

# Dal art 'from the offices'

by **Rollie Thompson**

For an art gallery, showing a selection from their permanent collection must be comparable to a high school reunion. First, it's obligatory. Second, the greater and the lesser lights are gathered — some having withstood the vagaries of the years well, others, not so well. And, in the end, it's probably the best test of the real strength of an institution — not the physical facilities, not the administrative apparatus, but its guts, whether students or works of art.

The current show at the Dalhousie Art Gallery in the Rebecca Cohn reveals a surprising breadth of range in its permanent holdings, notably in its Canadian works. Whether this is the product of happy circumstance or of conscious policy, we do not know, since the Gallery has not graced the show with anything like a catalogue. How were we to know that our very own gallery possessed works by David Milne, Lawren Harris, LeMoine Fitzgerald, Miller Brittain, A.Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer, William G.R. Hind, Christopher Pratt, to mention only a few? If you know little about art, this is a show which will furnish a quick and painless introduction. If you know more, it will be a pleasant stroll among some familiar and some not-so-familiar, artists.

Sixteen of William Hind's small watercolours of his nineteenth century travels begin the show. Poor old Hind, who closed his ill-starred career working as a railway draftsman in Windsor, Nova Scotia, had a superb eye for colour and detail. Lismer's "Halifax Harbour - Time of War" hangs side-by-side with an 1860 chromolithograph of the same scene from virtually the same part of the harbour, but the warships loom tellingly larger by the time of the First World War. Among the Milnes, "Snowstorm in the Narrows" is a superb marriage of his style to subject matter. The whiteness broken up by dully-coloured outlines creates just the right air of myopic obscurity. The three Jacksons retreat into muddy mediocrity when hung between two delicate drawings by Fitzgerald and the heat-induced shimmer of Goodridge Roberts' "Summer Landscape". The seven Harris drawings ascend from the literally mundane detail of a plot of broken ground, through the familiar skyward-pointed central forms to his ultimate Platonic abstractions. Elsewhere, Paraskeva Clark's "Self-Portrait" eyeballs the viewer with a disarming cocksureness while next door, the empty windows of Pratt's "Demolition on the South Side" stare aimlessly out onto a grey St. John's day.

Nor is the collection devoted solely to Canadian works. European works from the sixteenth century on take up one wall of the main gallery and only a part of the Carnegie print collection covers the whole of the little gallery. Among the Carnegie prints are a sun-drenched "The Smith's Yard" by Whistler (yes, the one with the Mother), a Daumier entitled "Les Bons Bourgeois" (for those with a penchant for a gentler form of class warfare) and Manet's bearded "Philosophe", proudly gathering his thin blanket around his erect figure. Of the whole group the most striking is a small etching and aquatint with the title "Baptême Japonais", a curious amalgam of styles and substances. West meets East uncomfortably, mixing but not melding.

The best touch in the hanging of the show is the facing pair of portraits, gazing at each other across the full expanse of the gallery — "Reverend Benjamin Gerrish Gray, I'd like you to meet

the French Queen, Marie Antoinette". This last is a beautiful portrait by Marie-Ann Elizabeth

Vigee-LeBrün, the former one of a portly Haligonian cleric. The irony is that, whether temporal or spirit-

ual, both have that well-fed, well-preened look common to those wholly assured of their position in society, whatever their era, whatever their means to exalted social status.

But where, oh where, have these works been all this time? This is my *continued on page 18*



Paraskeva Clark, "Self-Portrait" 1937. Collection Dalhousie Art Gallery.

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**Our funniest comedians weren't allowed to make us laugh.**

**What would it be like if there were such a list?**  
**It would be like America in 1953.**



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