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National Gallery of Canada

Hans Baldung *Eve, the Serpent and Death*
National Gallery of Canada.

The policy of keeping an open mind and looking for the best in what is new still holds today. In an age when the idea of meaning associated with a work of art has become something of a joke, the Gallery, in a recent annual review, craftily defended its purchase of "difficult" works with the statement that "they were bought with a conviction that even enigma is part of the meaning of our time."

One example is a recently purchased picture of rows of chairs, desks and wall clocks by Joseph Kosuth which goes under the title "The Eighth Investigation (A.A.I.A.I.) Proposition Five." At the other extreme from enigma and if anything more controversial is "The Great American Pastime" by the Canadian sculptor Tomiyo Sasaki, which has an empty soft drink can (a real one) held in a clumsily sculpted hand.

It is, of course, an important part of the Gallery's function to look back in time, both in Canadian art and the art of the world, particularly of those European countries in which Canada has her roots. Collections have been built up with the idea of demonstrating the sources out of which Canadian traditions have developed and are still developing. This aspect of the Gallery was also present from the start, when the Marquess of Lorne persuaded three English Academicians — Leighton, Millais and Watts — to contribute works.

However, the real foundations of the European collection were laid by Walker and Brown, bought with very limited funds but a strong determination to give Canadians a sense of history. By 1913 they were able to claim that the Gallery represented Venice in the fifteenth century; Florence, Flanders and Germany in the sixteenth; Rome, Flanders, Spain and Holland in the seventeenth; and England and France in the eighteenth. By 1921 they had four print galleries including specimens of Rembrandt, Goltzius and Dürer and proof impressions of Blake. A collection of

drawings was also started early on. Annibale Carracci's *Lute Player* was among 17 Old Master drawings bought from the Duke of Rutland's collection in 1911. Daumier's *Three Judges at a Hearing* was bought in 1914 and four Goyas from a Bordeaux sketchbook in 1923.

Beside the prints, the best purchases of those early days were probably the nineteenth century paintings: Millet's *Oedipus*, Monet's *Waterloo Bridge* and Sisley's *Washerwoman near Champagne* were all bought in New York in 1914. The Sisley was later returned for a large Degas pastel, *Danseuses à la barre*, and *Le pont de Pierre à Rouen* by Pissaro.

So over the years the Gallery has acquired its share of the world's art treasures, which are duly loaned out to other countries for special exhibitions. Among the most famous now in the collections are El Greco's *St. Francis*, Rembrandt's *The Toilet of Bathsheba* and *The Tribute Money* and Rubens' *Descent from the Cross*. Yet the central picture in the gallery, for obvious historical reasons, is Benjamin West's *Death of Wolfe* (loaned to the Royal Academy in London for their 1972 exhibition of Neo-Classicism.)

The most interesting recent acquisition is a German masterpiece of the early sixteenth century, *Eve, the Serpent and Death* by Hans Baldung, a follower of Dürer. The picture is an extraordinary combination of two subjects common enough at the time of the Reformation: the temptation of Eve and the dance of death. Faced with the terrifying spectre of Death, Eve remains irrepressibly provocative.

Many works have come to the Gallery in the form of bequests from private collectors and foundations: The famous Lichtenstein collection, for example, which included 12 Old Masters. The Vincent Massey estate brought the Gallery 100 works in 1968, mostly Canadian, including several paintings by Cornelius Krieghoff, a painter of the Flemish school who was almost alone in recording scenes of Canadian life in the middle of the last century. Some of the finest paintings by Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven (134 in all) were bequeathed by the man who did most to encourage and sponsor them during his lifetime, Dr. J. M. MacCallum. In 1900 the Parliament of Canada contributed twelve pictures by Paul Kane, commissioned in 1851, to help represent Canada before 1880.

Thus over its history the Gallery has gradually extended itself, buying as it thought fit and reaping a good harvest from its benefactors. Naturally it has reflected the special interests of those most closely involved in its welfare. The last director, the late Alan Jarvis, not only made a point of regularly showing the work of living Canadians, he also had a particular interest in building up the Gallery's collection of modern sculpture on an international scale. When he took over in 1955 it had little more than a few Epstein bronzes and a Maillol. Jarvis'

additions included a marble Arp, a Lipchitz limestone, a Despiau bronze, a Matisse head of 1927, a superb early cast of Rodin's *The Age of Bronze*, a small Giacometti head and a Henry Moore *Reclining Woman*.

Based in unsatisfactory office-type accommodation in Ottawa, the National Gallery of Canada is at present eagerly pressing the Government for a permanent and worthy home and is more than hopeful of getting one sanctioned by the end of this year. An interesting piece of Victorian Gothic architecture is awaiting inclusion in the building, perhaps as part of the reading room—the woodwork of the chapel of Notre Dame du Sacre Cœur in the convent of the Grey Nuns in Rideau Street, Ottawa, built between 1887 and 1888 and salvaged at the Gallery's request when the chapel was demolished. Careful records were made by photogrammetry and the sections were carried through the streets of Ottawa and carefully stored away.

In a huge country like Canada, a truly national gallery would not be doing its job if it merely sat still and waited for visitors. To be realistic, a large number of Canadians do not get to the Capital even once a year, let alone have time to familiarize themselves with the art collections based there. Hence the regular circulating exhibitions, lectures and publications with which the Gallery regularly reaches out to the furthest parts of Canada. For example, in 1972-73, ten exhibitions travelled to some 38 communities from Victoria in the west to Whitehorse in the north to St. John's in the east. A large exhibition of popular folk art (164 works) which was at the National Gallery in Ottawa last winter subsequently travelled on to Toronto and Vancouver.

Now and then special exhibitions are organized, attracting exhibits and public from all over the world. Recently *Art and the Courts* set out to evoke through filmed architecture and carefully chosen exhibits—a page of manuscript, a piece of embroidery, a silver buckle, an ivory carving—the remote past of the two principle cultures, English and French, that went into the making of Canada. Another special exhibition, *Fontainebleau*, concentrated on the art of France from the time of Francis I.

Most recently, *Silver in New France* attracted a lot of international attention, including a feature in the *Connoisseur* magazine in London. Lectures, films and other entertainments are mounted to coincide with special exhibitions, in addition to the regular programme of lectures and films that goes the rounds of the schools.

In these ways an institution which could be a pretty solid and static national monument is kept in a perpetual ferment of activity and excitement over some new acquisition, some new exhibition. And that's the way the authorities plan to keep it. In six years the Gallery will celebrate its centenary but Dr. Jean Sutherland Boggs, its present director, prefers to think of it as "a young collection still." ♦