

The Arts

# Gallery that takes art to the people

By Jill Pound-Corner



National Gallery of Canada

On a winter night in 1880 at the Clarendon Hotel in Ottawa, there was an exhibition of works of the newly founded Royal Canadian Academy. It was opened by The Marquess of Lorne, Governor General of the day, who had persuaded (perhaps blackmailed would be a better word) the new Academicians into each giving one work of art towards the formation of a National Gallery. The gift, described as a "diploma work," was a condition for membership.

As he opened the exhibition, the Marquess stood beneath the diploma work of the Academy's first president, Lucius O'Brien, a landscape of *Sunrise on the Saguenay*. Historically, that moment was significant. From the very beginning to the present day the Gallery has involved itself with contemporary art and artists — a policy natural enough in a new country, but contrasting sharply with some of the older European galleries, which still tend to play safe and buy an artist's work only

when he is established beyond all doubt, if not actually dead.

From the start, it was the Gallery's active policy to buy and encourage Canadian art and to reflect Canadian life in the collections. Fortunately, it came into being at a time when artists in Canada were just beginning to break away from restricting European traditions and look for fresh ways to paint their own country.\* The strongest single influence in this Canadian *renaissance* was Maurice Cullen, who after seven years in the liberating atmosphere of European Impressionism, returned to live and work in Montreal in 1885 — just five years after the National Gallery was created. His young followers including Clarence Gagnon and their even more adventurous contemporaries in Toronto found keen and intelligent support at the National Gallery, even as they earned the disapproval of more conservative and traditional painters at the Royal Canadian Academy.

Clarence Gagnon *Village in the Laurentian Mountains* National Gallery of Canada.

If one man could be said to have set the pattern for the Gallery's staunch support of contemporary art, it is their first full-time director, Eric Brown, appointed to that position in 1910.

Backed by the chairman of the Gallery's trustees, Sir Edmund Walker, he searched out and bought works from the new school of landscape painters so enthusiastically that in 1931 a reactionary petition was handed in to the Prime Minister of the day, signed by 118 artists including the President of the Academy, accusing him of "flagrant partisanship." However, support rallied behind him. A. Y. Jackson resigned from the Academy in protest and 300 artists pledged their support. So Brown held his own and in due course some of the rebels he supported have achieved a recognition far beyond their conservative critics.

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\* See article on the Group of Seven, page 7.