

# An Examination of Christiane Pflug's Works of Art on Paper

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Image source: <https://alchetron.com/Christiane-Pflug>

## Introduction

Christiane Pflug (1936-1972) is an important German-born Canadian artist who has become known for her detailed drawings and magical realist painting style. Her artistic beginnings began in 1953 when she went to study fashion design in Paris, France. During this time, she met her future husband Michael Pflug who encouraged her to pursue painting. Christiane relocated to Tunis, Africa in 1956 and immigrated to Canada in 1959. These transitions significantly influenced the subject matter of her work which centered on themes of her surrounding environment and her domestic interiors. Many of the works she produced in her short life now reside at several public Canadian art collections. The purpose of this research project was to conduct a technical examination of her art, with a focus on those on paper, housed at the Agnes Etherington Art Center (AEAC). Non-invasive methods were used to identify her material preferences and trace her artistic developments as she moved from Europe to Africa, and then to Canada. At the same time, this research explored the function of Christiane's graphite drawings, specifically in relation to her oil paintings. Ultimately, this project hopes to generate interest in this under-recognized artist and contribute to the limited body of knowledge surrounding her work.

## Methods

- 24 works were selected for examination from the AEAC collections
  - 21 works of art on paper, including bodycolour (gouache), watercolour, tempera and oil paintings; 1 sketchbook; 3 oil paintings on canvas
- Preliminary Research was conducted at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) E. P. Taylor Research Library and Archives. Works from the National Gallery Canada (NGC) were also examined at the Prints and Drawings Study Room
- Visible examinations under the microscope
- Technical photography of all works on paper:
  - Visible and raking light photography
  - Transmitted light photography
  - Ultraviolet-induced visible fluorescence (UVF) photography
  - Infrared (IR) photography
- Infrared reflectography (IRR) of paintings on canvas with Queen's University's Optical Spectroscopic and Infrared Remote Imaging System (OSIRIS)

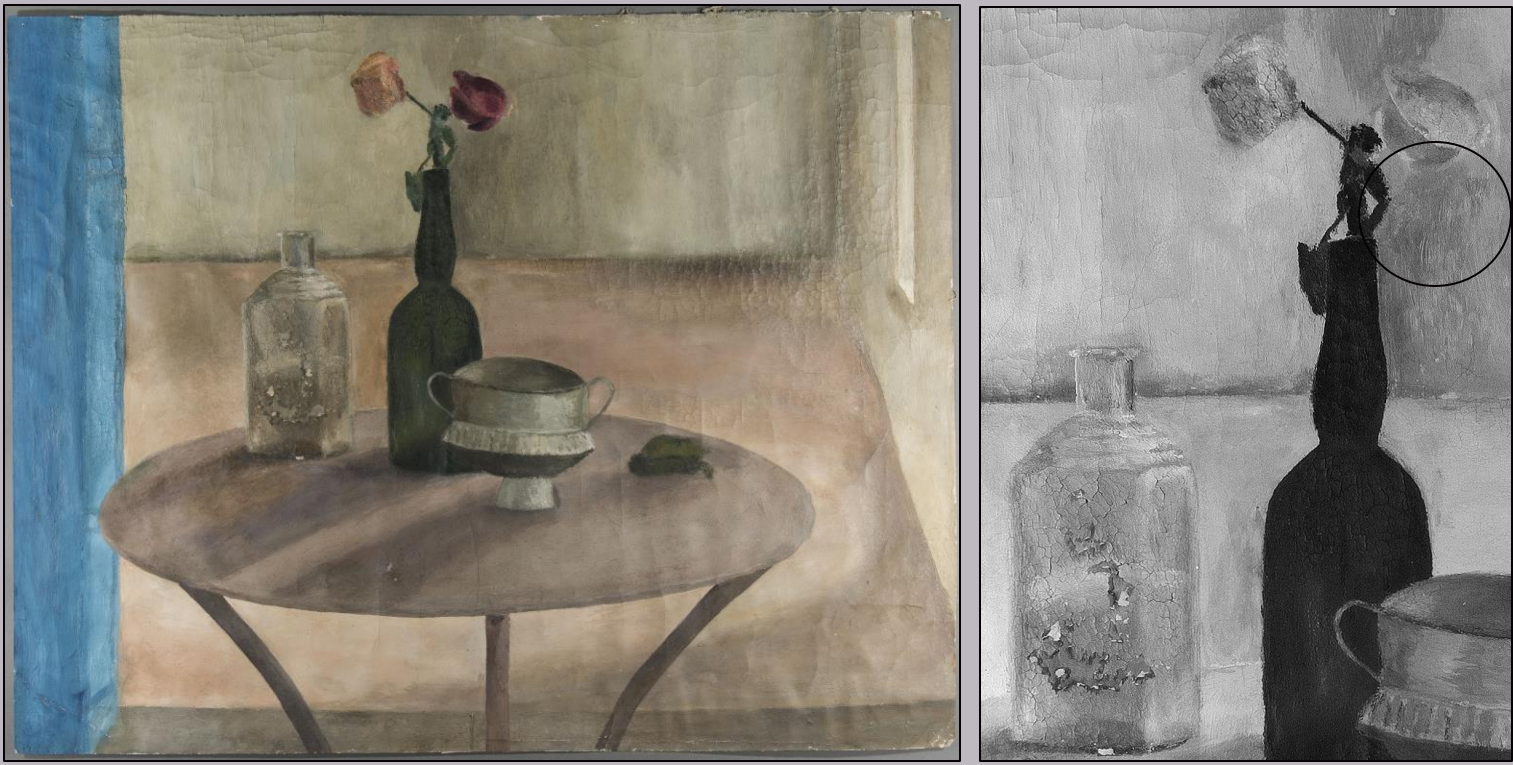


Figure 4. IR photograph (right) of *Still Life with Rose and Bottles* (46.6x60 cm, 1958, tempera on wove paper, AEAC) with circle showing underpainted rose. Condition issues include overall cracking and flaking of the tempera media.

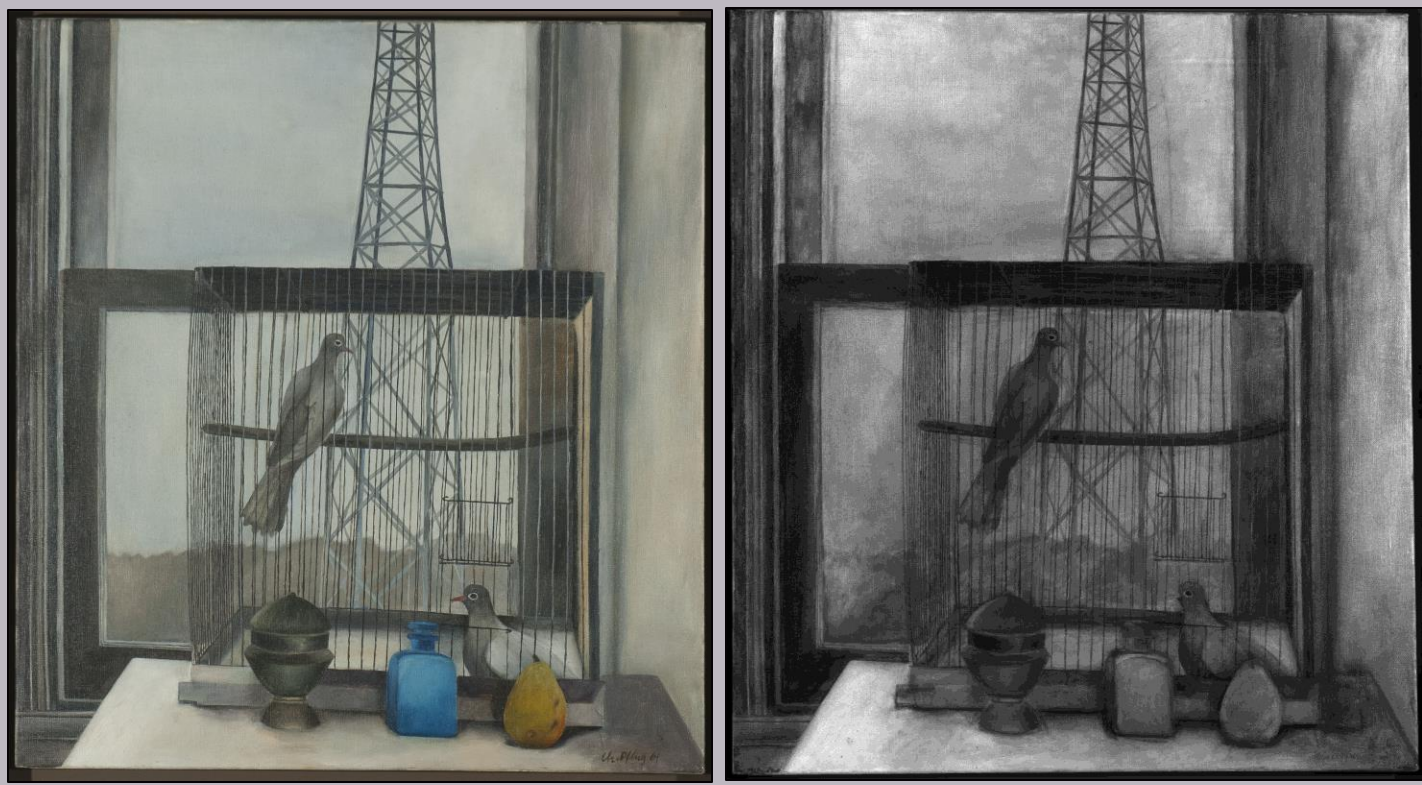


Figure 5. Reflectogram<sup>1</sup> of *Bird Cage with Hydro Mast* (60.50x55.5cm, 1958, oil on canvas, AEAC), detects possible underdrawings. A shift in the position of the hydro mast and reduction in the size of left bird was noticed.

## Discussion and Preliminary Conclusions

Examination of Christiane's paintings on paper showed she experimented with a variety of media on both laid and wove paper. Watermark identification revealed that in Paris she used laid papers made by the German paper manufacturer, Zerkall Bütten. All graphite drawings were executed on wove paper and both hard and soft pencils were likely used. Some of her wove papers were made by Latune et Cie., a paper manufacturer in France. This wove paper was identified in her sketchbook *Two Island Lake* and other finished drawings, now housed at the NGC. This revealed Christiane continued to use European-made materials while in Canada.

Christiane's drawings served many functions; some appear to be sketches whose subjects appear in later paintings (Figure 6). Other drawings are perspective exercises or stand alone as finished works. Regardless of their function, most works appear to be taken out of a sketchbook.

Traces of graphite underdrawings were visible in some early paintings on paper. In these works, graphite was also identified over top of the paint layers. In Christiane's paintings on canvas, changes in the position of subjects and shifts in the contours of objects were detected; however, it is difficult to determine if these were deviations from underdrawings or changes made while painting. X-Radiography should be done for more information.

This examination revealed there are media related stability issues with some of Christiane's paintings on paper, namely, cracking and flaking of the tempera media in her Tunisian still life. Interestingly, its deterioration has given a glimpse of Christiane's working method, in which she built up her compositions in successive paint layers.

## Summary of Christiane's Artistic Evolution

Paris, France (1953-1956)

- Produced a series of fashion studies while attending École Baziot.
  - Met Michael Pflug who encouraged her to paint en plein air.
  - Experimented with bodycolour, watercolour, tempera and oil paint on paper.
- Figure 1. Transmitted light image of *Fashion study (blue evening gown rear view)* (37.2x26.6cm, bodycolour and watercolour with traces of graphite on laid paper, AEAC).



Tunis, Africa (1956-1959)

- Became more interested in painting still lifes with tempera on canvas.
- Began drawing more frequently for both its spontaneity and ease of use, especially after the birth of her daughters.

Figure 2. *A Ben Tabbed Girl* (1958, 23.8 x 16.9cm, 1958, AEAC, graphite on wove paper).



Toronto, Canada (1959-1972)

- Painting in oil on canvas and drawing with graphite on paper became her preferred mediums; produced a series of works depicting the Toronto landscape and views of interiors from her Toronto homes at Young Street (1960-1962), Woodlawn Avenue (1962-1967) and Birch Avenue (1967-1972).
- Briefly experimented with printmaking.

Figure 3. UVF image of *Two Island Lake* (1967, 37.2x31.7 cm, AEAC, graphite on wove paper).



## Observations

Visual Examinations

- Media related stability issues: paper supports of oil paintings have staining from the binder; the large tempera on paper, made in Tunis, is cracking and flaking, revealing underlying paint layers (Figure 4).

Visible and Raking Light Photography

- Raking light show the intensity in which Christiane applied graphite in her Toronto-made, finished drawings. This style was common to other Toronto-made drawings observed at the NGC.

Transmitted Light Photography

- Many laid paper supports have a ZERKALL BÜTTEN watermark. All laid paper supports have similar chain and laid line measurements (Figure 1).
- The wove paper identified in her sketchbook and *Two Island Lake* have the same DESSIN SUPERIEUR GELATINE LATUNE BLACONS watermark.

Ultraviolet-Induced Visible Fluorescence Photography

- The sketchbook and *Two Island Lake* fluoresce blue light significantly more than any other paper, likely due to optical brightening agents that were added in the paper manufacture (Figure 3).

Infrared Photography

- IR photography did not detect graphite underdrawings in paintings with thick paint layers or areas with dark colours such as blue and green.
- IR photography may have detected the faint outline of a rose in *Still Life with Rose and Bottles* (Figure 4), suggesting this figure was later painted over.

Infrared Reflectography of Paintings on Canvas

- In all paintings, slight changes in the position of objects and/or subjects were detected in the reflectograms. These changes were likely made during the painting stages. *Bird Cage with Hydro Mast* (Figure 5) is the only painting where strong evidence of underdrawings were seen.

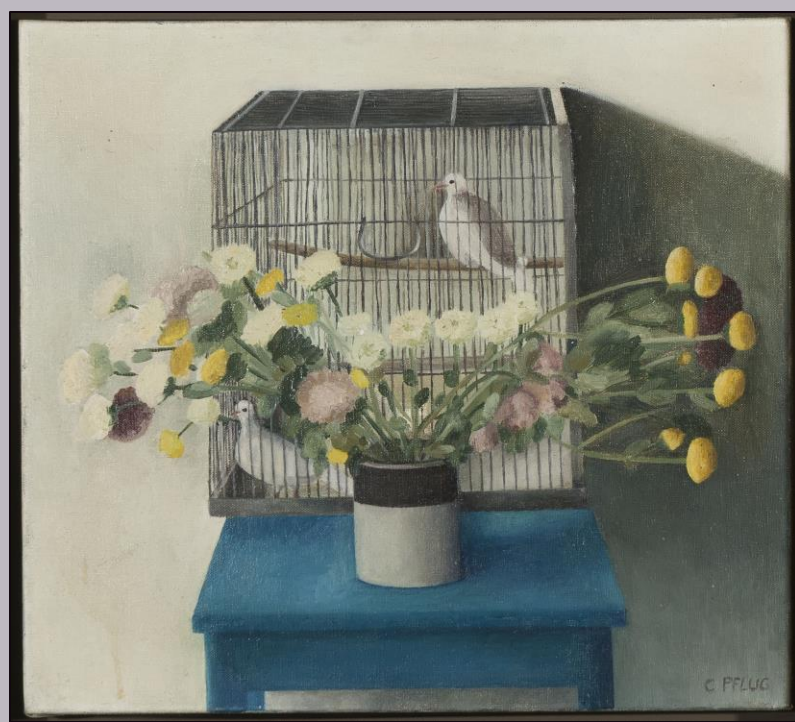
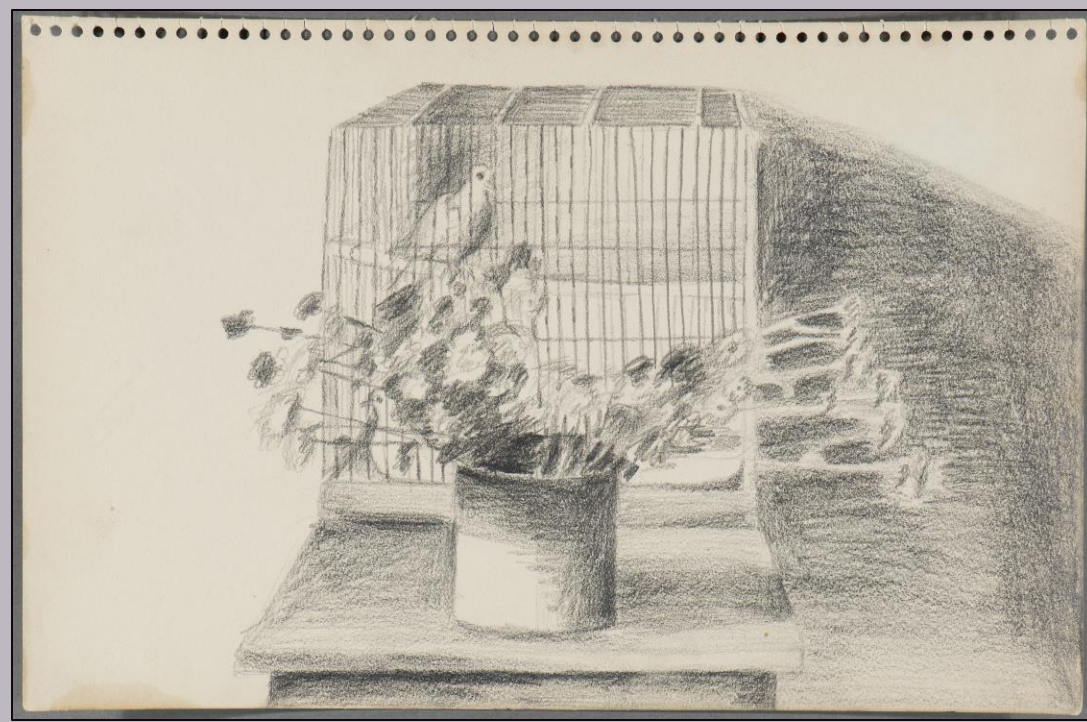


Figure 6 . Comparison of Christiane's drawing and painting. *Still Life with Birdcage and Flowers* (16.5x25.5 cm, 1960, graphite on paper, AEAC) (left) and *Still Life with Bird Cage and Flowers* (1962, 38x42.0cm oil on canvas, AEAC) (right).

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