with any Panabaker questions.**