



REVERENCE FOR NATURE

CELIA GODKIN'S PASSION EXPRESSED THROUGH ART



EMBELLISHING HER ART WITH WORDS IS A POWERFUL WAY CELIA GODKIN HOPES TO INSPIRE CHILDREN WITH THE SAME REVERENCE SHE FEELS FOR NATURE IN ALL ITS FORMS. SAYS THE AWARD-WINNING ARTIST AND AUTHOR, "OUR WORLD AND THE ENVIRONMENT ARE AT A CRITICAL TURNING POINT. AND OUR CHILDREN WILL PLAY A KEY ROLE IN ITS PRESERVATION FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS."

"It was my first big illustrating commission," recalls Celia Godkin, "creating signage for the Assiniboine Park Zoo in Winnipeg. While working there, I discovered the Zoo's Director, Clive Roots, had an unpublished manuscript on endangered species and suggested we collaborate on a book. The result was *Endangered Species: Canada's Disappearing Wildlife*, published in 1987 by Fitzhenry and Whiteside."

"This was a turning point in my life," says Godkin, "Years earlier, I'd written a number of children's stories but couldn't find a publisher. The success of *Endangered Species* encouraged me to try again."

In 1989, Godkin's first children's book was released to wide acclaim. *Wolf Island* won the Children's Literature Roundtable of Canada 1990 Information Book Award and was also nominated for the Mr. Christie Book Award.

"I never dreamed I would make a living doing what I loved most, but there I was, writing and illustrating books on nature."

Godkin had always loved to draw. She can't remember a time in her childhood when she wasn't busy sketching a plant or animal.

"By high school, I was quite a capable artist, but it never occurred to me that I could make a living with my art. I was fascinated by biology, so that's what I chose for my post-secondary studies."

For Godkin, the work she found as a biologist proved disappointing: "Television programs featuring research biologists in far flung places had given me a misleading impression about the profession. I was working at The Reptile Breeding Foundation. And while that might sound very interesting, in reality, I was cleaning cages and feeding snakes. I knew I wanted more."

So Godkin set her sights on the field of scientific illustration and enrolled at the Ontario College of Art.

"I loved it," she says. "After years of fact-based studies, it was wonderful to focus on my creative side."

Godkin's talents flourished. After completing an illustrated master's thesis in zoology, she was hired to teach scientific illustration at the University of Toronto (U of T). One year later, she jumped at the chance to expand her teaching to include botanical drawing and watercolour.



COMMEMORATIVE COINS DESIGNED BY CELIA GODKIN

2008 99999 GOLD COIN—PURPLE SAXIFRAGE

2008 \$20 FINE SILVER COIN—CRYSTAL RAINDROP

2009 \$20 FINE SILVER COIN—CRYSTAL RAINDROP

Godkin's teaching style was perfectly suited to this new group of students; gardeners at heart with a desire to master realistic painting. Unlike most art teachers who give open-ended assignments and critique students' interpretations, Godkin provided specific step-by-step instructions, with each lesson building on the last.

By the time Godkin retired from U of T in 2005, she was teaching eight different courses, with many students returning time and again. Those attending her botanical watercolour courses ultimately formed the nucleus of the Botanical Artists of Canada of which Godkin is also a member (www.botanicalartistsofcanada.org).

How did Godkin wind up designing coins for the Mint?

"That opportunity literally came out of the blue," says Godkin, "Pamela Stagg, my mentor in botanical art and winner of the world's top award, had done work for the Mint and recommended me to them."

Godkin's experience illustrating texts proved invaluable in designing for the Mint. "I was already accustomed to working towards specific technical requirements, so providing a design that could be reduced down to the size of a coin was not difficult," says Godkin, "Generally, I prepare a line drawing showing where the engraver's cuts should be and a half-tone pencil drawing showing the relief of the coin. If colour is part of the actual coin design, I do an additional painting in watercolour, sometimes enhanced with colour pencil. Lettering is added on the computer."

Godkin also draws in pen and ink. She'll combine watercolour and coloured pencil to re-create animal fur and uses water soluble oil paints when the project calls for it. "Oils are unmatched for creating intensity of colour, like forest fires."

Fire! The Renewal of a Forest (2006), is one in a series of children's books that illustrate nature's powerful ability to recover from natural disasters. "Boys are especially fond of these books," says Godkin, "They love catastrophes like volcanoes and hurricanes."

"When I was writing *Hurricane!* (2008), I realized how little research had been done on a hurricane's effect on wildlife. Thankfully, I managed to find a paper documenting the impact of Hurricane Charlie on the wildlife of Sanibel Island in Florida and my scientific background enabled me to sort through the technical terminology and re-formulate it in a language that children could understand."

Godkin sees children's reactions first-hand when she does readings at schools and libraries, "Children care very deeply about wildlife and what's happening to our natural world. Their concern inspires me to keep on producing books that will help them understand the environmental challenges we face and at the same time reassure them about nature's recuperative powers."

With hundreds of published illustrations to her credit and seven books that Godkin has authored herself, writing and illustrating have become the primary focus of her life. When asked if she will ever retire, Godkin smiles and says, "Retirement; what's that? This isn't work—art and writing are my life-long passion."

Born in England and raised in Brazil, Celia Godkin immigrated to Canada after earning a Bachelor's degree in Zoology. Her scientific studies led to a career in scientific illustration and teaching. Formerly an Associate Professor at University of Toronto, this passionate art teacher has illustrated textbooks, scientific papers and has written and illustrated a number of award-winning children's storybooks on ecology. Ms. Godkin's work, both as artist and educator, has evolved out of a profound respect for nature in all its forms and a desire to see those forms preserved for future generations. She hopes that her teaching—in particular, her children's books—will inspire others in the same, profound way.

