

THE FIGURE

IN CANADIAN PAINTING

AN EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS
FROM THE PERMANENT COLLECTION
OF THE BEAVERBROOK ART GALLERY



The second exhibition, "The Figure in Canadian Painting", organized by the Beaverbrook Art Gallery for circulation to cities and towns in New Brunswick, is designed as a sequel to the first exhibition, "Canadian Painting: Yesterday and Today".

"The Figure in Canadian Painting" attempts to illustrate the multiple forms and techniques used in the treatment of the figure in the history of Canadian art. The exhibition begins with an anonymous, early 19th century miniature, "Portrait of Emma Colebrooke" and concludes with the hard-edge "Portrait of Somebody" executed in 1968 by West Coast artist, Donald Jarvis.

Aspects of figure painting represented in the exhibition include the traditional portrait, the figure in the landscape, the figure in groups, and the figure as illustration. Technical modes of presenting the figure include Primitivism, Classicism, Romanticism, Impressionism and Surrealism.

Three new exhibition centres, Rothesay, Chatham and Richibucto, have been added to the itinerary for "The Figure in Canadian Painting" exhibition.

The maintenance of this extension exhibition programme for towns and cities in New Brunswick constitutes an attempt on the part of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery at a greater dissemination of its collection in line with the Secretary of State's newly-announced museums policy with its emphasis on decentralization and democratization within Canadian museums.

The Beaverbrook Art Gallery is grateful for the financial assistance received from both The Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation and The Canada Council for this exhibition.

Ian G. Lumsden
Curator

"Every artist finds certain visual possibilities before him, to which he is bound. Not everything is possible at all times."

This statement by the august German art critic, Heinrich Wölfflin, has never been more applicable than in the history of Canadian art. Because of the youth of Canada and its consequent limited cultural heritage, Canadian artists have had to build and borrow from the wellsprings of international art movements.

An artist's vision is necessarily defined by the fund of visual knowledge that has been accumulated up to his time. Impressionism would not have been possible without the naturalist school of landscape painting as known by Constable, just as Cubism was a logical outgrowth of Impressionism and could never have preceded it. An artist's perception is the result of accumulated visual experience; artists perceive things differently in different centuries.

This cumulative development of art history is responsible not only for the constant stylistic changes in painting but for the revival of interest in the various subjects of painting at different times.

In Canada in the 1960s there was much glib banter among many art critics concerning "the return of the figure in Canadian painting". In reality figure painting had occupied a place in the historical continuum of painting in Canada from the time of the *voitive* (ex voto) paintings of the 17th century in Quebec. Its presence has always been one of degree. Certainly there were periods in Canadian art when its existence was overshadowed by other movements, such as the "national school" of landscape painting (later the Group of Seven) in the early 20th century, and the rise of Abstract Expressionism in Canada in the late 1950s under the leadership of Painters Eleven. (Although with the latter's concern for morphological shapes, it can rightfully be argued that the figure was still at the core of this school although instead of presenting it in its entirety, it was then being depicted in fragments).

This exhibition purports to present some of those periods in Canadian painting when figure painting was at a high point and more particularly those artists who have dealt with the figure, and their mode of representation.

"Portrait of Emma Colebrooke" is an anonymous miniature of the wife of Sir William MacBean George Colebrooke, Governor of New Brunswick (1841-48), probably executed around the time of their marriage in 1820. Many miniaturists who worked predominantly in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and the Eastern United States, were trained in England and brought their skill over to North America. The slightly naive quality of this work as a result of such features as the disproportionately small body and the somewhat neck-less appearance of the young sitter indicate that the artist was probably trained locally. Throughout the 19th century it was a mark of social distinction to have one's portrait painted. Those who could not afford the artistry of the miniaturist could have a silhouette done of their profile.

Cornelius Kriehoff's paintings of rural Quebec life were sufficiently popular in his time that he was not forced to turn to portrait commissions for mere subsistence as was the case with many 19th century Canadian artists. Kriehoff's concern was the figure in the landscape. His landscapes were animated with the stereotypic jolly French Canadian "habitant" and the heroic North American Indian both of whom were frequently more poetic than factual. Both "Indian Squaw with Papoose" (1852) and "Indian Hunter on Snowshoes" portray the Indian braving the elements with considerable dignity.

"Portrait of a Notary" (1848) is only one of the few portraits executed by Kriehoff. This work is carefully observed and rendered with a good deal of empathy. The elderly notary does not become a caricature like so many of the figures that people Kriehoff's canvasses.

Although Kriehoff's subject matter and settings are certainly indigenous to Canada notwithstanding their slightly idealized format, his technique owes much to the 17th century Dutch genre and landscape painters such as Teniers and van Ostade with whose work he became familiar as a boy in Rotterdam. Given Kriehoff's background and the extremely spotty artistic activity in North America at that time, he had little alternative but to apply this highly refined realist tech-