FEBRUARY 21, 2025

A CANADA WITHOUT THE USA
GREG CURNOE'S BRILLIANT VISION

The London, Ontario-based artist's masterpiece about Canadian–American relations may have been meant to be humorous. But now, it is anything but funny.

Greg Curnoe, *America*, July 1989, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Central to the art scene of London, Ontario, from the early 1960s until his sudden and too-early death while cycling, few Canadian artists have been as fiercely proud of their country as the multitalented Greg Curnoe (1936–1992). In 1972, Curnoe began creating the first of several maps of North America, which eventually led to his masterpiece, *America*, July 1989 (above). As Judith Rodger tells us in the Art Canada Institute book *Greg Curnoe: Life & Work*, after Curnoe finished the piece, which successfully connects Mexico to the Canadian border, "He was so pleased with himself." While growing up in London, Curnoe was aware of the commission into the arts in Canada, led by Vincent Massey, that warned as early as 1951 of the dangers of American influence in media and publishing.

Greg Curnoe

In Curnoe's school classrooms, he learned about various historic Canadian border quarrels, including the Alaska Panhandle dispute. Throughout the 1960s, Curnoe listened to the intense debates raging in Canada about the virtues of nationalism versus continentalism or internationalism. His wife, Sheila Curnoe, commented that *America* was "meant to be funny and not to be taken so seriously." But her husband is having the last laugh. The fictitious map packs a punch with its prescience, and it reminds us why art about this country's history is more topical than ever.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

MAP OF NORTH AMERICA, 1972

Greg Curnoe, *Map of North America*, 1972, Dalhousie Art Gallery, Dalhousie University, Halifax.

Curnoe's first map work was most likely in response to a commission to produce a cover for the January 1973 issue of the *Journal of Canadian Fiction*. Drawing upon a childhood interest in maps and some professional experience with mapping from a summer job in the City of London Surveys Department, he created the ink drawing *Map of North America*, 1972. Curnoe, living in London, Ontario, less than two hundred kilometres from the U.S. border, witnessed firsthand the influx of American branch plants and university professors to Canada. He began his career at the beginning of a decade of change and turmoil in Canada and the world. Particularly relevant to his oeuvre were the sexual revolution, the Vietnam War, and the increasing American influence on life in Canada. He made headlines through humour and irony, such as with his 1970 statement, "All Canadian atlases must show Canada's southern border to be with Mexico. Bridges & tunnels must be built between Canada & Mexico."

Learn more about *Map of North America*

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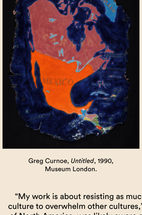
UNTITLED, 1990, AND STUDY FOR AMERICA, 1989-90



Greg Curnoe, *Untitled*, 1990, Museum London.

Greg Curnoe, *Study for America*, 1989–90, private collection.

"My work is about resisting as much as possible the tendency of American culture to overwhelm other cultures," said Curnoe, who, in redrawing the map of North America, was likely aware of the 1929 Surrealist map of the world by an anonymous artist who cast the continents in a manner that also eliminated the United States completely. Although Curnoe made several versions of these maps, *America*, July 1989, is the one that has been most exhibited, especially as an example of Conceptual art—and now as a tongue-in-cheek statement about cultural imperialism.

Learn more in ACI's *Greg Curnoe: Life & Work* by Judith Rodger

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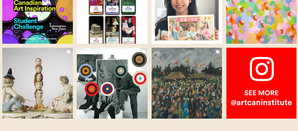

Image Credits: [1] Greg Curnoe, *America*, July 1989, trial proof II state 2, colour lithograph on wove paper, printed by Don Holman, 73.9 x 57.6 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1990 (no. 30842). Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada. © Estate of Greg Curnoe. Photo credit: NGC. [2] Photograph of Greg Curnoe, n.d., photographer unknown, courtesy of Michael Gibson Gallery. [3] Greg Curnoe, *Map of North America*, 1972, India ink on paper, 29.5 x 22.2 cm. Collection of Dalhousie Art Gallery, Dalhousie University, Halifax, purchased in 1978 from The Third Dalhousie Drawing Exhibition. © Estate of Greg Curnoe. [4] Greg Curnoe, *Untitled*, 1990, fired clay with glaze, 68 x 50 x 2 cm. Collection of Museum London, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John H. Moore, London, Ontario, 1994 (94.A.24A). © Estate of Greg Curnoe. [5] Greg Curnoe, *Study for America*, 1989–90, watercolour, 72.4 x 55.9 cm. Private collection.