
DAVID MILNE: "SUBJECT PICTURES"

During the Second World War, after almost forty years of selecting his subjects from his surroundings, David Milne began to invent idiosyncratic subject matter for his paintings. The resulting pictures, mostly water-colours, are often called "fantasy paintings" in the literature and they are fascinating for their complexity of thought, their humour and their resistance to interpretation. They are, overall, syntheses of elements from both the modern world and the past, and many have Christian allusions. They reflect the fact that Milne, although not involved in organized religion, had been raised as a Christian and over the years had become a dedicated reader of the Bible.

John O'Brian devoted the last ten pages of his book *David Milne and the Modern Tradition of Painting* to these pictures. He explores possible sources of their imagery in Milne's life at that time: the documented development of the artist's interest in the Bible, in Giotto's painting, in T.S. Eliot's writing and in children's art; the three-year wartime visit to Toronto of Wyndham Lewis, who was known for his fantasy paintings; the birth of Milne's son in 1941; and his return to watercolour after over a decade of working only in oil.¹

In O'Brian's view, these works produced late in Milne's career ran "against the current of modern art to which he had attached himself."² Certainly, when he reached full artistic maturity at Boston Corners, New York during the First World War, he was working directly from nature in the tradition of Monet. Milne's writings from the Boston Corners period, and for the rest of his life were, as O'Brian demonstrated, essentially the writings of a modernist, locating the meaning of a painting in its formal aspects rather than in its content. The new "subject pictures," as Milne called them, with all their narrative elements, may appear then to have broken away from the international modernist context that was so much a part of

his commitment to art. In fact they are important, natural developments within that context.

Milne introduced the new pictures as curiosities, "not much to look at but interesting to do."³ Almost every one of the subject picture themes found expression in a group of pictures rather than in a single image. In the case of *King, Queen and Jokers*, the content evolved considerably as Milne worked through more than a dozen versions produced between 1941 and 1944. Inspired by sketches he had made in 1941 from a book on early playing cards, these paintings are of royalty posed as for a photograph in front of a wall: king and queen central, jokers at the sides. After the first few paintings he added a man and woman in 1940's clothing to this royal group; in some versions framed playing-card portraits appear on the wall. Throughout most of the series four angels hover symmetrically above, the outer two in nightshirts: "call these jokers, too," Milne wrote.⁴

Taken together the motifs of the subject pictures show a development from 1941, when they first appeared alongside his usual landscapes, still lifes and interiors, until the end of his career in 1952. The earliest themes are often the lightest and most whimsical in character. *Noah and the Ark and Mt. Ararat*, 1941-42, shows Noah as a tiny figure in a suit and bowler



fig. 1 David Milne, *The Saint, No. 4*, 1942, Watercolour over graphite on wove paper, 38.3 x 55.2 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. (Photo: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.)

hat, holding an umbrella and standing near a miniaturized Mount Ararat.⁵ Much more prominent are the many animals which give the pictures a sprightly character, filling most of their surfaces with a *horror vacui* effect. The equally fanciful *Return from a Voyage* series features the Old Testament figure Jonah, arriving at Toronto's Union Station, describing his trip with the aid of whale diagrams to a group of reporters. One other series fits naturally with these although its subject is not directly biblical and not about a journey. In the *Saint*, 1941-44 (fig. 1), a large reading 'saint' in monk's habit walks in a peaceful procession with some of the exotic animals from *Noah*, in front of a campsite at the edge of a Canadian forest.

The subject pictures with which Milne occupied himself for the longest time, six years from 1941 on, were images of Christ above a landscape. More than forty exist. Some of these are Ascensions, in which Christ, dressed in a biblical cloak, rises from a village of vaguely Eastern buildings like those in the first subject picture Milne painted, *Snow in Bethlehem* (Art Gallery of Ontario) of 1941. The chronological counterparts to the Ascensions are Resurrection (fig. 2) and Day of Judgement images: Christ returns to earth now in a bowler hat, sometimes floating with his



fig. 2 David Milne, *Resurrection No. 2*, 1943, Watercolour on paper, 37.6 x 55.9 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Gift from the Douglas M. Duncan Collection, 1970. (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.)

angels over what appears to be an Ontario village scene. *Mary and Martha*, 1945, is another biblical narrative with a contemporary setting: a dinner party in a room decorated with paintings; Christ, wearing a suit, is looking at the art (one version [priv. coll.] is subtitled 'The Connoisseur').

Milne's painting activity slowed in the late 1940's, and he did not paint subject pictures from 1947 to 1950. When he began them again, he wrote to his agent Douglas Duncan that "the only live interest is there."⁶ These last subject pictures often have Temptation themes and are more enigmatic and less whimsical than the early religious images. In *Tempter with Cosmetics*, 1952 (fig. 3), some of the familiar angels try out cosmetics peddled by a man in a bowler hat. *Another Generation*, 1952 (Winnipeg Art Gallery), is a type of Resurrection picture, but it is linked to the *Tempter with Cosmetics* by the angels and a woman who prepares to meet her maker by putting on lipstick; "this is what interests the angels," Milne wrote.⁷ The final Temptation theme, and the artist's last group of paintings, was *Fruit of the Tree*, 1952, in which Eve (Milne's only nude) sits with Adam at a table outdoors among rocks, a serpent crawling near Adam's feet.



fig. 3 David Milne, *Tempter with Cosmetics*, 1952, Watercolour on paper, 55.2 x 75.3 cm, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Gift from the Douglas M. Duncan Collection, 1970. (Photo: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston.)

The series called *Paracutin* is a secular one, based on a Mexican volcano which was famous from its birth in 1943 until its spectacular 'dying' in February 1952. A week after the last explosions from its 400-foot cone, Milne started his first *Paracutin* painting. The volcano appears curiously small in Milne's pictures, smaller than the single figure of a woman who is always seen running away from it; and the landscape features small animals, many of which are prairie dogs, according to Milne's diary.⁸

These odd pictures are not in any way a reversal of what Milne had been doing previously, rather they are quite the opposite. He concerned himself

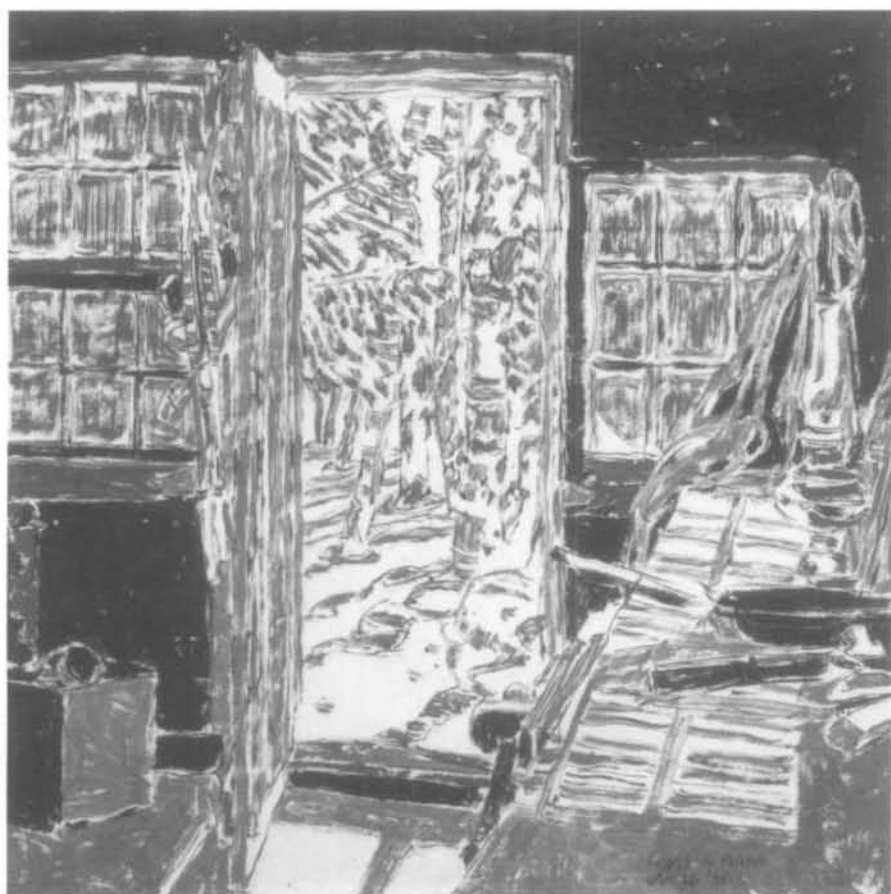


fig. 4 David Milne, *Doorway of the Painting House*, 1921, Drybrush watercolour over graphite, on wove paper, 40.85 x 40.85 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. (Photo: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.)

greatly with continuity, wanting each of his pictures to reflect the progress of preceding ones; change in his work was constant but slow, never lightly made. If we look back at his work and his writings from the twenties and thirties, we can see that his initially reserved attitude toward content broadened gradually throughout those decades.

Even before Milne left the Boston Corners region in 1923 a slight shift had occurred. *Doorway of the Painting House* (fig. 4) from January 1921 recalls his earlier interiors, except that there are now important foreground elements, the table and a workbench, holding such every day objects as his hatchet and frying pan. These direct signs of his presence make the painting's content slightly more personal than previously.

Other pictures done that year also have slightly unusual content. In *Painter by the Brook* (Milne Family Coll.) and *Black Waterfall* (Milne Family Coll.), both of which may be self-portraits, an artist stands at his easel suggesting a sort of camouflaged figure in the forest. That December, among a group of sparsely drawn and coloured still lifes, appeared a watercolour called *Window and Easel* (Mira Godard Coll.), using a picture-within-a-picture device, with the image reproduced on an easel. Milne had written to James Clarke that summer that he was working with "the theory that one subject is as good as another,"⁹ expressing in one sense the modernist idea that choice of subject did not affect the quality of a picture. In another sense, though, the statement suggests that the artist was consciously allowing himself to explore new subject matter.

At the end of the twenties Milne spent an unusually long time on the series called *Painting Place*; he eventually produced three oils and two dry-point etchings between 1926 and 1930.¹⁰ It was one of his first instances of success with painting and repainting in the studio rather than working entirely from nature, and this was important to the overall direction his work was beginning to take. *Painting Place* is generally based on the Boston Corners landscapes which were among his most strongly formalist works. However, it has a new element: a bold foreground where Milne recorded his own presence much as in *Doorway of the Painting House*, by depicting a few familiar objects he had with him when he painted.

He used similar objects in many later still lifes, including the water lily paintings he produced when he moved back to Canada and camped at Lake Temagami in northern Ontario for the summer of 1929. In these works the objects sometimes appeared in notably incongruous combinations with other elements. For all the beautiful formal harmony of *Water*

Lilies and the Sunday Paper (fig. 5), for example, its content, the juxtaposition of the jar of lilies with the comic strip pages, remains one of the picture's most captivating aspects.

In one of Milne's favourite books, *Modern Painters* by the nineteenth century critic John Ruskin, this magical combining of elements is seen as one of the highest acts of the human mind. Ruskin thought that by "mysterious and inexplicable" means, the imagination modifies the content of a work of art through various functions, the first of which is the combining or associative function. The imagination puts together two or more apparently unrelated elements and in fact, the stranger the choice of the elements, the better the process works: "whatever rude matter it receives, it instantly so arranges that it comes right; all things fall into their place, and appear in that place perfect, useful, and evidently not to be spared. . . ."11



fig. 5 David Milne, *Water Lilies and the Sunday Paper*, 1929, Oil on canvas, 51.1 x 61.3 cm, Hart House, University of Toronto. (Photo: TDF Artists Ltd., Toronto.)

Milne's imaginative selection of subject matter for the water lily paintings was largely responsible for their brilliance, and it was this same quality, intensifying and constantly evolving, that led to the "subject pictures." There were more still lifes using remarkable combinations of ordinary objects throughout the 1930's, and just before he began the first series of subject pictures, he carried the process a step further by introducing images that seem by themselves to be fantastic such as in *Chickens on the Tablecloth*, 1940 (Milne Family Coll.).

Milne's painting methods were also evolving. In August of 1933 he had written to his friend Clarke that he was tempted to paint a night picture with firelight. To do this he would have to give up working directly from nature and make a pencil sketch and otherwise save the image in his memory to be painted the next day. Milne had been repainting pictures such as *Painting Place* in the studio ever since his first winter back in Canada. This new interest in *starting* a painting indoors was a further move towards emphasizing what the mind rather than the eye sees. "I have got a little used to this method in doing clouds at Palgrave," he added. "Because they changed so quickly I usually made pencil drawings, then settled down to the painting after the clouds had gone."¹² Two months later Milne wrote Clarke a letter of the greatest significance for the future development of the subject pictures:

... there has been what promises to be a rather curious development, for me. Subject - that is story has played about as little a part with me as with anyone I know; yet this direction has to do with subject. More accurately, and stranger still, with titles. Titles to me have been handles, recognition marks for my own convenience, and fastened on after the pictures were painted, usually when they were sent out somewhere.

Now here is one under way that is born with a title, 'The Alder Branch'. Nothing unusual in the title, nothing unusual in the subject. . . . Absolutely no new motive, but a consciousness of subject or rather title. There are several others that I have in mind but haven't painted. 'The Trail Marker'. . . . I seem to be fascinated by these minor parts of the picture, while conscious that the chief color and value interest is in the surroundings. . . . Perhaps a part of the direction I think I spoke of in another letter, a tendency to enrich my painting method by using various outlines and lack of

outlines, rather than to develop new motives. A desire, too, to work longer and larger on one subject, and to work at it inside - away from the material. I don't know what there will be in it but it is a welcome direction, a sort of popular direction, and there has been little of the popular in my stuff up to date - judging by results. However I have a playful side - which just falls short of humor.¹³

Milne did start to paint subjects along these lines and also started painting night pictures in the studio from sketches, for example, *Northern Lights*, 1935 (priv. coll.). These show, in the absence of description and in the intensity of the subject elements, the effects of retrieving an image that has been transformed by memory and imagination. By the forties he was working consistently from sketches and memory. Milne believed that it was probably this tendency that led him in the direction of the subject pictures. In fact it was also the reverse, a growing interest in subject that led to the change of working method.

A strong desire for freedom seemed to be behind particular homages Milne paid at this point to earlier artists. It was their imaginative power, a quality of inventiveness within formal limitations that impressed him. Giotto, for instance, a favourite of a great many modernists, was mentioned for his "endlessly inventive" architectural forms, as well as for the powerful positive shapes of his skies and his direct unsentimental compositions.¹⁴ Milne also shared with countless European and North American artists of this century an admiration for the art of children, with their freedom from hesitation, external objectives and habits of mind and hand.¹⁵ "At Easter when I stopped in at the school," Milne wrote to his sometime patron Alice Massey in 1937, "the teacher asked me to draw an easter picture on the board. I wouldn't, so she got her two youngest pupils to do one. . . . The next time I went over I saw it. Thrilling, much better than anything I could do. I have used it in a picture."¹⁶

That same year Milne, who had been painting only in oil since the mid-1920's, again took up the lighter medium of watercolour; this would also have had a strong liberating effect on his work, as John O'Brian mentioned.¹⁷ There then appeared an important series of watercolours called *Good-bye to a Teacher*, 1938-39, connected to Milne's short-term experiment with children's art. The series "produced a whole flock of interesting problems," he wrote to Alice Massey in 1939,¹⁸ mostly because of its very human subject:

I have some similar ones more or less planned but have no idea when they will be done or whether they will ever be done. There is one 'Passenger List' or 'Bill of Lading' - that's Noah sketching off his list while the animals pass into the ark. Not funny, but easy, light, natural. In any of these I don't go outside my own experience for material. Noah is just any ordinary person. I don't go to a book to see what the animals are like, I just take what I already have in my mind. 'Christ in the Wilderness,' the wilderness is right round Six Mile Lake with a canoe and a campfire and smoke and stars - and maybe northern lights. 'The Anointing of Christ.' No anointing, because I have no experience with anything of that kind. Just Lazarus and some other men - disciples and Martha and a very earthly - human - Mary and an earthly - human again - Christ and a supper table, which would be not unlike my own.¹⁹

And so ideas for the subject pictures appeared after years of subtle developments in medium and subject matter had brought Milne to this point. "About the only advantage of these things," he suggested to Mrs. Massey, "is that they allow great freedom in arrangement." It was the freedom he had been longing for as a painter.

When Milne wrote to Mrs. Massey about those first ideas for what would become subject pictures, he was just coming to the end of six years alone in his cabin at Six Mile Lake, Ontario, and he now had the welcome company of "Wyb," Kathleen Pavey, with whom he would spend the rest of his life. Soon they shared an apartment in Toronto, and Milne, describing his work in 1940, wrote with contentment, "Many of the interiors have a figure in them knitting, sewing, smoking, reading the morning papers, washing dishes, or just sitting or standing. That's Wyb. . . . That's Wyb who is also supposed to pose for the long contemplated Noah - for Noah, and Mrs. Noah and maybe all the animals. Also for St. Francis."²⁰

Beyond being a joke, these lines bring the subject pictures into the context of emotional warmth that was in such contrast to Milne's life at Six Mile Lake, a warmth reflected in the gentle humour of the visual details of the pictures. The Saint, Noah, and Jonah represent a final shift from the exterior world toward the personal world of memory and imagination: the Saint is alone in the wilderness, Noah has just landed after a long, rigorous time of being 'at sea,' and Jonah finds himself returned to civilization

after an abrupt removal from it. They may also, if I can extrapolate from a comment made by literary critic Eli Mandel, be particularly Canadian: "The shape of a pastoral emerges in Biblical parallels and images in Canadian poetry (a myth of city, garden, wilderness) and in the figures of wanderers, voyageurs, boatmen, and mirrored selves."²¹

Without rejecting modernism or giving up the complex of ideas he had worked from for so long, Milne could embody more and more of his humanity in his work as it grew. This deepening of content, gradual as it was in his case, occurred in the work of other modernist painters, and it had to do with larger patterns in North American art of the thirties and forties. The central content of the subject pictures is the figure, which stands not as a formal model, but rather as a vehicle for the imagination, a way to express, or at least hint at, profound human meaning. There was a general impulse in this direction among artists and critics, related at least in some instances to the Second World War and preceding events. In the 1939 *Canadian Forum* article "Canadian Art: Man vs. Landscape," Barker Fairley declared, "It is scarcely too much to say that Canadians have ceased to expect a painting of humanity to affect them humanly. . . . Ought not the painting of humanity to draw ahead of the landscape, to take priority over it? Ought it not do so in any age and especially in this age of intense human conflict and suffering and innovation?"²² And earlier, reviewing, the 1936 *Year Book of the Arts*, Fairley had complained similarly that the painting represented in the book offered:

little sense of the contemporary world, the world of Picasso and Henry Moore, torn by revolutions and seeking after fundamentals. For my part I should like to flood the minds of Canadian artists with all the contemporary whirlpools in the hope that in this way satire and conflict and imagination might get into their work and give it new life.²³

Northrop Frye, in writing about an exhibition of Canadian watercolours in 1940, applauded tentative indications "that Canadian eyes are slowly rising from the vegetable kingdom into human life."²⁴ The presence of humour and a related sense of "the importance of the random impression" which he found in a Milne still life, interested Frye particularly as a sign of this change.

In the United States, John Marin and Marsden Hartley, for example, had phases of producing the type of work encouraged by Fairley and Frye. In Canada there is some work by modernists apart from Milne that could

be considered part of this tendency (the work of the generation maturing in Québec and elsewhere under the direct influence of surrealism must be set apart as a separate phenomenon). Pegi Nicol McLeod's figure paintings of the thirties and forties occasionally include fantastic elements. Goodridge Roberts did humorous and eccentric figure drawings in the thirties, and in 1945 he exhibited a gouache called *Nursery Fantasy No. 1*, which is actually a battle scene.²⁵ Frederick Varley's famous *Liberation*, painted in 1937 (AGO) and again in 1943 (priv. coll.), is an enigmatic Christ-like figure which has been seen as a spiritual self-portrait.²⁶ Another picture, *Mirror of Thought*, 1937 (Art Gallery of Greater Victoria), has caught Varley's face, according to Joyce Zemans, "as if accidentally, in a shaving mirror hung against the crossbar of the window frame: the artist as Christ."²⁷ Arthur Lismer began in 1940 and continued throughout the war to draw and paint strongly narrative arrangements of "bits of fishermen's gear"²⁸ on Cape Breton wharfs, images that occasionally expanded to include figures as well. Lismer, in fact, had been one of the three painters Northrop Frye had commended for introducing humour into Canadian art in his 1940 article on watercolours.

Many North American artists like Milne who had deep roots in the European modernist tradition would eventually expand their personal aesthetic contexts to make room for more imaginative human content. In doing so they did not regress to older attitudes to the figure, as the American Scene painters and other realists had done. Imaginative human content had of course belonged to some modernist art from its European beginnings, especially the work of artists like Gauguin and Rouault. The latter, in fact, had a very strong presence in North America at the time of Milne's subject pictures, and there are strong affinities between such Rouault subjects as the Biblical landscapes and Milne's subject pictures.

The expansive outlook Milne had toward painting by the early forties revealed itself clearly in an essay which he wrote but did not publish, called *Aesthetic Agents*.²⁹ It is a defense of the ideas that enabled him to go beyond narrowly formal ways of looking at and making art, without at all denying them. He still insisted that the basic "aesthetic agents" were "line (one way of saying shape) colour (dark or light or of different hues) texture (an intimate combination of shape and colour) arrangement (the placing of shapes on a flat surface and the use of the blank surface itself)." However, he now mentioned other elements that could be aesthetic agents, and these were the reason for writing the essay. First, there was the use of the

third dimension. Milne wrote about Monet as a radical precedent for modern artists, a painter who stripped painting down to a frank declaration of its essential, two-dimensional elements.

Using these terms Milne then called Cézanne a "counterrevolutionary" because of his "desire for solidity." According to Milne, Cézanne made a "purely aesthetic use" of the third dimension not to give any illusion of volume, but to emphasize shapes and give density to a picture. Milne was well aware that by putting Cézanne, the hero of arch-modernist critics Roger Fry and Clive Bell, into the argument this way, he was denying as strongly as he could the validity of defining modernism strictly in terms of the picture as a flat surface.

Another potential aesthetic agent Milne named, one that was central to his new painting, was recognition:

Without going into the question of whether painters have sought recognition to make their pictures lifelike or taken pains to avoid recognition to eliminate a nonaesthetic agent we may give some thought to the question of whether recognition has aesthetic value. My answer, based only on my own experience is that mere recognition has or may have aesthetic value, though a look at one of Kandinsky's paintings, and many others, makes it clear that it isn't a necessary element in picture making. Painting is an art of intensity, of compression, and anything that gives compression is an aesthetic agent, anything that increases the speed with which the composition can be grasped with completeness. In illustration - one of my own pictures, 'Noah and the Ark and Mt. Ararat'. It is derived mostly from animals moving across a plain. Little attention is given to anatomy or completeness. The shapes are just barely recognizable, the origin of these shapes is just barely traceable. But they *are* recognizable, most of them, instantly. Their familiar, recognizable shapes can be got hold of quickly and so speed up a complete grasp of the picture, and increase its aesthetic effect.

Even humour, in the sense of incongruity, an "unexpected shift of emphasis," could become an aesthetic element, an intensifier; and so Milne accounted for the presence of humour in his subject pictures.

Milne's arguments seem almost like a response to a reference Roger Fry once made about what content might contribute to art. Considering the

parallels between art and science in the study of nature, Fry warned that artists must not have a purely intellectual, and therefore non-aesthetic, curiosity about nature; this would "interfere with the perfection and purity of the work of art."³⁰ However, "in so far as it merely supplies the artist with new motives and richer material . . . , it is useful but subsidiary." In the same paragraph Fry happened to refer to the "subject picture" in the sense that the term was commonly used earlier in this century, to describe academic historical painting, the kind modern artists reacted against. For Fry such painting always lacked aesthetic unity because of its intrusive intellectual content. Milne's use of the term "subject pictures" was a wry one. Given the fact that he knew Fry's writings, perhaps it was a way of taking up a challenge, to make pictures with significant content without denying the power of the formal elements.

And so Milne found ways to justify what he had come to believe, that art had much to gain from richer content, and nothing to lose. "After all," he said concluding *Aesthetic Agents*,

there is very little 'pure art'. There is no clear cut line between poetry, satire, music, painting. The only advantage I can see in a purely aesthetic painting, unrelated to other arts, is the singleness of purpose such a conception and practice might give the painting. Freedom, freedom from checks and distractions and delays seems to be essential in painting, with that the painter may suit himself about what goes into his pictures.

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Notes

¹ John O'BRIAN, *David Milne and the Modern Tradition of Painting*, (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1983), pp. 118-128.

² O'BRIAN, p.119.

³ MILNE to James Clarke, 10 December 1941, David Milne Papers, Public Archives of Canada(PAC), Ottawa.

- 4 MILNE, "Fantasy, 1944," in "From the Spring Fever to Fantasy," *Canadian Art*, Vol. 2, no. 4 (1945), p.165.
- 5 Milne was not the first Canadian painter to produce Noah pictures, although he may have been the first to do so without any prompting. In 1933 a number of Canadian artists submitted sketches to a competition for the stage design for André Obey's play *Noë*, produced the following year by the Montreal Repertory Theatre. It is not known whether Milne was aware of this competition.
- 6 MILNE to Douglas Duncan, 11 November 1950, Douglas Duncan Papers in Milne Family Papers (MFP).
- 7 MILNE, diary entry, 8 November 1951, MFP.
- 8 MILNE, diary entry, 17 March 1952, MFP.
- 9 MILNE to James Clarke, 28 June 1921, MFP.
- 10 Rosemarie TOVELL has discussed these thoroughly in her monograph *David Milne: Painting Place*, Masterpieces in the National Gallery of Canada series, No.8, Ottawa, 1976.
- 11 John RUSKIN, "Of the Imaginative and Theoretic Faculties," *Modern Painters*, Vol. II, third ed. (London: George Allen, 1900), p.168.
- 12 MILNE to James Clarke, August 1933, David Milne Papers, PAC.
- 13 MILNE to James Clarke, 8 October 1933, David Milne Papers, PAC.
- 14 MILNE, diary entry, 7 May 1940, David Milne Papers, PAC.
- 15 Milne's responses to an unidentified 1942 questionnaire (MFP) contain the fullest statement he made about children's art.
- 16 MILNE to Alice Massey, 1 July 1937, Massey Family Papers, PAC.
- 17 O'BRIAN, p.125.
- 18 MILNE to Alice Massey, 9 March 1939, Massey Family Papers, PAC. David Milne Jr., in fact, considers *Good-bye to a Teacher* to be the first fantasy picture (conversation with the author, January 11, 1988).
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 MILNE, draft of letter to Massey, July 1940, MFP.
- 21 Eli MANDEL, *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), p.19. Rosemarie Tovell as well as John O'Brian has suggested that the subject pictures are in some way autobiographical (see *Reflections in a Quiet Pool: The Prints of David Milne*, [Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1980], p.211). In addition Dennis Reid agrees with O'Brian that it is likely more than a coincidence that the actual painting of the first subject pictures began not long after the birth of Milne's son David Jr. in May 1941 (letter to author, April 14, 1987). David Milne Jr., however, believes that only *Snow in Bethlehem* and *King, Queen and Joker*, which were inspired by images the artist saw in the Toronto Public Library while awaiting his birth, can be linked to this event.
- 22 Barker FAIRLEY, "Canadian Art: Man vs. Landscape," *The Canadian Forum*, Vol. XIX, No.227 (December 1939), pp. 284 and 286.
- 23 Barker FAIRLEY, "Arts in Canada," *Saturday Night*, Vol. 52, No. 6 (December 12, 1936), p.12.
- 24 Northrop FRYE, "Canadian Watercolours," *Canadian Forum*, Vol. 20, No. 231 (April 1940), p.14.
- 25 *Goodridge Roberts: A retrospective exhibition*, intro. and catalogue by James BORCOMAN (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1969), p.40 (ill. p.86). Sandra Paikowsky has pointed out that Roberts' work in this vein is mostly of an ephemeral and private nature, and that *Nursery Fantasy No.1* was destroyed not long after it was exhibited (conversation with the author, October 30, 1987).
- 26 Joyce ZEMANS, "Varley: An Appreciation," in Peter VARLEY, *Frederick H. Varley*, (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1983), p.69.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.
- 28 See Dennis REID, *Canadian Jungle: The Later Work of Arthur Lismer* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1985), p.37. My thanks to Dennis Reid for calling my attention to this wartime phase of Lismer's work.
- 29 Seven-page typescript written early 1940's, MFP.
- 30 Roger FRY, "Art and Science," in *Vision and Design*, orig. ed. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1920), p.53.

LES "SUBJECT PICTURES" DE DAVID MILNE

Durant les dernières années de sa vie, David Milne peint de nombreux tableaux sur des sujets fantastiques, où des éléments tirés du quotidien voisinent généralement avec des thèmes directement ou indirectement inspirés du christianisme. Ce que Milne appelait ses "subject pictures" (tableaux avec sujets), au contenu d'un intérêt indéniable, a pu sembler être aux antipodes de sa production moderniste. Mais, pour Milne, toujours conscient de sa position théorique, il n'y a pas là contradiction. En fait, si on considère son oeuvre au cours des deux décennies qui ont suivi la Première Guerre mondiale dans la perspective de son souci de continuité, on peut y déceler certaines variations subtiles qui annoncent ces tableaux. Les "subject pictures" apparaissent, alors, comme un développement naturel et important dans sa carrière, développement parallèle à celui d'autres peintres modernistes nord-américains de sa génération.

Déjà, au début des années 20, Milne avait adopté une attitude un peu plus ouverte qu'auparavant à l'égard du contenu de ses tableaux. A partir de la fin des années '20 on retrouve souvent, dans ses natures mortes, des objets ordinaires associés de façon parfois incongrue à d'autres éléments. En 1940, un an avant l'apparition de ses premiers "subject pictures", il avait déjà commencé à inclure dans ses oeuvres des objets à caractère un peu fantastique.

La technique picturale de Milne évoluait elle aussi dans une direction favorable à l'émergence du fantaisiste dans son oeuvre. A son retour au Canada, en 1929, il commence à repeindre ses tableaux en atelier, au lieu de les exécuter entièrement sur le motif. A partir de 1933, il fait même les ébauches en atelier, se fiant à sa mémoire et à des croquis au crayon. A l'époque des premiers "subject pictures", il travaille de façon régulière à partir d'esquisses et de souvenirs.

Les "subject pictures" de Milne témoignent aussi de son intérêt pour les peintres primitifs, tel Giotto, et pour les dessins d'enfants. Dans un contexte plus large, les "subject pictures" appartiennent à la période de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, époque à laquelle plusieurs critiques et artistes se préoccupaient de sujets plus profondément humains qu'auparavant.

Au début des années '40, Milne avait défendu l'attitude plus large qu'il avait adoptée à l'égard du modernisme dans un essai encore inédit intitulé *Aesthetic Agents*, dans lequel il affirmait que certains aspects du sujet d'un tableau avaient un potentiel esthétique comparable à ses éléments formels.

Traduction: Élise Bonnette