

The first consciously 'modern' art in Canada — as distinct from that striving merely to be current — came from those artists who formed the Canadian Art Club (CAC) in Toronto in 1907. The Club, an invitational society, was determined to bring Canadian art 'up to date' by encouraging Canadian painters who had been drawn to Paris to exhibit at home. The annual exhibitions of the OSA and RCA were seen as havens for outdated academicism and, although the CAC in no sense intended to replace these broadly-based bodies, it was meant to act as a corrective, a positive alternative to perceived mediocrity. In this respect it was the first in a new trend in Canadian artists' organizations, selective in membership and committed to specific aesthetic ends.

Although Toronto artists such as Edmund Morris (1871-1913) and Curtis Williamson (1867-1944) were the initiators, the consistent quality and stylistic cohesiveness of the eight exhibitions that were held before dissolution of the club in 1915 can be largely attributed to the inclusion of Montreal painters such as James Wilson Morrice (1865-1924), Maurice Cullen (1866-1934) and Marc Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Côté (1869-1937). The members presented moody, atmospheric paintings derived variously from impressionism, Whistler and his circle or the Hague School. Even when they worked in Canada (a good number were actively pursuing careers abroad), they tended to stress effects of atmosphere, often limiting their palettes to one or two richly toned hues. This sombre painterliness impressed Canadian collectors with its similarity to the currently popular international mode. But it lacked a sense of place, and it was this failing in the work of the internationalists that another, smaller and younger group of painters in Toronto in the years just before the war rallied to overcome.

Expeditions to the bush

In their concern to develop an idiom that expressed the unique nature of the Canadian experience, the members of this group found common ground around J.E.H. MacDonald (1873-1932) and Lawren S. Harris (1885-1970) during 1912 and 1913. An exhibition of contemporary Scandinavian art viewed in nearby Buffalo, New York, early in 1913, underlined for them the unique nature of northern landscape, and they found in Tom Thomson (1877-1917) — a commercial artist recently turned to painting — the model of the new Canadian artist. The following year their program took concrete form. Housed in the new Studio Building of Canadian Art in Toronto, the assembled painters — Harris, MacDonald, A.Y. Jackson (1882-1974) from Montreal, Arthur Lismer (1885-1969) and Fred Varley (1881-1969), recent immigrants from Sheffield, England, and, of course, Tom Thomson — travelled into the Ontario northern bush around Georgian Bay and Algonquin Park for their inspiration.