

The Bank of Beaux Arts

Current assets: \$3.3 million — funded by you

BY BARRIE HALE

It seems hard to believe, but the taxi driver doesn't know where the Art Bank is. Taxi drivers know everything, especially in a smallish company town like Ottawa, and this guy knows all about the row of warehouses on Gladwin Crescent behind the McDonald's on St. Laurent Boulevard. That's out by the National Museum of Science and Technology. There's an Eaton's warehouse out there, and RCA and IBM, but he's never heard of an Art Bank, and what's an Art Bank anyway?

Well, of course, it is that branch of the Canada Council that was given a million dollars a year for five years, beginning in 1972, to purchase contemporary Canadian art and supply it to other government departments on a yearly-rental basis. I say "of course" only out of courtesy, because chances are you haven't heard of it either; most Canadians haven't. My taxi driver is not the exception, he is the rule. There is even a story making the Ottawa rounds that the Art Bank found its name a nuisance when it set up its warehouse out on Gladwin, because every Friday afternoon the employees from other neighborhood warehouses would drop in and try to cash their paycheques.

Finally, we locate the place — and at once it is obvious; surely it is the only warehouse around with an Armand Vaillancourt steel sculpture squatting on the grass in front of it, and we should have spotted it immediately. But I won't apologize. A fairly low profile has been a characteristic of the Art Bank up to now and not to be able to distinguish the place from its neighbors in this row of warehouses is quite appropriate.

Inside, it is a pleasant, well-lit, carpeted, up-to-date office area like hundreds of others, except that everywhere you look there is art. Huge paintings, medium-sized paintings and framed graphics on the walls; tabletop sculpture on the tabletops and floor sculpture on the carpet. I have seen a

number of private, corporate collections of art in my time, but never anything that overwhelms in the immediate way the Art Bank's does — and the Art Bank offices are only a small part of it. Behind the offices lies the warehouse proper and the framing, packing and shipping rooms, high-ceilinged, enormous spaces, all filled up with art. I have also been in the storage spaces of a number of our public museums, but have never seen anything quite like the Art Bank's, and again, this is understandable. Because there isn't anything like it, anywhere. It is the largest collection of contemporary Canadian art in existence; the count in August, 1976, was a total of 6,752 works of art — paintings, graphics, sculpture and photographs — that altogether cost about \$3.3 million. The total expenditure projected for the end of fiscal 1976-77, which is also the end of the Art Bank's first five years, is about \$3.8 million. The rest of the Art Bank's \$5 million (a million a year for five years) will have gone to the costs of running the collection. The staff, which has purposely been kept very small, is even now barely sufficient for the task — travel, framing, insurance, shipping and so on, including the costs of this huge warehouse facility. (The warehouse is protected by an elaborate, sophisticated alarm system and the works of art are protected by insurance wherever they are — at a cost of \$14,000 a year.)

Which is all, so far, according to plan. Luc Rombout, the Art Bank's first director (he left in July, 1975 to become director of the Vancouver Art Gallery), described its function as fourfold: "To strengthen an extremely weak art market; to bring art to a broader public; to purchase art from galleries that had made a contribution to Canadian art; to set an example that could be emulated on all levels of government." The first part of the mandate, then, has been admirably carried out; an expenditure of \$3.8 million over five years will have

made the Canada Council the largest single customer for contemporary art produced by the artists of this country. Some of it has been purchased directly from individual artists, some through established commercial galleries, which have taken their normal commission (about 40 per cent) on the sales. This does not represent an unearned windfall for those dealers. Though the Art Bank has been buying art only since 1972, it has not limited its interest to work produced since then, but has explored the past decade and beyond to acquire notable works that, because of size or some other characteristic, have not been sold, but carried as overhead by various "galleries that have made a contribution to Canadian art."

The rest of the Art Bank mandate — the setting of an example to be emulated by all levels of government and the bringing of contemporary Canadian art to a broader public — has not been as quickly served, for a variety of reasons. The Treasury Board was initially attracted to the Art Bank as an idea, partially because the plan was for the Bank to rent its collection to other government departments at a rate of 12 per cent per year of each work's current fair market value. To promote this, the Board directed all government departments to stop buying art, if they had been, and henceforth to make use of the Art Bank collection. (With a couple of exceptions: External Affairs, with a long history of active interest in the visual arts of this country, continues to buy art for its embassies abroad; the national museums, including the National Gallery, continue to buy art for their collections and the Department of Public Works continues its program of commissioning original art for its new buildings.)

But, "the clientele is a difficult one," says Jessica Bradley, who was a liaison officer at the Bank before becoming, this year, its special projects officer.