

News of the arts

Paintings of J.W. Beatty at AGO

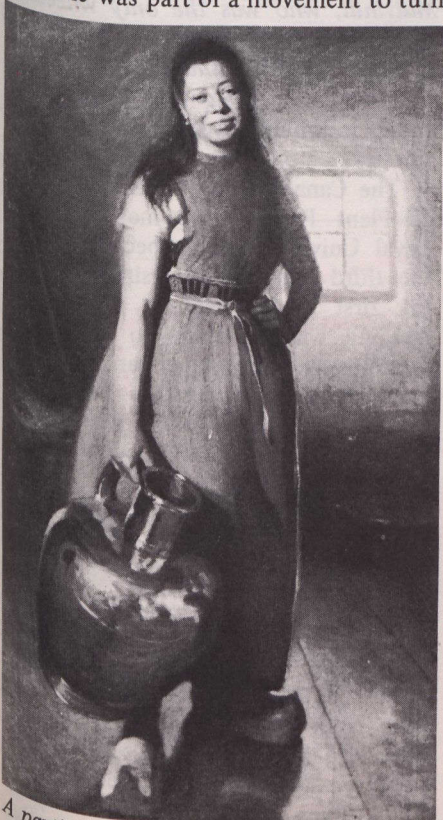
The Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto is currently presenting a retrospective exhibition of the works of J.W. Beatty. The exhibition, *J.W. Beatty 1869-1941*, will be on display at the gallery until August 23.

Late in 1911, Toronto artist J.W. Beatty, wrote to Eric Brown, who was then the director of the National Gallery of Canada, to suggest an unusual exchange of paintings. The year before, the National Gallery had purchased Beatty's *A Dutch Peasant*, a product of the artist's studies in Europe during 1906-08.

However, Beatty wrote to Brown "...I am a Canadian and I would much rather be represented by a Canadian picture." In consequence, the National Gallery returned Beatty's *Dutch Peasant* to him and accepted into the collection *The Evening Cloud of the Northland*, a haunting depiction of a dark north Ontario shoreline with a dramatic evening sky above.

Patriotic exchange

This exchange of paintings was a patriotic and philosophical gesture much appreciated by Beatty's fellow painters in Toronto, where he was part of a movement to turn



A partial view of *A Dutch Peasant*, oil on canvas by John William Beatty.



A partial view of *The Beech Woods*, oil on canvas.

away from the dominating presence of European painting and to select subjects for paintings that were expressive of the Canadian milieu.

The movement eventually culminated in the formation of the Group of Seven in 1920, although by that time J.W. Beatty was no longer part of it. In the early days, however, Beatty was a significant catalytic force.

Toronto-born J.W. Beatty had come to painting at the relatively late age of 31, after a decade as a fireman with the Toronto Fire Department. During the course of two sojourns in Europe (1900 and 1906-08), he developed considerable skill as a painter of lyrical landscapes, reminiscent of academic Dutch painting so much admired by Canadian collectors. It was only after Beatty's return from abroad that he discovered a more meaningful and radical expression in the depiction of the Canadian northland.

In October 1909, the *Toronto Globe* reported "An almost virgin field for artists was visited by Mr. J.W. Beatty and Mr. T.W. McLean, who spent some weeks in the vicinity of Fort Mattagami, in Northern Ontario". Beatty returned from that trip excited by the Ontario northland and eagerly embarked on a series of Canadian pictures.

Earlier that summer, he had accompanied Lawren Harris on Harris' first recorded northern sketching trip. When Tom Thomson began painting around 1910, his work closely emulated Beatty's and reflected Beatty's friendship and assistance. In 1914, Lawren Harris opened the Studio Building in Toronto to painters doing "distinctively Canadian work", and offered space to Beatty, along with J.E.H. MacDonald, Tom Thomson and A.Y. Jackson.

With the outbreak of the First World War, the stimulating activities among the Studio Building artists diminished as many of the occupants departed to the war. Thomson and Beatty remained at the Studio Building and were close friends. But in the face of growing antagonism in the press to the "avant-garde" work produced by the Studio Building artists, and after the shock of Thomson's death in 1917, Beatty drew back.

Although he continued to paint attractive work in the 1920s, Beatty became both anti-Academic and anti-Group of Seven. He became a painter of the older generation, which in age, in training, and in his proclivities he had always been.

(Article by Dorothy M. Farr in *The Gallery, Art Gallery of Ontario, June/July, 1981.*)