

An abstract painting of a landscape. A road, rendered in warm tones of red, orange, and yellow, leads from the bottom right towards the center. To the left of the road, there are dark, silhouetted trees and a green field with diagonal brushstrokes. The background features a blue sky and a distant horizon line. The overall style is expressive and painterly.

Road Trip

ACROSS CANADA WITH
ALAN C. COLLIER

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AGNES
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“Alan brought the General home for lunch today.”

So begins Ruth Collier’s chronicles of her family’s 1956 cross-Canada summer trip.¹ The “General” was a travel trailer; and for the whole preceding year, Toronto artist Alan Caswell Collier, his wife Ruth and son Ian, had pored over “maps and books deciding on what would be the most rewarding country for an artist with sketch box and camera.”² They settled on the West for that summer, but over the next three decades the Colliers would eventually visit every province and territory several times over, wearing out six trailers and the eight vehicles that towed them. In the 1970s and 1980s, with Ian grown, Alan and Ruth also travelled, by ship, plane and helicopter, in the Arctic. They referred to their travels as Alan’s “business trips.”³

During these trips, Collier painted and photographed the countryside, building a body of work that would later be expanded in his Toronto studio, and ultimately exhibited and sold. He described himself as “a long-time believer in the Canadian landscape”⁴—something worthy of depicting, experiencing and protecting. While the romance of rail preoccupied previous generations of Canadian artists, Collier embraced the road at a time of unprecedented economic growth, automobile production and highway expansion. He was Canada’s first committed landscape-by-car artist.

Collier approached his subject from a unique perspective. In the first decades of his adult life, he laboured on the land. Following his 1933 graduation from the Ontario College of Art (OCA), he “went on the bum,” hitchhiking and “hooking a drag on the fly,” aka freight hopping.⁵ He then worked in British Columbia relief camps, constructing roads that eventually formed part of the Trans-Canada Highway, and in northern Ontario gold mines, shovelling rock as a mucker to fund his studies at the Art Students League of New York. Collier would return to mines in the 1950s and 1960s to paint the industrial landscape above and below ground, “with the aid of a miner’s head-lamp.”⁶ In wartime, he was a sheet metal worker at Victory Aircraft Ltd, Malton, before being drafted into service as an artillery surveyor. “With his knowledge of map-reading, camping (hoboes do that a lot) and fieldcraft,” wrote Harold Strom, fellow army veteran and Harbord Collegiate alumnus, “he was a natural, indeed.”⁷

Collier’s artistic career, like that of so many Canadian artists, began in and was supplemented by advertising work and teaching. He was a commercial artist in New York and Toronto, then joined the advertising art department of his alma mater, OCA, in 1955.



As a college instructor with unpaid summers off, Collier saw travel as an opportunity to bring in extra income and to have fun while doing it. The annual family road trips were initiated at a time when the Trans-Canada Highway was under construction and campers were a rapidly expanding consumer market, placing the Colliers at the forefront of an activity increasingly enjoyed by Canadians. By the early 1960s, according to historian Daniel Francis, “two-thirds of all Canadian households owned a car, and one in ten were two-car families.”⁸ Cars made the country more accessible than ever before. Furthermore, the country was dotted with over 2,000 national, provincial, municipal and private campgrounds.⁹ After twelve years teaching in the fall and winter, and road tripping in the summer, Collier felt he made enough as an artist to resign from OCA in 1967, and devote himself to painting and travelling.

Collier was as pragmatic as he was creative, always retaining a commercial artist’s business savvy. As historian and Collier biographer Peter Neary points out, “Though he had a strong egalitarian streak and was now a committed social democrat, Alan well understood the need for artists to have patrons and that in the context of the time this meant big business, public institutions, and government.”¹⁰ Before the 1956 road trip, he made a deal with Goodyear. For a cut rate on tires, he would become part of their promotional efforts. Collier photographed the tires’ performance *en route*, and the family’s trip was featured in the company’s next “Special Holiday Issue” of its brochure *Going Places*. Collier soon became known as “Canada’s most ardent camper.”¹¹ His recommendations for the best places to visit in Canada were published in *Maclean’s* and *Imperial Oil Review* in 1963 and 1970 respectively, illustrated with his landscape paintings. In 1957, Canadian Oil Companies Ltd purchased a northern Ontario landscape to reproduce in advertisements for White Rose service stations; in 1963, Standard Oil commissioned several paintings for a special feature on the Trans-Canada in its magazine *The Lamp*; and, in 1979, Canada Post chose *Across the Tundra* (1971) to represent Kluane National Park on a stamp.

The Collier road trips were a well-oiled production. As the artist explained in 1962, “I have tried all kinds of camping: boxcars and ‘jungles’ during the Depression, tenting in the bush for 5 months at a time while working underground in a mine, canoe trip camping, army ‘camping,’ and now this deluxe stuff in a trailer with its own toilet, shower and proper fridge.”¹² The Colliers would drive west or east, stopping in campgrounds for up to one month, frequently a national park or an area that later became one, while Alan painted the vicinity. Sometimes Ruth Collier, a fellow OCA graduate, would sketch and take photographs too, but often she would “read, write letters and our log book, relax in the sun, go for walks, compare notes with other campers.”¹³ They had carefully prescribed roles. As Neary describes, Alan “looked after car repair and maintenance ... Ruth looked after shopping, cooking, laundry, and everything else that made the trailer as much as possible a home away from home.”¹⁴ Both kept

meticulous notes on how to manage the practical arrangements of camp life. Collier held the conviction that “each politician should be required to travel Canada in a pick-up and trailer.”¹⁵

On these trips, Collier’s mainstay artistic output was the 12 x 16-inch oil landscape, which he painted on-the-spot, either outdoors or (especially in later years) from his vehicle, the “mobile studio,” when it was buggy, or the weather was bad, or there were too many onlookers.¹⁶ He prepped his materials for travel ahead of time. For the painting support, he used dense cardboard panels, which he coated with gesso, sealing all the edges so that they were impervious in wet conditions. To work out the composition, Collier started with a thumbnail pencil sketch on paper. Moving to the panel, he quickly washed in the composition using oil paint thinned with turpentine, ensuring that the white gesso surface was completely covered. Then he applied paint sparingly, taking advantage of the rough underlying gesso layer for texture.

In *The Planted Ground, North of Morden, Manitoba* (no. 7), for example, the field of buckwheat to the right “is produced simply by dragging the brush lightly across the tops of the [gesso] humps ... you just hit the tops of the humps and if it happens to look like buckwheat you quit.”¹⁷ The sky was a happy accident. In the preliminary drawing, he didn’t intend it to be so brooding, but the turpentine-and-oil wash made it quite dark. “I thought, hey, it looks good like that,” he explained in a slide talk at Toronto’s Arts and Letters Club, of which he was a member. So he added “just a few little chunks of opaque paint in the sky,” but for the most part kept “the wash the way it happened to go in the first place.”¹⁸ Collier routinely photographed his subject for reference, as well as for later use in his talks to various art groups.

Collier aimed to make at least two 12 x 16-inch landscapes on a dedicated painting day, producing an average of 70 to 100 over the summer. These he considered complete artworks in themselves, framing and selling them as such. He didn’t keep all of them; sometimes he destroyed panels, relying on Ruth Collier’s artistic eye to help him determine unsuccessful works. He also made finished drawings and water-colours, believing a pencil line to be better suited than oil for certain geographical features, such as fissures in Arctic ice. Back in his Toronto studio, Collier drew upon all this material—the panels, drawings, water-colours, sketchbooks and photographs—to “paint up” further landscapes on Masonite or canvas. He worked to standard sizes, with 48 x 60-inches and 36 x 72-inches as the biggest paintings.

Collier recognized patron needs in his landscape formats: “Very few people have homes large enough for a 48 x 60. That kind of painting usually goes into a board room or gallery collection or something like that.”¹⁹ While he exhibited with various arts societies and organizations throughout his career, his first solo exhibition was held at Roberts Gallery, Toronto, in 1956, following his first cross-Canada trip. Owner Jack Wildridge became Collier’s lifelong dealer and friend. A successful pattern was established, wherein

Collier prepared the artistic output from his travels for solo shows at Roberts, as well as Kensington Fine Art Gallery, Calgary, in later years. At his 1969 Roberts Gallery show, he could barely keep up with the demand for his 12 x 16-inch landscapes. Most of them were sold in the first five days. Collier's landscapes found their way into the collections of oil, mining, banking and assurance companies, as well as public museums and private homes.

Over the years, Collier completed over 5000 landscapes. Though he covered a multitude of geographies, there were certain elements that he favoured: big skies, rock faces, mountain and iceberg peaks, weathered trees and expanses of sand, ice or cultivated fields. He regularly returned to sites of outdoor labour, such as mines, mills, docks and scientific field camps. He also became aware of what he should not paint. Once, while Collier was sketching totem poles in Gitsegukla, British Columbia, a resident informed him of a \$500 fine that was levied against anyone who made images for sale and was not a member of the community. Collier later admitted, in a radio interview with Betty Kennedy, that he had sketched in a number of Indigenous West Coast villages, because it had "sort of been a tradition ever since the days of Emily Carr," but realized, after that encounter, that "I was really taking advantage."²⁰

"Simple" is a word that Collier often used to describe his work: "I like simple forms, simple land forms."²¹ In his paintings, geography is distilled into abstract shape and pattern, but never becomes fully abstract. Collier once said, rather provocatively, "Personally, I consider abstract painters conventional. The real rebel today is the man who paints a tree to look like a tree."²² He championed landscape at a time when abstract expressionism was in the vanguard of the Canadian art world. Though informed by that rising aesthetic, his paintings are still grounded in the depiction of place. Lawren Harris's Arctic paintings, for example, first made Collier want to see the North; for Collier, however, landscape was not a spiritual quest, it was a destination. The roadside (or park trail or boat rail), if not front-and-centre, is just outside the picture plane. These are landscapes you can park beside—an accessibility and specificity corroborated by Collier's penchant, almost obsession, with documentation. Each work bears detailed inscriptions that correlate to extensive records, including logs of daily activity and location, as well as a map outlining every road trip (which once hung in his son Ian's room), not to mention hundreds of slides and Ruth Collier's travel chronicles.

Every year, as a record of these trips and his artistic development, Collier gave his son Ian two 12 x 16 landscapes. The Ian M. Collier Collection grew to include 86 works, representing the country from coast to coast to coast. The fourteen images mapped in this pamphlet convey the expansive reach of Collier's brush. Recently donated to the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, the Ian M. Collier Collection captures the nuances of Canada's natural beauty in spare form and layered colour. "Whenever I see Ian's sketches," Alan Collier once reflected on the collection he built

for his son, "whenever I see each one of them, it's like playing a tape recording. I can remember things that happened here."²³ Looking at Collier's landscapes today—despite the "big carbon footprint that was in the making" when he first hit the road²⁴—it is easy to be transported.

Alicia Boutilier, *Curator of Canadian Historical Art*

ENDNOTES

- 1 Ruth Collier, "Rolling Home" (unpublished travel journal), file 3, box 5, Alan Caswell Collier fonds (ACC), 5008.1, Queen's University Archives, Kingston (QUA).
- 2 *Going Places* (Goodyear) 6, no. 3 (1957): n.p.
- 3 Ruth Collier, "Turpentine and Gasoline: 'Moving' Pictures Across Canada," *Alumnus* (Ontario College of Art), spring/summer 1980, n.p.; Fergus Cronin, "Artist on the Move," *Atlantic Advocate* (Fredericton), 30 July 1990, 38.
- 4 Alan Collier to Corinne Noonan, 28 August 1967, file 10, box 1, ACC, 5142, QUA.
- 5 Paul Bennett, "Interview with Alan C. Collier, Fall 1970," in *Alan C. Collier Retrospective* (Oshawa: Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1971), n.p.; "Snapshots" (album), 1934–1935, file 32, box 4, ACC, 5008.9, QUA.
- 6 "The Art of Mining," *Mining in Canada*, March 1967, 27.
- 7 Harold M. Strom, "Alan C. Collier, R.C.A. – A Portrait of the Artist (1911–1990)," *Harbordite* (Harbord Collegiate Institute), fall 1996, 3.
- 8 Daniel Francis, *A Road for Canada: The Illustrated Story of the Trans-Canada Highway* (North Vancouver: Stanton Atkins & Dosil, 2006), 83.
- 9 James Knight, "The Six Basic Canadian Highway Holidays," *Maclean's*, 27 July 1963, 21.
- 10 Peter Neary, "Relief Stiff: Alan Caswell Collier's British Columbia Sojourn, 1934–35" (book manuscript, in press, 2015), 52. The author is grateful to Professor Neary for sharing his extensive research on Alan Collier.
- 11 Knight, "Six Basic," 20; *The Lamp* (Standard Oil Company, New Jersey), spring 1964, cover image caption.
- 12 Alan Collier to Don Sims, 18 April 1962, file 9, box 1, ACC, 5142, QUA.
- 13 Ruth Collier, "Turpentine and Gasoline."
- 14 Peter Neary, "Alan Caswell Collier (1911–1990): An Ontario Artist of Newfoundland and Labrador," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 28, no. 2 (2013): 270–271.
- 15 Carolyn Fleming, "Alan Collier: Painter of Canada," *Artswest* 7, no. 4 (April 1982): 21.
- 16 Ruth Collier, "Turpentine and Gasoline."
- 17 Alan Collier, "About Ian's Collection," talk at the Arts and Letters Club, Toronto, 22 and 23 March 1978, audio tape, file 14, box 60, ACC, 5008.1, QUA.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Alan Collier, interview by Betty Kennedy, *Betty Kennedy Show*, CFRB radio, Toronto, 14 March 1975, audio tape, box 6, ACC, 5142, QUA.
- 20 Ibid., unknown date.
- 21 Ibid., 26 March 1973.
- 22 Gary Lautens, "A Portrait of an Artist," *Toronto Star*, 25 April 1963.
- 23 Alan Collier, "About Ian's Collection."
- 24 Neary, "Relief Stiff," 53.



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LEGEND

- 1 In Resolute Bay, aboard CCGS d'Iberville, Northwest Territories (today Nunavut), 1972
- 2 Burned Forest, beside the Alaska Highway, Yukon, 1960
- 3 Chinese Freemason Hall, Barkerville, British Columbia, 1956
- 4 West Trail to Opabin, above Lake O'Hara, British Columbia, 1971
- 5 Snaring River and Colin Range, Jasper National Park, Alberta, 1987
- 6 Beside the Trans-Canada Highway, Just West of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, 1971
- 7 The Planted Ground, North of Morden, Manitoba, 1968
- 8 Smelter Smoke at Copper Cliff, Ontario, 1954
- 9 Near North Augusta, Ontario, 1980
- 10 Gaspé Veteran, Sainte-Thérèse-de-Gaspé, Quebec, 1957
- 11 Hay Barn, West of Albert, New Brunswick, 1974
- 12 Farm Road, Prince Edward Island, 1966
- 13 Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia, 1983
- 14 At Topsail, Conception Bay, Newfoundland, 1969



All paintings are by Alan C. Collier, oil on board, from the Ian M. Collier Collection, Gift of Ian Collier, 2016.
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BACK COVER: Ruth, Alan and Ian Collier, 1962. Alan C. Collier fonds (5119.2), Queen's University Archives

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