

Art has lost its innocence and come of age

By William Withrow

Introduction to Contemporary Canadian Painting by William Withrow, reprinted with the permission of The Canadian Publishers, McClelland and Stewart Limited, Toronto, Ontario. Revised and edited by Research and Writing Section, Department of External Affairs, Ottawa.

The past quarter-century has witnessed radical changes in the state of art and the artist in Canada. For one thing, it was the period when Canadian art finally caught up with the twentieth century. In Europe abstract art was firmly established by the start of the First World War but in Canada the Second World War was over before abstract art was anything much more than a rumour.

Starting in the forties (in Montreal) and the early fifties (in Toronto), Canadian art joined the mainstream. In less than two decades from the end of the Second World War, Canadian painting was overwhelmingly non-figurative, and a few non-figurative Canadian painters were even established firmly on the international scene. Jean-Paul Riopelle was the darling of Paris, and William Ronald was selling his total output in New York. (In 1956, Ronald had won a Guggenheim Award against international competition. In 1958, Jack Shadbolt of Vancouver won the same award, and the 1960 winner was Paul-Emile Borduas.) In 1971, Jack Bush was being called, by an American critic, "one of the important non-figurative artists painting today."

Painters multiplied

During the same period, and under the same stimulus of fresh ideas and larger ambitions, living artists became much more visible in Canada. There was an odd but definite effect of the number of Canadian painters having multiplied. The sense of increased artistic activity was reinforced by the appearance of work by living Canadian artists not only in galleries and in the annual society shows but in many unlikely public places. Furthermore, the work itself often became the subject of healthy comment. Art made news.

So did artists. They appeared on television, ran radio programmes, were profiled in newspapers and popular magazines. This was all part of another change that the same quarter-century witnessed: the raising of the artist's status. The story of the years 1945-1970 is thus the story of art in Canada's coming of age,

beginning at last to be accepted as a vital and meaningful element in Canadian society.

It is also the story of the end of an epoch. Until recently, painting completely dominated the visual arts in this country. These days, almost all the important artists in the country are experimenting with other forms and other means of expression, ranging from poetry to film, photography and even to sound or multi-media creation.

A period that has brought such a quickening in the country's art cannot be chronicled easily.

People — individuals — made some of the difference: displaced painters from war-torn Europe bringing news of the latest fashions in art; a handful of inspired teachers at home, pariahs as like as not in the Establishment art schools; here and there a crucial, imaginative gallery director/commercial dealer/civil servant/collector/patron. The painters themselves, of course: their stories are worth knowing about.

Social influences

Conditions made a difference, too: social and economic change, affluence, the rise of radicalism. Some institutions and associations played a part, and so, most importantly, did communications, including television and even the popular magazines. But if it is true that "creation comes from an overflow," perhaps it is simply that Canada at least had energy to spare for the arts that older cultures take for granted.

The beginning of change came with the end of the Second World War for two reasons. The first is that Emily Carr died in 1945. In her isolated, desperate struggle to express herself, and to survive as an artist in Canada, she stands as a symbol of what it was like in the first half of this century. The prejudice against the artist was almost complete. The art schools themselves were hidebound and conservative. Technique was everything; experiment, and particularly "modernism", was firmly quelled. The art societies were not much more daring. Scarcely a painter, of whatever degree of safe competency, could make a living from his "fine" art alone. The idea seemed to be to postpone buying the work of a Canadian artist until he was safely dead and his reputation reliably established. As for any "modernistic" painter, he could scarcely get exhibition space, let alone a one-man show or a commercial dealer to handle his work.

And yet, terribly belatedly, and just before her death, Emily Carr had been recognised by the then-official art world of Canada, in the person of the National Gallery director. That, too, was a symbol. For, at war's end, events were stirring in this country. Something was afoot.

It was in 1945 too that a group from the Arts and Letters Club (in Toronto) began pushing actively for government support for Canadian culture. From this small germinal endeavour sprouted such ramifications as to alter significantly the situation of the arts in Canada. The first step was the organisation of the Canadian Arts Council, which became in 1959 the Canadian Conference of the Arts. Through the efforts of this council, the Canadian government agreed to set up a Royal Commission to investigate the National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences. The Commission's report was published in 1951 and led directly to the establishment in 1957 of the Canada Council.

But the flowering of contemporary Canadian painting is a complex phenomenon, and long before that landmark event all sorts of other things had happened.

They happened first in Montreal. Alfred Pellan had returned from Paris and almost before his first Canadian exhibition was over, he was attracting students and experimenting with fresh techniques. Meanwhile the Montreal artist-teacher Paul-Emile Borduas began painting his first abstracts, using a sort of automatic, action-painting approach. He soon had a group of disciples, Les Automatistes, with whom he exhibited, and it was this group, along with other like-minded young radicals that in 1948 published the collection of rebellious plays and essays called *Refus Global*. It was not a document of aesthetic theory but of political and social protest. Borduas was strongly critical of the repressive forces of organised religion and of the Quebec government of the day. The publication of *Refus Global* caused a furor. And somehow the episode was a magically liberating force for young Quebec painters.

When Les Automatistes waned in influence in 1954, their place was quickly taken by Les Plasticiens: four young Montreal artists who had been exhibiting together and who in 1955 issued a manifesto. French-Canadian artists differ from their English-speaking colleagues in one main respect: their love of manifestos. The

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