

The Canadian Art Club, 1907-1915

Robert J. LAMB

Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton, 1988
94 pp., 12 col., 25 b/w illus., \$10.00

Institutional Imperatives

Histories of the institutional structures that have helped shape the development of art in this country have been slow to appear. Until the late 1970's, there were few attempts to document (let alone to critique) the societies, galleries, academies and arts boards through which the institutionalization of art has taken place since Confederation. Instead, historians preferred to direct their attention to the preparation of monographs and general surveys. This reluctance to tackle institutional histories finally broke down only in 1979, with the appearance of Dennis Reid's *Our Own Country Canada*. The book, written to accompany an exhibition of the same name bearing the subtitle "An Account of the National Aspirations of the Principal Landscape Artists in Montréal and Toronto, 1860-1890," was a *tour de force*, an accumulation of primary documentation mobilized in the interest of explaining points of connection between Canadian expansionism, the nation's incipient arts organizations, and landscape painting. It was followed a year later by an exhibition, organized by Charles C. Hill, on the founding in 1880 of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts and the National Gallery of Canada. Then by a book on the R.C.A. by Rebecca Sisler. And so on. The 1980's seem to have been a decade for institutional art histories.¹

The Canadian Art Club, 1907-1915 reflects the temper of the 1980's. Both the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue were prepared by Robert J. Lamb for the Edmonton Art Gallery. On the face of it, Edmonton seems an unlikely place to have produced an investigation of the Canadian

Art Club, an organization that was based in Toronto and tended to look east (to Montréal and beyond) much more than west. The C.A.C. was founded in 1907 by seceding members of the Ontario Society of Artists. The immediate cause of the secession, as secessions in arts organizations often are, was primarily financial and procedural rather than artistic. It was provoked by a reactionary attempt by the board of the O.S.A. to veto the purchase of work by the Ontario Government of two of its younger members, Archibald Browne and Franklin Brownell, on the specious grounds that the paintings in question had not been exhibited in the Society's current exhibition. Browne and Brownell immediately resigned their memberships, and were followed a short while after by William Atkinson, Edmund Morris, Homer Watson and Curtis Williamson.

The seceding faction could not be placated. It viewed the O.S.A. as congenitally incapable of internal reform and proceeded to form its own exhibiting society, independent of government support and comprised of elected members only. Shortly after the C.A.C. had established itself as an organization, it issued an official statement of policy. Its members would include not only those artists of "distinction" living in Canada, but also those expatriates

who have had no desire to sojourn amid the somewhat harsh and indifferant conditions hitherto imposed on them here, and who consequently...have received renown in other climes.

In short, this meant Horatio Walker and James Wilson Morrice. The former had lived in New York since 1878, the latter in Paris since 1890, and along with Homer Watson they made up the sum, or close to the sum, of Canada's international reputation in the visual arts.

The C.A.C. overturned no applecarts in its eight years of existence. The resignations of its founding members from the O.S.A. did not force the O.S.A. out of business; nor did the C.A.C. establish a presence strong enough to significantly alter the direction of art in Canada. As Lamb points out, the O.S.A. confounded its secessionist critics by proving amenable to reform. It enrolled younger members to replace those lost to the C.A.C., including J.E.H. Macdonald in 1909 and Lawren Harris, Arthur Lismer, Tom Thomson and A.Y. Jackson in the years that followed; Macdonald and Harris were even elected to executive positions. An argument can be made that by 1913 it was the C.A.C. rather than the O.S.A. that was dragging its feet on the admission of younger members. This to say nothing of the C.A.C.'s policies towards women. Its patriarchal bias was extreme even for the period. Walker advised Morris to "keep clear of...women artists, as of the devil," and no woman was ever admitted to membership in the organization.

Thus, while the future members of the Group of Seven generated excitement in the press for their representations of the Canadian North, representations that seemed to the viewing public raw and drastic, the membership of the C.A.C. generated polite applause for exhibiting work whose subject matter looked urbane and whose execution polished. This was the reason why the C.A.C. did not stir more comment. The paintings it showed (an appendix to the catalogue lists the contents of the C.A.C.'s annual exhibitions) strived to appeal to the tastes of the principal purchasers of art in Canada, that is, to the mercantile classes in Toronto and Montréal on whose walls hung the grey, docile, inoffensive cows and windmills of the Hague School. ("Art in Canada meant a cow or a windmill," A.Y. Jackson once wrote of the

period leading up to World War I.²) In other words, work by the C.A.C. members presented itself as suitable to be hung next to paintings by Weissenbruch and Blommers—work with heavy gilt frames that was certifiably house-broken. Even Morrice, whom one might have expected to cause some alarm with paintings that reflected the example of Gauguin and Matisse, habitually sent to Toronto paintings from an earlier and less adventuresome stage of his career.

Therefore, despite being able to claim the allegiance of Morrice, Walker and Watson, the C.A.C. attracted none of the controversy and public interest that comparable secessionist groups attracted in Europe and the United States. Lamb is explicit on this as he is on other shortcomings of the C.A.C. His catalogue essay fully recognizes the inherent conservatism of the organization and does not claim more than can be demonstrated for its achievements.

Even so, it occurs to me that Lamb could have gone further, a great deal further, in his analysis of the relationship of the C.A.C. to the social circumstances of its times. The introduction of his essay, for example, offers a gloss on the Laurier period, but one so reduced in scope that instead of informing us about the political life of the period, it serves rather to neutralize what was distinctive about it. Nationalism is broached as a subject for discussion but not Laurier's trade policy of reciprocity with the United States and its resounding defeat at the polls; the landscape painting of Thomson and the future members of the Group of Seven is adumbrated but not the patriotic consciousness that it registered in a way that still commands attention. One detects a reluctance on Lamb's part to transgress the boundary of art's putative autonomy—a boundary that anyone applying themselves to the task of writing institu-

tional histories must immediately recognize as artificial—in case he should confront the murky, contradictory aspects of art practice. The most that Lamb permits himself to express is an ideological bromide in the last sentence of his essay. "By avoiding reductive definitions of nationality, yet demonstrating national pride," he writes, "the Club becomes an attractive model for a pluralist, multicultural Canada." This sounds to me more like the language of a Canada Council grant application than the language of a properly critical history of art. And, in Canada, it is a critical history of art that we want.

John O'Brian

University of British Columbia

The Power Plant, 1987). It is worth noting that the majority of these works, like *Our Own Country Canada*, was published in the form of an exhibition catalogue. It is also worth noting that Reid's book remains the foundation for further investigations into late nineteenth-century art organizations in Canada, particularly as the catalogue for Hill's 1980 exhibition, *To Found a National Gallery: The Royal Canadian Academy of Arts 1880-1913*, has never been published.

² The paragraph by Jackson in which this sentence appears is quoted in Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People's Art* (Toronto: NC Press, 1974), 115, a book unaccountably expurgated from Lamb's references and bibliography.

Notes

¹ This is not to say there were no histories written about the institutional structures of art in Canada prior to 1979; see, for example, Jean Sutherland Boggs, *The National Gallery of Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971). Some of the histories or studies published since 1979 are: Karen McKenzie and Mary F. Williamson, eds., *The Art and Pictorial Press in Canada: Two Centuries of Art Magazines* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1979); Rebecca Sisler, *Passionate Spirits: A History of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts 1880-1980* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1980); A.A. Bronson and Peggy Gale, eds., *Museums by Artists* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983); Sandra Paikowsky, *The Non-Figurative Artists' Association of Montreal* (Montréal: Sir George Williams Art Galleries, 1983); Christopher Varley, *The Contemporary Arts Society: Montreal 1939-1948* (Edmonton: The Edmonton Art Gallery, 1983); Maria Tippet, *Art at the Service of War: Canada, Art and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984); Yvan Lamonde and Esther Trépanier, eds., *L'avènement de la modernité culturelle au Québec* (Québec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1986); Rosalind M. Pepall, *Building a Beaux-Arts Museum, Montreal 1912* (Montréal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1986); and A.A. Bronson, ed., *From Sea to Shining Sea* (Toronto: