

Sculpture at last finds a Canadian voice

By James Purdie

Canada has been aptly described as a country of unresolved solitudes, and its art has traditionally been defined as much by this fact as it has by the two main streams of history, European and American, from which it has grown.

Although the Canadian land mass is greater than that of the United States, it supports a sparsely dispersed population of little more than 23 m. It is not possible to live in a Canadian town or city without being aware of deep intuitive and psychological levels — of two predominant characteristics of the land and its people that are not to be found in combination anywhere else in the world.

One of these is the sense in every Canadian, artist or not, of the vast, undeveloped, severely beautiful emptiness that stretches northward from the fertile regions to the shores of the Polar seas. The other is the social organization, which is based on what is officially called multiculturalism — not the melting-pot system of assimilation that welded the United States into a nation.

Warrior idol, a jade sculpture by David Enn, who is represented in the current exhibition at Canada House Gallery, London.

The common solitude is the eternal silence, the shared frontier of glacial lakes, forest, tundra and ice, this is the solitude that unites. It also holds the greatest promise of producing a mature, definable, indigenous art — an art yet to be synthesized from the many streams of influence that flow through the painting and sculpture of today.

The other solitudes are defined by geography and the cultural differences it has inevitably produced. British Columbia on the Pacific coast is separated by the Rocky Mountains from the oilfields of Alberta, the wheat-fields, potash and uranium of the Prairies and the industrial complexes of Ontario and central Canada. The Atlantic Provinces, with their vast forests and fisheries, are generally more immediately concerned about storms at sea than they are about storms in Parliament 1,500 miles away.

Quebec province, which has preserved its unique cultural identity for 300 years — and, in many ways, achieved maturity in the arts earlier than the rest of the country — defines its particular and special solitude by means of language and a social organization

with separate roots that reach back to pre-revolutionary France.

Canada, then, had no art history of its own before the early years of this century (apart from those ancient arts of the Indian and Eskimo that are now being revived — encouraged and preserved in museums as an irreplaceable cultural treasure).

The country's art, throughout the nineteenth century, consisted of adaptations of styles imported from Europe — either directly or indirectly, by way of the United States, the first emergence of a national style came into focus after 1912, the year in which Group of Seven Toronto-based painters drew inspiration for an austere beautiful new style of landscape painting from an exhibition of Scandinavian art in Buffalo, New York.

Swift evolution

The evolution since that time has been swift and diverse. Today, art that competes with the best the world has to offer is being produced in every conceivable style, figurative and abstract. Canadian artists, because of their solitudes and the preservation of ethnic identity within a government system of co-operative confederation, are freer than most to draw their inspiration from any style or period in world art history.

So it is that American West Coast painting and sculpture and design philosophies from the Orient have more influence in British Columbia than the art being produced in other parts of Canada. In Alberta and Saskatchewan, the endless horizons and great vaulted skies encourage a contemplative lyricism that is unique to its regions. And so it is across the country. The world of art history is represented everywhere in microcosm.

Viewed in this light, contemporary Canadian artists recognize their potential as a significant gathering point for the art traditions of the old world and powerful new streams of art energies that have welled up through the great convergence of cultures in the United States.

It is important to know something of the Canadian solitudes, this state of suspension between world cultural streams, if the diversity of an emerging art maturity is to be properly understood and assigned a place in the international art world of the present day.

Canadian artists, unlike those of Europe, have no native Michelangelos, Constables or Henry Moores on whose shoulders they can stand. They lay claim, instead, to the heroes of both Europe and North America. Their art college is the world.

Until the present period, the flow of ideas and techniques has been generally a one-way affair, with Canadians absorbing information and inspiration abroad and returning to their solitudes to work out a

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