

Exhibition Review

The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation. NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA. CIRCULATED TO OTTAWA, TORONTO, VANCOUVER, AND MONTREAL. 16 February - 5 May 1996. 376 p. catalogue. (In Toronto, at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the exhibition was part of the **OH! Canada Project**.)

The Group of Seven is one of the most recognizable "names" in Canadian art. Formed in 1920, the original members of this group, J.E.H. MacDonald, Lawren S. Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer, Fred Varley, Franklin Carmichael, and Frank Johnston, had been active for many years in the Toronto art scene in exhibitions and at the Arts and Letters Club. While their styles of painting may have been different, they shared similar ideas and a common interest in the representation of their country, Canada. Although the Group disbanded in 1933 to become part of the Canadian Group of Painters, their initial influence and innovations have sustained their reputation.

Over the years, numerous exhibitions, catalogues, and books have featured the work of these artists and remarked on their contribution to the visual arts in Canada. So, yet another exhibition might not elicit much interest or excitement. While focusing on the eight exhibitions held between 1920 and 1931 at the Art Gallery of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario), and featuring many works from private collections that have not been on public display since the 1920s, *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation*, curated by Charles Hill of the National Gallery, is a penetrating account of the significant role they played in the history of art in Canada.

Accompanying the exhibition is a comprehensive 376-page catalogue, which is a highly readable, informative, and handsomely-illustrated publication. A comprehensive list of exhibitions (1913-1936) and a bibliography including books, articles, and manuscript sources is provided. Of particular note is the extensive list of archival collections which have been researched in preparation for this exhibition. This information, a valuable resource for future reference, is used to great advantage throughout the text, which is enhanced with archival photographs and quotations.

Indeed, this exhaustive research reflects one of the most enlightening aspects of the exhibition, for Charles Hill attempts to address a recurrent problem in some critical discussions of the Group of Seven. "Writings about art too often build on other writings about art, so that a selected quotation, for example, takes on a life of its own quite different in meaning from the original intent. An idea expressed by an author writing about an artist is quoted as if it were the artist's own idea." Hill goes on to say: "This publication and exhibition propose to examine the history and development of the Group's ideas and exhibitions during the 1920s, based as much as possible on contemporary documents, and thus, it is hoped, lay a new groundwork for debate."

This direction is clearly evident throughout the exhibition, since many of the canvases are accompanied by quotations including contemporary reviews by critics and artists' statements. These quotes provide the viewer with insights into the issues of the day and enhance one's appreciation and understanding of the works on display. Many of the artists were very articulate in expressing their philosophical and nationalistic beliefs, adding deeper meaning to their landscapes. Lawren Harris, who had written the foreword to the 1920 catalogue, wrote in *Canadian Forum* in 1927 "...the Group of Seven...have moved the art of landscape painting into a more rhythmic and plastic idiom, more in harmony with the energy and quality of our national character."

Visitors to the exhibition are introduced to the prevailing styles of the Canadian art scene through a brief yet informative display of work by leading Academicians. Paintings such as *Noon* (1915) by E. Wyly Grier and *The Road* (1922) by Carl Ahrens demonstrate how these artists and their colleagues favoured tradition over innovation, and technique over content, basing their Canadian art on European models. By comparison, the bold and bright manner of painting by members of the Group of Seven, and their depiction of "ugly" aspects of the Canadian landscape was the source of much criticism. Relevant and descriptive quotes accompanying these paintings by contemporaries of the Group of Seven reveal the challenges the Group faced. Hector Charlesworth, the conservative art critic for *Saturday Night* wrote in his review of the Ontario Society of Artists exhibition in 1916, which included works by the future members of the Group of Seven, "The chief grudge that one has against these experimental pictures is that they almost destroy the effect of very meritorious and sincere pictures which are hung on the same walls."

Tangled Garden (1916) by J.E.H. MacDonald provided the appropriate dramatic note as the overture to the exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario venue. When this painting was included in the first Group exhibition in 1920, it was already well-known, since it had been the cause of heated controversy four years earlier at the 1916 Ontario Society of Artists exhibition. Hector Charlesworth accused the artist of throwing "...his paint pots in the face of the public." It is also interesting to note that while the 1920 exhibition included a wide variety of landscapes, also featured were urban scenes, portraits, and works produced for the Canadian War Memorials, for example *Halifax Harbour, Time of War* (1918) by Arthur Lismer. In discussing the goals of the Group, Hill states: "The intent was to present the best work of Canadian artists inspired by the varied national experience."

The Group of Seven exhibitions (1920-1931), the focus of this retrospective, were highlighted in a distinct yet consistent layout at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The installation featured individual galleries painted different colours, each with large free-standing black room-dividers holding didactic text and photographs providing interesting background information. Additional text, often including original quotations providing a new and interesting perspective, is in many cases included on the walls next to the works themselves. Although not all the works from each original exhibition were reassembled, this presentation nonetheless reflected an archival approach to the study and enjoyment of art through the use of original documentation and a reconstruction of the exhibitions themselves.

As we learn in this exhibition, it is important to realize that the Group of Seven was not a secession, but rather a banding together. As Hill writes: "It was merely a

cooperative group of like-minded artists joined together to articulate their ideas for the advancement of Canadian art." Other artists from across Canada were invited regularly to participate in Group of Seven exhibitions and many fine examples, including *Wood Interior* (1929-30) by Emily Carr and *Lumberjack* (1924) by Edwin Holgate, are also included in this retrospective exhibition. Whether it be the well-known *A September Gale - Georgian Bay* (1921) by Arthur Lismer from the National Gallery or *Northern Lake II* (ca. 1926) by Lawren Harris from a private collection, the remarkable paintings which Hill has brought together for this exhibition reflect the considerable impact these artists had on the development of painting in Canada.

In conjunction with this retrospective display celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the first Group of Seven exhibition, the Art Gallery of Ontario organized a large interactive exhibition entitled the *OH! Canada Project*. This consisted of complementary installations with participation by community-based groups and schools, interactive activities, talks, tours, films, and music. The focus for this activity was derived from the theme of the Group of Seven exhibition: nature and nation. Interesting works created by groups such as Art Starts, The Hammer Collective, and Latino Crew, to name just three, demonstrated innovation in the arts, a belief which had been strongly advanced by the Group of Seven. In the foreword to their 1922 catalogue they wrote: "New materials demand new methods and new methods fling a challenge to old conventions." Hill notes: "The artists reaffirmed the experimental and vital nature of their art, the adventurous quest for the discovery of new ideas."

Just as the artists and their work were the subject of much debate during their careers, the Group of Seven continues today to stimulate discussion in the arts in Canada. This detailed study by Charles Hill makes a valuable contribution to an illustrious chapter in Canadian history.

Pamela Wachna

City of Toronto Archives