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Cover image: *Doris Slater Titus, Untitled (Abstract)*
(circa 1959), mixed media on board.

Inside cover image: Dorothy Stevens, *Portrait of Doris Slater*, 1949, oil
on canvas.

Doris SLATER TITUS





*We'll sing in the sunshine,
We'll laugh every day.
We'll sing in the sunshine,
And I'll be on my way.*

- Gale Garnett, "We'll Sing the Sunshine," 1964

DORIS SLATER TITUS: Retrospective, 1941 - 1964

curated by
MATTHEW RYAN SMITH, Ph.D.

Glenhyrst Art Gallery, Brantford, Ontario
March 27 – May 23, 2021

Thames Art Gallery, Chatham, Ontario

Glenhyrst Art Gallery of Brant

Doris Slater Titus is not represented in the canon of Canada's art history. She is not alone. As a visual artist, comic book illustrator, commercial designer, and arts educator, her life and work have impacted Canada's cultural history. The repercussions of this are still unfolding. This retrospective exhibition is Titus's first exhibition in nearly 60 years and marks an important step in recognizing her experiences and accomplishments in the arts. Her remarkable legacy is where sexism was combatted, rules broken, and stereotypes foiled. She was unwavering. A nonconformist. Daring.

Born into an agricultural community near Chatham, Ontario in 1917, Titus moved to Toronto, Ontario with her family in 1929. After graduating from Oakwood Collegiate High School, she continued her studies at the Ontario College of Art (now OCAD University) in Toronto in 1935. She excelled in commercial design and illustration, which earned her two scholarships from the McLaughlin family of Oshawa, Ontario (and the General Motors company). A personal letter addressed to Titus by Mrs. R. A. McLaughlin in 1936 says "One piece of advice I may give you; Don't let your work obsess you to the extent that no one can bring you other happiness." [1] Mrs. McLaughlin's words allude to the period's social expectations, one where a young women's responsibility to raise a family took precedence over career aspirations. Titus would eventually balance both, in her own way.

Likewise, Titus graduated from the Ontario College of Art in 1939 and was asked to co-judge the Miss Toronto beauty pageant at the Canadian National Exhibition. The contest was covered by the June 22nd issue of the *Toronto Daily Star*—the headline reads "There'll be Beauty on the Bench, too, at Police Contest." In the article Titus is paraphrased as saying, "the Hollywood idea of an "oomph" girl doesn't rate with her." A second newspaper article promoting the event includes the headline "Two Beauty Judges Might Take Prizes: Girls from Art School "Lookers' Themselves, Will Help Selection." Titus continued to encounter sexism and misogyny that limited her career prospects and impacted her work in commercial illustration.

Through the marriage of her older sister Minnie, Titus became sister-in-law to Ted McCall, the editor and writer of Toronto-based Anglo-American Publications Company. This familial connection was fortuitous. In the summer of 1941, Titus was hired by McCall and Anglo-American to produce several comic book illustrations. Her first work, "Pat the Air Cadet," featured a brother-and-sister team that outwitted Axis plots during the Second World War (1939 – 1945). The signature "MacDuff" is believed to be a pseudonym for the working relationship between McCall and Titus—McCall writing stories and Titus illustrating them. The publication of "Pat the Air Cadet" in the September/October issue of *Grand Slam Comics* in 1941 made Titus the first woman comic book artist in Canada. [2] Unfortunately, this accomplishment is little known outside the Canadian comic book industry.

Grand Slam Comics, "Pat the Air Cadet," vol. 1 no. 1 (1941).





Titus later produced her own comic feature, “Martin Blake, The Animal King,” in March, 1942, and signed it with her real name (before marriage), “Slater.” In 1944, she adapted Pat Joudry’s popular CFRB radio show program “Penny’s Diary” for the comic book market. The radio show presented audiences with stereotypical experiences and misfortunes of a Canadian teenage girl. Titus’s illustrated version of “Penny’s Diary” first appeared in Active Comics no 19 in 1944 and represents the first teenage romance feature in Canadian comics.[3] The next issue of “Penny’s Diary,” in Active Comics, no 21, is the only war-time comic book cover drawn by Titus. “Penny’s Diary” ran until issue 26 in early 1946 and was her last work in the comic book industry.

Titus married crooner and radio broadcaster Russ Titus in 1944 and the couple soon had a son, Robin (Bobby), in 1946, and a daughter, Patricia (Patti), in 1949. Though managing a household and caring for two young children, she continued to produce graphic illustrations for corporate marketing campaigns and publications. She also published drawings for children’s books like Byng Whitteker’s *Baby Bee’s* series, published in 1950 and 1953 by McClelland Stewart. Titus’s work in the *Baby Bee’s* books is indebted to her comic book aesthetic, yet they contain a sense of tenderness and sentimentality that is likely inspired by her own young children.

When the war ended in 1945, the Canadian comic book industry slumped. Titus responded by turning her focus to arts education. Her marriage ended in 1950. In 1952, she moved with her two young children to Brantford, Ontario and was hired as an art instructor at Brantford Collegiate Institute & Vocational School (BCI). Titus’s years in Brantford are perhaps her most productive. She founded the Brantford Sketch Club, which convened weekly on the 14-acres of Glenhyrst Gardens (now Glenhyrst Art Gallery) to paint and draw *en plein air* (outdoors). The group also organized exhibitions to display and sell their work in Glenhyrst’s cottage and in various locations downtown.



Above: Active Comics, “Penny’s Diary,” no.19 (1942), pg.30.

Photograph of Dorris with her two young children, Robin and Patti.

Right: Members of the Sketch Club creating in Glenhyrst Gardens.



In addition to the Sketch Club, Titus was also a member of the Brantford Art League, which was active during the 1950s and 1960s. Several of the works in this exhibition, including Titus’s Cubist-inspired painting *Cats* (circa 1959), were first shown at Brantford’s Public Library as member of the Art League. Titus and other members of the Art League contributed to the arts throughout the region. For instance, a newspaper article pasted into her green scrapbook highlights how the Art League assisted in painting and designing a set for Simcoe’s Little Theatre, one of Ontario’s longest-running community theatres. She pasted a photograph of the set, with its Eiffel Tower backdrop, beside the article.

Titus’s support for the arts was unwavering. She was a prominent member of Brantford’s art community and often advocated for public funding and student scholarships. For example, in an article published in the *Brantford Expositor* titled “Art Scholarship Aid Suggested To Service Club,” she is described as saying that the “natural talents” of students were being “wasted because they could not afford to develop them through further education.”[4] It speaks to the ways that she encouraged students to pursue a formal education in the arts and supported public funding of the arts before it was part of public consciousness.

It is possible that, through her connections with the Sketch Club and Art League, Titus was given a major commission to paint the history of Brantford’s 56th field artillery regiment. The mural is currently installed in the



Top: *Untitled (portrait of a woman)*, 1962, oil on board.

Right: *Untitled (green abstract)*, 1962, oil on board.

armoury on Brant Avenue and, to date, has never been on public display until this exhibition. At the centre of the painting stands a forward observation officer in battle dress. To his left stands an infantry officer from the 17th Canadian Infantry Brigade, 7th Canadian Division, deployed for home defence in May, 1942 after the attack on Pearl Harbour. To his right, an officer from the 2nd and 10th Dragoons is mounted on horseback during World War I. It employs a one-point perspective, seen in the pyramid-like structure that points to the top of the picture—there stands the Brantford armoury, which formally opened on 30 October, 1893. What is remarkable about the mural is that it values historical narrative over aesthetic composition—it is overwhelmed by symbolism—which is unusual for her. Thus, it stands in contrast to her comic book illustrations and later paintings.

Because her comic book work distanced her from painting, Titus signed up for art classes at the Doon School of Fine Art in Kitchener, Ontario (now Homer Watson House & Gallery) under the instruction of Manx artist Toni Onley. Titus and Onley soon struck a friendship that lasted many years. (Photographs of a family vacation to Mexico with Onley and his wife are documented in Titus's archives). Though primarily recognized for his landscapes, Onley took to abstraction in the mid-1950s. Titus would turn to abstraction several years later and investigate it until her death. Evidence of this can be found in works like *Untitled (Green Abstract)* (1962) where she borrows from the fragmented compositions of Cubism to interpret a sun setting over a horizon to present a different form of reality. Abstract painting may have offered Titus a sense of freedom that commercial design and comic book illustration could not—it went deeper than the surface, beyond the things that we experience with our eyes. "In the "modern" styles," she was described as saying, "the artists painted not what they saw, *but what they felt about what they saw.*"[5]

In the late 1950s, Titus started to experiment with unorthodox materials. Her daughter Patti remembers that her mother often incorporated birdseed and her own bathwater as a medium. Abstract Expressionist painters of this period, such as Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline, also incorporated unconventional elements like cigarette butts, sand, bottle caps, and footprints into their paintings. Still, for a woman artist to do so at that time may have been considered taboo, which is likely why this information was kept within the family. We do not know Titus's intentions for using her bathwater in her paintings, though it is conceivable that she was interested in creating a self-portrait of sorts, an extension of her body, where her likeness was not represented but lived in the paint itself. To this end, the interplay of her nudity with pigment may have also been a blatant (yet invisible) expression of her sexuality.

Similarly, unknown substances and organic compounds also appear in a number of untitled abstract paintings from this period. These include a number of oily, transparent surfaces against paper or board backgrounds. It is believed that Titus dipped her board or canvas in the water of the Grand River then placed oils on the surface of the water. The board or canvas was then raised (perhaps on strings) to capture the flowing oils.[6] Their appearance reflects Titus's growing interest in how paint can be applied to two-dimensional surfaces, the



ways that texture impacts the quality of light, and the illusions of visual perception itself. The surfaces of her paintings were not safe from the knife, scissor, or pen, either. They were occasionally cut up and rearranged to create unusual collages and compositions.

Some of Titus's most touching works depict children, especially her own, caught in everyday moments. In her sketchbooks, she painted sitters head-on or in $\frac{3}{4}$ view using watercolour. These quickly-executed works are notable for the quality of their brushwork and minimal use of paint. Their linework and depiction of facial features are not caricaturizing, per se, but harken back to the idealized representations of figures found in her comic illustrations and children's books. The candid sketches of her children standing in their crib or playing with the dog in the yard convey a mother's love and simultaneously an artist at work, attempting to capture dynamic movement and emotion. This is perhaps nowhere clearer than her humble drawing of Robin asleep in bed, which is one of the most memorable works in this exhibition.

In 1960, Titus accepted a teaching position at the High School of Commerce (HSC) in Ottawa, Ontario, and subsequently moved the family there. She remained at HSC for four years. 1962 appears to be one of her most productive years, which is demonstrated in a number of works from this date in this exhibition. In 1964, she agreed to instruct a summer studio art course at her *alma mater*, the Ontario College of Art. In June, Titus was headed to the family cottage in Arden, Ontario and was involved in a traffic accident. She was killed along with Onley's daughter Jennifer, who was also in the front seat at the time. Patti Titus was in the backseat at the time of the accident and escaped with minor physical injuries.

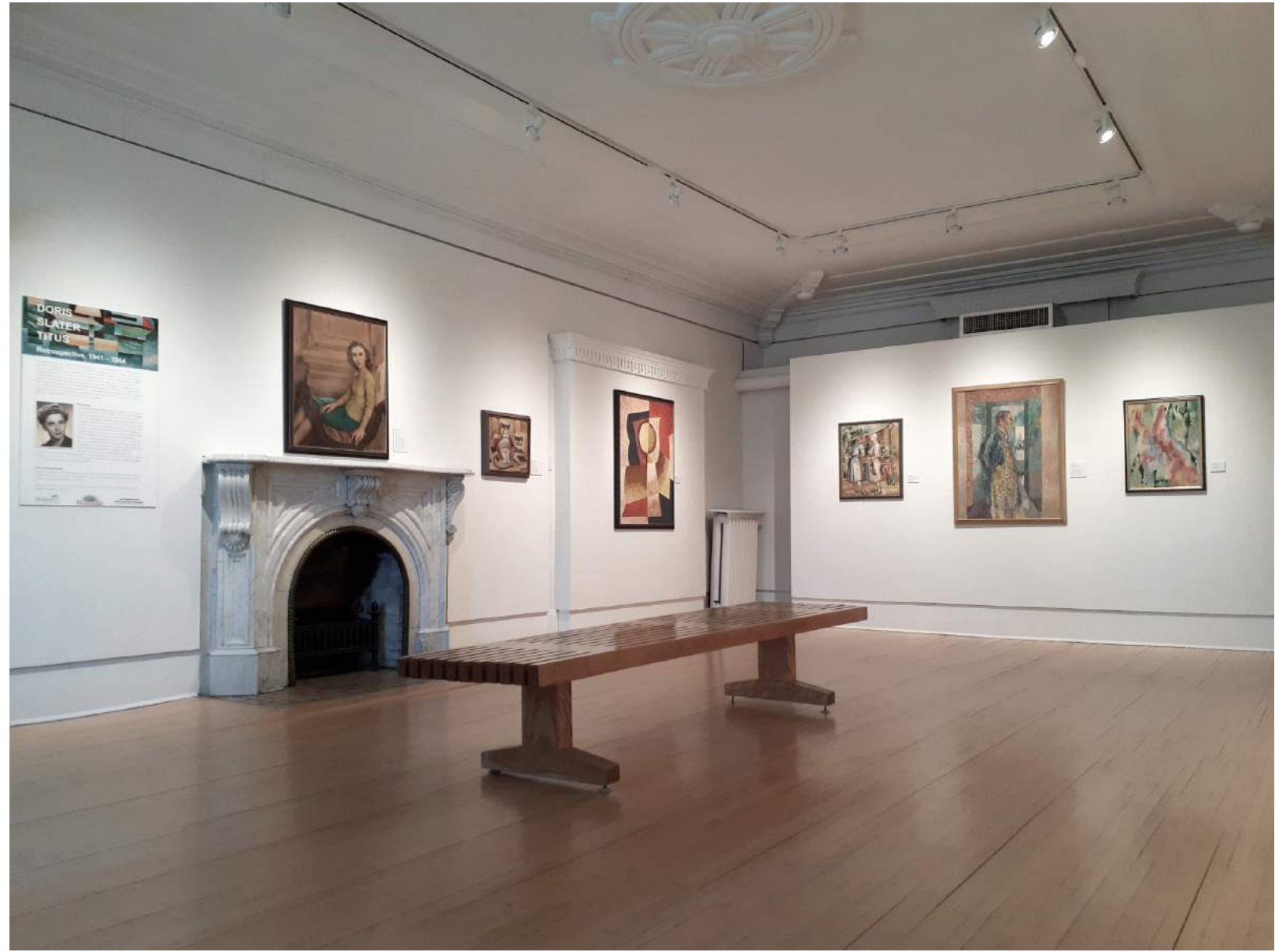
Doris Slater Titus was 47 years of age at the time of her death and is buried in Chatham. Titus's obscurity in Canada's art history may be due to her early death, but it is also endemic of a number of accomplished women artists who have been overlooked by our institutions and academies. It is the role and responsibility of art galleries and museums to tell stories like hers. Her biography addresses the difficulty of maintaining a career as a professional artist while caring for two children as a single mother. To this end, she stands as a bridge between established gender roles in the 1950s and locating empowerment through the arts in the 1960s. Titus achieved numerous firsts for women artists in Canada. Her successes deserve critical scrutiny. Nonetheless, to Brantford, she is an artistic force in the City's cultural history to the extent that, through this exhibition, artworks and anecdotes have come forward and are now being shared with the community. We may see Titus's name become a familiar one.



Untitled (child on bike), circa 1950, watercolour on board.



Installation Photographs





Doris Mildred Titus (nee Slater) was born outside Chatham, Ontario in 1917. She attended the Ontario College of Art (now OCAD University) on scholarship and focused on commercial art, later graduating in 1939. In 1941, she began illustrating comic books for Anglo-American Publications. The drawings for her first comic, "Penny's Diary," made her the first woman comic book artist in Canada. In 1952, Titus moved to Brantford, Ontario and was hired as an art teacher at Brantford Collegiate Institute. During this time, she founded the Sketch Club at Glenhyrst Gardens (now Glenhyrst Art Gallery), participated in exhibitions, and befriended artist Toni Onley. Her experiments with abstract painting led to the use of unconventional mediums like her own bathwater. Titus left Brantford for Ottawa in 1960 to teach at the Ottawa High School of Commerce. Tragically, she died in an automobile accident in June, 1964 at the age of 47. For her contributions to the Canadian comic book industry, she was inducted into the Shuster Awards Hall of Fame for Canadian comic book creators in 2015. Her work resides in several private collections in Canada and England, and in the permanent collection of Glenhyrst Art Gallery.

Notes

1. McLaughlin, R. A. Mrs. R. A. McLaughlin to Doris Slater, Oshawa, ON, June 17, 1936.
2. Kocmarek, Ivan. "Titus (nee Slater), Doris Mildred." In *Heroes of the Home Front*, 274. Hamilton: North End Books, 2018.
3. Ibid, 275.
4. Brantford Expositor. "Art Scholarship Aid Suggested To Service Club." *Brantford Expositor*. Date unknown.
5. Ibid. Emphasis added.
6. Kocmarek, Ivan. E-mail message to the author. 5 March, 2021.