

CHARLES COMFORT'S *LAKE SUPERIOR VILLAGE* AND THE *GREAT LAKES EXHIBITION* 1938-39

The *Great Lakes Exhibition* featuring paintings by artists of the Great Lakes Region was first conceived in 1936 as a collaborative venture by the Buffalo Society of Artists, the Patteran Society (an artists' organization in Buffalo) and the Albright Art Gallery. It contained one hundred and sixty-five paintings by artists from Buffalo, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee, Rochester, Toledo and Toronto. After opening in Buffalo in November 1938, the show circulated among all the participating cities except Chicago,¹ ending up at the Milwaukee Art Institute in May, 1939. Toronto was the sole participant from north of the 49th parallel, and received the show at the Art Gallery of Toronto where it opened on January 6, 1939.

The rationale for the show as expressed by Edwin J. Weiss, chairman of the executive committee of the Patteran Society,² was to demonstrate a regional artistic trend in the cities of the Great Lakes as distinct from other regions in North America. The organizers also proposed to show that "each city possessed a certain tone or expression in its art peculiar to that city."³ They were motivated by the desire to refute foreign critics whom they felt had been belittling American art in order to boost the U.S. market for European (especially French) art. They also wished to give American painters the impetus to paint in the "real American tradition, born of our history, our industries and our regional differences and likenesses."⁴ The Patteran was a regional group which had been organized in 1933 with the twin objectives of "open-minded discussion without resentment" and "raising the standard of their annual exhibition through impartial jury selection."⁵ The *Great Lakes Exhibition* was the brainchild of one of its members, and was initially intended as a biennial affair. There were aspirations that it would prove to be one of the most important held in the United States, comparable in national interest to the Corcoran and Pittsburgh shows.⁶ This, however, was not to be, for the *Great Lakes Exhibition* was a one-time only event.

Despite this and aided by half a century of hindsight, the *Great Lakes Exhibition* may be regarded as significant for a number of reasons. By focussing attention on the Great Lakes Basin, it reopened the issue of Regionalism which had not been a hot topic of national debate in the United States since the early 1930's. This indicated that the nationalist wave that had swept North America after World War I had not disappeared, with its concomitant opposition to



fig. 1 Charles Comfort, *Lake Superior Village*, 1937, Oil on canvas, 108 × 177.8 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Gift from the Fund of the T. Eaton Co. Ltd. for Canadian Works of Art. (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario)

foreign modes of expression and promotion of a mild form of chauvinism. Also significant was the fact that the exhibition allowed for a comparison between contemporary art of Canada and the United States, an opportunity seized upon by critics on both sides of the border. Furthermore, it permitted Canadians to see their artistic production in a North American context.

The time was right for such a comparison in 1938. There was a lively interest in Canadian-American relations at the time; between 1935 and 1941 four conferences on Canadian-American Affairs were held under the joint auspices of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Queen's University and the St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York. The 1937 conference dealt with cultural trends, and included an address by Canadian artist André Biéler (1896-1989) entitled "National Aspects of Contemporary American and Canadian Painting." Art critics like Graham McInnes of *Saturday Night* were enthusiastic participants in the comparative exercise through articles and reviews such as his "Artists of the Inland Seas" (January 14, 1939).

Repeating this comparative examination fifty years later sheds new light on the art of this period, since it puts the work in a new context.⁷ Bertram Brooker (1888-1955) and Charles Comfort (b.1900), both represented in the *Great Lakes Exhibition*, were among the Toronto artists of their day who could

see beyond a narrow nationalist point of view. In 1933, at one of the initial meetings of the Canadian Group of Painters (successor to the Group of Seven), only Brooker and Comfort raised their voices against the strong insular attitude they saw reflected in the name of the new group. They felt that "paintings, even by Canadians in Canada, need not necessarily be confined to any sort of nationalistic tradition."⁸ Both recognized the value of exposing their art to foreign eyes. A decade earlier Brooker had written that: "The critics of another country can often sense the nation's unification in a foreign work of art more keenly than in their own, because, being unfamiliar with all the smaller complications which the local critic is aware of, they find in the simplified whole presented by the artist a coherent experience unlike that portrayed by artists among other peoples or in other times."⁹

Comfort felt that the *Great Lakes Exhibition* was "an admirable idea" and that it did "much more than trade pacts and economic agreements to emphasize the understanding and amity which exists between the Canadian and American people."¹⁰ He had some personal contact with the United States through his studies at the Art Students League of New York in 1922-3, where his instructors had been Robert Henri (1865-1929) and Euphrasius Allen Tucker (1866-1939). He had also kept in touch with fashionable commercial artist Robert Fawcett, a boyhood friend from Winnipeg whose family had moved to Chicago around 1919. Comfort had seriously considered moving to the States for financial reasons in 1937, a decision he reversed upon procuring a teaching position in the Department of Art and Archaeology at the University of Toronto that year. In addition, he was well-informed about and pursued an ongoing interest in contemporary American painting during the thirties. Comfort was awarded first prize of \$500.00 in the *Great Lakes Exhibition* for his painting *Lake Superior Village*, 1937 (fig. 1), by a jury consisting of three American art critics: Dorothy Grafty of *The Philadelphia Record*, J.C. Bulliet of *The Chicago Daily News*, and Malcolm Vaughan, a freelance critic, formerly associated with *The New York American*.

American art critics of the thirties were not unfamiliar with Canadian painting, for Canadian sections had been included in world's fairs and international shows from the late nineteenth century, and there had been a number of exhibitions devoted to Canadian art in the years leading up to the *Great Lakes Exhibition*. For instance, there were sections devoted to Canadian art in the *First Pan-American Exhibition of Oil Paintings* at the Los Angeles Museum in 1925-6, the *Sesqui-centennial International Exposition* in Philadelphia in 1926, the first *Baltimore Pan-American Exhibition* at the Baltimore Museum in 1931, and the College Art Association's *International Art Exhibition* held in New York in 1933. As well, a number of exhibitions devoted exclusively to Canadian painting were circulated in the United States after World War I.¹¹



fig. 2 Lawren S. Harris, *Beaver Swamp, Algoma*, 1920, Oil on canvas, 120.7 × 141 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Gift of Ruth Massey Tovell in memory of Harold Murchison Tovell, 1953. (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario)

In reviews of these shows, unlike those that covered earlier international expositions, critics made a conscious attempt to draw comparisons between the art of the different nations. Francis Henry Taylor, director of the Worcester Museum in Massachusetts saw the value of bringing together the art of different nations when he remarked that “when a group of American paintings are assembled not as representative pieces by familiar artists, but as a national section of an international show, a comparison, whether intended or not, is implied at once. The approach of the critic shifts to an international state of mind, from which any element of chauvinism or intellectual prejudice which he may consciously or unconsciously have acquired must be eliminated.”¹²

At the *Pan-American Exhibition* of 1926, Canadian pictures were described as “showing great vigor” and “running to the decorative and to patterns,”¹³ and Lawren Harris’ (1885-1970) *Beaver Swamp, Algoma*, 1920 (fig. 2), was singled out and described as displaying “bold execution and stark

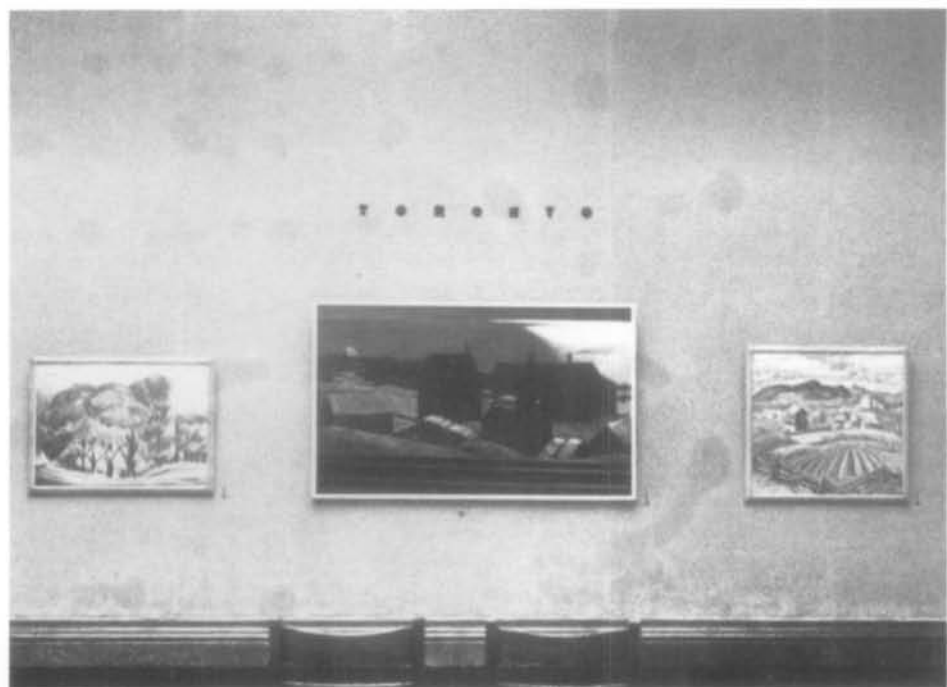


fig. 3, fig. 4 Installation of the *Great Lakes Exhibition* at the Art Gallery of Toronto, January 1939, Charles Fraser Comfort/National Archives of Canada, Ottawa (PA 173708, PA 173709). (Photo: Charles Comfort)

realism.”¹⁴ In 1931, the art of Canada and Mexico was compared in a review of the *Baltimore Pan-American*: “Canada’s section is of interest in a sharply different way, for while its painters, like the Mexicans, seem to be searching for some special means of expression, the dominion artists stem more directly from the American moderate-modernists.”¹⁵ However, the reviewer went on to point out the dissimilarity in vision and tendency between the two, contrasting the “sharp-edged, clean-surfaced and bright airy color” of the Canadian work with the hot, heavily pigmented and slowly rhythmical and earth-toned Mexican examples. In fact, this was largely a matter of geography. A comparison was drawn between the design elements of Lawren Harris’ *North Shore, Lake Superior*, 1926 (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa) and some of Rockwell Kent’s northern studies, but the Harris was seen as typically Canadian in its high, luminous tones and distinct contrasting layers of colour. The Baltimore audience had already seen a large exhibition of Canadian painting the year before which was organized by the American Federation of Arts with the cooperation of the Carnegie Corporation of New York.¹⁶

The very small Canadian section at the 1933 College Art Association *International* did not receive much critical attention. As it consisted of five paintings by original members of the Group of Seven, it tended to present Canadian art in the light of an outdated nationalism. Bertram Brooker, who saw the exhibition in New York, was struck by how out of place the Canadian paintings appeared in the company of works from other nations. In his opinion it went off in either a decorative, or romantic or philosophical direction, and with the exception of A.Y. Jackson, lacked a painterly quality.¹⁷ In December 1934 the installation at the Art Gallery of Toronto of a significant Canadian collection, *Canadian Paintings, the Collection of Hon. Vincent and Mrs. Massey* coincided with the exhibition, *Contemporary Paintings by Artists of the United States*, organized by the Carnegie Corporation and circulated in Canada by the National Gallery of Canada. Critics took the opportunity to compare the artistic output of the two nations. The American work was felt to be more progressive and modern, and was praised by Canadians for the “willingness to experiment,”¹⁸ the “intellectual awareness,”¹⁹ and the “free portrayal of a tremendous national life as they find it.”²⁰ It was a representative cross-section of contemporary American painting, and included artists like Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, Charles Burchfield, Andrew Dasberg; and Henry Lee McFee, Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley and Eugene Speicher.

In 1938, the *Great Lakes Exhibition* once again gave artists and critics the opportunity to see Canadian art within a larger context. This time, since the forum was more focussed, being restricted to cities situated around the Great Lakes, it forced a closer comparison between the art of Canada and the United States. Whereas in Buffalo, the work of individual cities was hung in separate

rooms, in Toronto the juxtapositions were more direct. The cities were installed together, grouped under letters affixed to the wall which spelled out the name of each city.²¹ While the Toronto contingent was separated physically from the rest in the small Walter Laidlaw Gallery, a visual link was made by hanging the prize-winning picture, *Lake Superior Village*, where it could be viewed at a distance from one of the large galleries which contained the bulk of the show (figs. 3, 4).

The Toronto section was selected by a jury consisting of A.Y. Jackson, Peter Haworth and Franklin Carmichael, presidents of the Canadian Group of Painters, the Canadian Society of Painters in Water Colour and the Ontario Society of Artists, respectively. The jury was selected by the Exhibition Committee of the Art Gallery of Toronto,²² on the advice of Gordon Washburn, director of the Albright Gallery who was also responsible for setting the Toronto quota at sixteen pictures. This number was in keeping with the number of works expected from other cities. Forms were sent out to a pre-selected group of artists. The final selection included John Alfsen, Bertram Brooker, A.J. Casson, Paraskeva Clark, Charles Comfort, Kathleen Daly, Fred S. Haines, Lawren P. Harris, Bobs Cogill Haworth, Yvonne McKague Housser, Arthur Lismer, Isabel McLaughlin, Will Ogilvie, George Pepper, Carl Schaefer and Gordon Webber.²³ While most were members of the Canadian Group of Painters (CGP) whose scope and membership were national, all were Toronto-based and most demonstrated artistic concerns particular to that city. That is, they tended to execute formal, stylized essays in landscape, figure painting or a combination of both. However, Alfsen and Clark's work showed more of an affinity with American painting than the other Canadians. These artists did not represent the entire nation, although in the context of the *Great Lakes Exhibition* they were certainly perceived as doing so.

Although they represented the diverse concerns within the CGP, most of the Toronto paintings showed an indebtedness to the Group of Seven, particularly in the strong design and stylization, and the landscape bias that their work displayed, like George Pepper's (1903-1962) *Tobacco Patch, St. Urbain*, 1934 (fig. 5), for example. Seven of the sixteen Canadian pictures in the *Great Lakes* show had already been exhibited in the CGP show in November 1937. A balance was struck by the inclusion of works by Alfsen and Clark, whose subject matter and orientation presented an aesthetic awareness that went beyond mannered reprises of the Group of Seven's brand of post-Impressionism.

Edwin Weiss, perhaps because he was looking for a distinct flavour in the art of the Great Lakes Region to counter-balance the prejudice which favoured European art, praised the Canadian work for remaining true to itself. "The idiom of the Canadian scene is always unmistakably there," he is quoted as saying, and continued, "...in colour and tone, by stroke of brush, the genuine

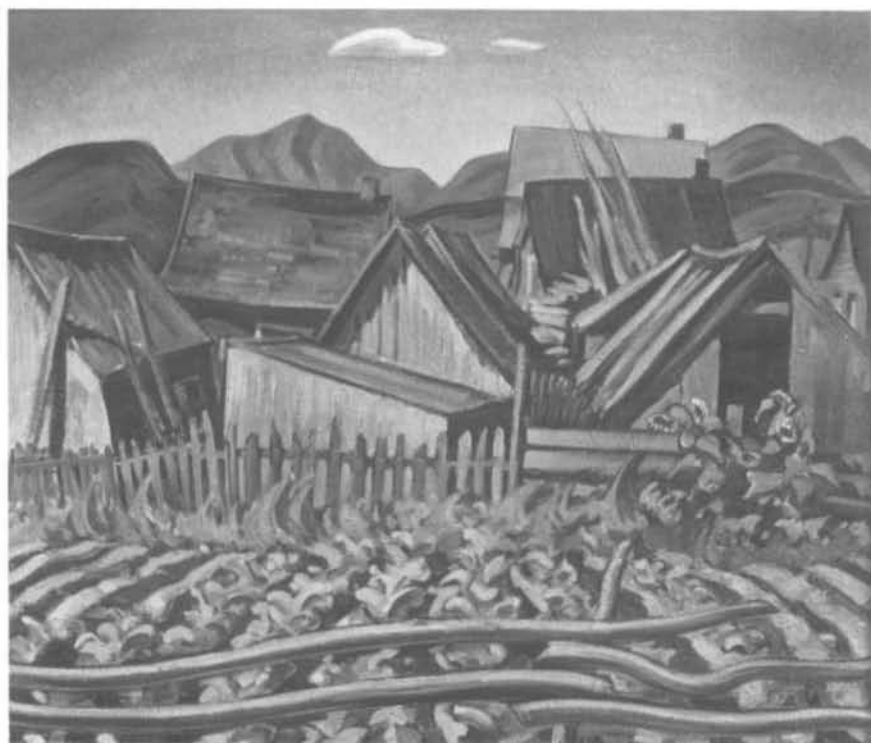


fig. 5 George Pepper, *Tobacco Patch, St. Urbain*, 1934, Oil on canvas, 63.5 × 73.7 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 1935 (2334). (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario)

artist of Canada seeks to express faithfully what he sees and feels about this country, bringing to his canvas the effects of a commendable restraint and a sense of innate refinement."²⁴

Gordon Washburn, who wrote a critique of the Toronto paintings soon after the Toronto opening, praised them generally for their "native quality, refinement and orderly thinking" but noted the "crystallization" of a formula in some of them.²⁵ *The New York Times* reviewer merely mentioned in passing "the generic Canadian style" without explaining just what that meant.²⁶ But he felt the Toronto work fitted in comfortably with that produced by artists of other Great Lakes cities: "Inclusion of the group of sixteen Canadian artists broadens, as it enriches, the field, stressing still more the homogeneity of 'place' and emphasizing too, ... the avoidance of traffic with narrow 'nationalism'."²⁷

Some, including Canadian art critic Graham McInnes, found neither any uniformity, nor any trace of regionalism in the show apart from the extrinsic



fig. 6 William C. Grauer, *Ohio Landscape*, 1937, Oil on canvas, 76.2 × 91.8 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Hinman B. Hurlbut Collection (2161.37). (Photo: The Cleveland Museum of Art)

incident of subject matter.²⁸ While he saw a common vitality in much of the work of the Great Lakes Region, he took the opportunity to describe the main differences between Canadian and American painting. Canadian painting, he wrote, was characterized by "a broad decorative realism" whereas "experimental dash, brilliant color, and definite overtones of almost harsh realism" described the American work. American painting, he felt, was richer due to the more varied ethnic backgrounds of its artists, and it displayed greater psychological depth, a livelier interest in paint values, and the artists' willingness to paint their immediate surroundings. Of the Toronto group he wrote: "Our painting, on the whole, is the romantic art of escape. There is not... a single city scene (with the exception of Paraskeva Clark's *Petroushka*)... [T]he Canadians have a much more 'regional' approach, a higher level of technical competence, and are more at ease with their surroundings... [It] is still overwhelmingly a landscape art." Martin Baldwin, director of the Art Gallery of

Toronto summarized the difference as being primarily one of technique: "...our painters seem much more alive to colour in [*sic*] pattern than the Americans but they, in turn, seem more sensitive to the intricacy of design and to the sense of depth."²⁹

There was certainly much more variety in the American work, and although jingoistic critics denied the existence of European influence, focussing on the fact that artists were now painting local subject matter (the result, no doubt, of the economic constraints which prevailed at the time), much of their painting did display some European influence. An expressionistic technique, reminiscent of van Gogh was used, while the angular, knife-edged precision of forms derived from Cézanne and Cubism was evident in others, such as William Grauer's (1896-1985) *Round About Cleveland*. This painting won honourable mention in the *Great Lakes Exhibition*, and is similar to *Ohio Landscape*, 1937, illustrated here (fig. 6).

From 1936 McInnes repeatedly lamented the state of "painful indecision" evident in Canadian painting, which he blamed on the "ghost of the Group of Seven," and exhorted artists to put less emphasis on the subject, and more on what was done with it, focussing more on "true painterly qualities." He wrote that the "Canadian scene" (a reference to "American scene") would come to life automatically if artists would paint with "complete honesty and genuine feeling."³⁰ The future, he felt, lay with artists like David Milne, Carl Schaefer, Aleksandre Bercovitch, John Lyman, Louis Muhlstock, Fritz Brandtner, Pegi Nicol and Paraskeva Clark,³¹ most of whom he featured in a series of articles in *The Canadian Forum* in 1937. One of the artists included in this series was Charles Comfort whose work, McInnes felt, epitomized the perfect blend of art in that it combined a vivid consciousness of the contemporary environment and the ability to draw from the "great tradition" with mastery of his vehicle of expression.³² In his review of the *Great Lakes Exhibition*, he called Comfort's *Lake Superior Village* a "brilliant piece of painting."

The American jurors unanimously awarded first prize to *Lake Superior Village*. It was praised for "the remarkable strength in its dark masses," (*Buffalo Evening News*, Oct. 29, 1938) and its "dramatic simplicity and elemental design" (*Buffalo Courier-Express*, Oct. 29, 1938). *The New York Times* was more critical, seeing as the result of these qualities "a clever posterized design" (Nov. 6, 1938). One of the jurors, Chicago critic J.C. Bulliet, described it as "a night snow scene big in dimensions, impressive, expert, and above all, honest in its observation and the recording of what the artist saw." He noted that it "brought a new name and a new talent (approaching genius) into United States comprehension and started the Great Lakes art movement, we hope, along the way it should go and the way mapped for it by the Patteran Society."³³ Gordon Washburn called the painting a "brilliant *tour de force*," and admired the

virtuosity of the luminous effects, and the artist's ability to convey his message through his technique, even if he did get "carried away by his means."³⁴

Why did *Lake Superior Village* elicit such an enthusiastic response from the Americans? First, it gave credence to the "regional idea" in art. That a regional subject (a view of the small fishing community of Rosspoint, Ontario, on the north shore of Lake Superior) was worthy of being treated on such a grand scale (108 × 177.8 cm), and merited first prize to boot, fulfilled the sponsor's intention to show that "the real artists of Canada and the United States were seeking to portray the life of their people and their surroundings."³⁵ Secondly, it appealed to the contemporary eye because, although executed in a realist manner, it was a style obviously informed by modernism. While abstraction had fallen out of favour in the more conservative artistic climate that followed World War I, its vestiges are visible in works like *Lake Superior Village*.

By 1937 Comfort's work demonstrated an awareness of the American brand of Cubism known as Precisionism, or Cubist-Realism, grafted onto an approach to art practiced by the Group of Seven. By his own admission, he had accomplished little artistically before 1925, the year he moved from Winnipeg to join the Toronto branch of the commercial art firm of Brigden's. During a stay in Toronto in 1920, he had had an opportunity to view the first exhibition of the Group of Seven, which impressed him greatly. His work of the 1920's shows the group's influence. *The Great Rock, Bon Echo*, 1928 (fig. 7), for instance, combines Arthur Lismer's approach to the same view — *The Big Rock, Bon Echo*, 1922 (National Gallery of Canada) with Fred Varley's mountain landscapes like *Early Morning, Sphinx Mountain*, 1927-8 (The McMichael Canadian Art Collection) or *The Cloud*, 1927-8 (Art Gallery of Ontario). Comfort's juicy application of paint, and the marbling effect used to describe the rock face suggest his awareness of Varley's work that was included in the 1928 *Group of Seven* show at the Art Gallery of Toronto in February, 1928.

Also included in the 1928 show was Lawren Harris' *Ice House, Coldwell, Lake Superior*, c. 1923 (fig. 8). Here, in contrast to the expressionist manner he had used in earlier views of Algoma and his house pictures of the early twenties, the artist has used a severe, stripped-down approach appropriate to his spiritual vision of Canada's north. However, Comfort's unqualified admiration for the Group was not sustained over time. In 1938 he referred to them as a "seven-headed Hydra," an "amphibious monster that rose out of Georgian Bay and settled in Toronto,"³⁶ and lightheartedly poked fun at their demise in a cartoon entitled "Exeunt omnes" in *The Canadian Forum* (April, 1934). Nonetheless, his own work continued in that tradition.

In fact, having made earlier trips to the region himself, and with the knowledge that his friends the Brigdens, the Peppers (George and Kay Daly),



fig. 7 Charles Comfort, *The Great Rock, Bon Echo*, 1928, Oil on canvas, 127 × 152.3 cm, London Regional Art and Historical Museums, Gift of the Volunteer Committee 1961 (61.A.22). (Photo: Ian MacEachern)



fig. 8 Lawren Harris, *Ice House, Coldwell, Lake Superior*, c. 1923, Oil on canvas, 94.1 × 114.1 cm, Art Gallery of Hamilton, Bequest of H.S. Southam, 1966 (66.72.22). (Photo: Art Gallery of Hamilton)

A.Y. Jackson, and Lawren Harris had all painted there, Comfort went to Rossport with a well-formed concept of "Superior" in his mind. He sought to portray the scale and strength of "this great North Shore, sort of a last great line of defense protecting the invisible secrets of the north."³⁷ In his use of the phrase "invisible secrets of the north," Comfort echoed Harris' concept of the North and his "mystical ideology of a national art" which he had explained in an article entitled "Revelation of Art in Canada" in 1926. Harris wrote: "We [Canadians] are in the fringes of the great North and its living whiteness, its loneliness and replenishment, its resignation and release, its call and its answer — its cleansing rhythms."³⁸ Harris and Jackson had first ventured to the north shore of Superior late in 1920, repeating these trips until 1925. Harris' *Ice House, Coldwell, Lake Superior* was based on sketches made in 1921, when he and Jackson visited Coldwell, north-west of Rossport on the north shore.

As it turned out, Comfort was disappointed in the view which Rossport presented, illustrated here by both a photograph he took (fig. 9), and one of the field sketches he made during his brief visit in October 1935 (fig. 10). He wrote:

...it is much more shut in than I had expected. It is situated at the bottom of a deep bay which is filled with wooded islands. The result is that instead of getting the impression that you are on the greatest of the Great Lakes you appear merely to be in Algonquin Park. I have always sensed the immediacy of Superior and it was with the idea of objectifying that impression that I came here... It is interesting enough country but it doesn't excite my vision.³⁹

It is surprising that Comfort expected Rossport to provide a view tailor-made to his vision, considering that Harris' own view (fig. 11), and those of Yvonne McKague Housser (1898-), who also painted there around 1929 (figs. 12, 13), clearly describe the local geography, including the wooded islands. Harris' *Rossport, Lake Superior*, 1921 (Toronto Board of Education) bears a closer affinity to the earlier Algoma pictures like *Beaver Swamp* than to the Lake Superior pictures that followed soon after. Perhaps Comfort was not familiar with these views, but this seems unlikely. McKague Housser's sketch was shown in the Ontario Society of Artists (OSA) *Little Pictures Exhibition* at the Art Gallery of Toronto in November 1929; the canvas was exhibited in both the *OSA Annual* and the *Group of Seven* shows in 1930, and also at the Art Gallery of Toronto.

Nonetheless, he made the best of the situation. Able to complete only a few field sketches, due to unfavourable weather conditions, he fell short of the quota of eight he had set for himself. In order to bring the painting in line with his pre-determined vision, Comfort converted one of the sketches (fig. 10) into a night scene which allowed him to use dramatic lighting and create a greater visual impact. He also suppressed incidental detail and neatly eliminated the islands in the background to create that impression of isolation and grandeur



fig. 9 View of Rossport, Ontario, taken by Charles Comfort, October 1935, Charles Fraser Comfort/National Archives of Canada, Ottawa (PA 167878). (Photo: Charles Comfort)



fig. 10 Charles Comfort, *Rossport, Lake Superior*, 1935, Oil on panel, 30.5 × 38.1 cm, Mrs. Wallace Clancy, Toronto. (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario)



fig. 11 Lawren S. Harris, *Rossport, Lake Superior*, 1921, Oil on canvas, 80 × 94.5 cm, Collection Records Archives and Museum, Toronto Board of Education. (Photo: Toronto Board of Education)



fig. 12 Yvonne McKague Housser, *Rossport, Lake Superior*, c. 1929, Oil on panel, dimensions unknown, location unknown. (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario)



fig. 13 Yvonne McKague Housser, *Rossport, Lake Superior*, 1930, Oil on canvas, 61.1 × 76.6 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (3704), (Photo: Merrett & Harper Inc., Montréal)

that he associated with Lake Superior. The success of the final canvas may be measured by a description of *Lake Superior Village*, written by Comfort's friend, art critic Robert Ayre:

I feel it is essentially Canada and it is the more important because it is not the much painted Canada of swirling Laurentians, monumental Rockies, or the blazing pageantry of autumn forests. Its buildings and woodpiles, heavily underscored by implacable railroad tracks, stand grim and uncompromising in a great space, sombre with the oncoming night, yet dramatically lit. It is solidly built, well-ordered, and the small figures of men reveal the bigness of scale that must always be Canada.⁴⁰

Comfort's style was perfectly suited to the expression of cold and isolation, particularly in the hard-edged precision with which he defined the forms. The evolution of this approach had begun in the late 1920's when Comfort was first exposed, in any meaningful way, to the language of abstraction. *The International Exhibition of Modern Art* from the Collection of the Société Anonyme, New York had a significant impact on Comfort and a number of his friends and colleagues when it was shown at the Art Gallery of Toronto in April, 1927, a fact which he himself acknowledged. Comfort was evidently aware of the modern movement in art before this exhibition, as he had been asked to act as a docent. However, this was the first significant show of abstract art in Canada, and he felt that it was of equal importance to the 1913 *Armory Show* in New York.⁴¹ He was familiar with contemporary aesthetics, having read works such as Clive Bell's *Art* (1914) around 1924, and Sheldon Cheney's *A Primer of Modern Art* (1924) in 1925. Bell's theory of "significant form" and Cheney's "emotional form" were echoed in Comfort's own aesthetic musings around 1931. In a discussion of expressionism in art, Comfort wrote about the creative artist's "imperious need to express felt emotions by direct external forms and signs," which results in an art that "manifests the manner in which the artist apprehends a sensation or sentiment, and gives the measure of what he has felt and of his emotional power."⁴²

Comfort acknowledged that he first applied the contemporary aesthetic of reductive formalism, based on the legacy of Cubism, and ultimately Cézanne, to his commercial work. Between 1932 and 1936, for example, he executed advertisements for the International Nickel Company using the scratchboard technique, demonstrating his virtuosity in the control of line and dramatic contrasts which resulted in a characteristic "art deco" look. He also employed this in a number of murals: the commission for the North American Life Insurance Company on King Street West, Toronto in 1932; the Toronto Stock Exchange, 1936-7; and the *Romance of Nickel*, a mural commissioned by the International Nickel Company for the mining building at the 1937 *International Exposition* in Paris. He was greatly admired by young contemporaries like

William Winter and Jack Bush. As Robert Ayre later remarked, "Comfort has a way with straight lines."⁴³

According to one contemporary, writing in 1935, Comfort felt that the blend between his commercial and expressive work had been a great advantage.⁴⁴ He had begun working in the commercial field at Brigden's studio in Winnipeg in 1913, transferring to Toronto in 1925 where he was employed as "creative designer and figure draughtsman" until 1929 when he moved to Rapid Grip & Batten Ltd. After leaving that firm, he set up his own commercial studio with Will Ogilvie and Harold Ayres in 1931. Comfort discussed the relationship between modern art and advertising in a talk he delivered in December 1931, pointing out that the impetus for employing modern art in advertising had generally been the need for new modes of expression. While not implicating himself, Comfort ventured to say that it was probably "this urge to lead, stand out, attract, get away from the mob, rather than a deep philosophical motive," that first led to the use of modern art in advertising. He wondered if there was anything more to it than "these curious angular and distorted shapes that catch our eye and challenge our intelligence," and why it could be applied acceptably to industrial design and yet "cause a dog-fight in the painter's hands."⁴⁵ He concluded that the Canadian population was too conservative for modern art to be "an effective agent for loosening Canadian purse-strings," at least in 1931. Comfort finally broke with commercial art when he opted for a stable teaching position rather than pursue a high-pressured, but lucrative career in that field in New York in 1937.

The modern aesthetic first appeared in his canvases in the late 1920's with the portrait of his wife *Louise*, 1927 (National Gallery of Canada), and then in works like *Tadoussac*, 1935 (fig. 14). Here the simplified, streamlined forms and consistently smooth facture imply the influence of the Precisionists, particularly Charles Sheeler, whom Comfort met through Robert Fawcett in Ridgefield, Connecticut in 1933. Comfort was impressed by Sheeler, and one of his "treasures" was Constance Rourke's monograph, *Charles Sheeler: Artist in the American Tradition* (1938), signed by the artist.⁴⁶ The reduction of forms, use of straight line and dramatic tonal contrasts which Comfort had employed both in his commercial work and "expressive work" earlier in the thirties, were all brought together in *Lake Superior Village* in 1937.

If Precisionism had inspired the language of this painting, Charles Burchfield's (1893-1967) regional focus may have had a hand in guiding Comfort's eye. Burchfield was lauded as the archetypal regionalist painter of the day, notably in the introduction to the catalogue of the *Great Lakes Exhibition*. This was not surprising, since he was a Buffalo-based painter. His contribution to the *Great Lakes Exhibition*, a watercolour entitled *Old Houses in Winter*, 1929-40 (Sheldon Swope Art Gallery, Terre Haute, Indiana) received honourable mention.

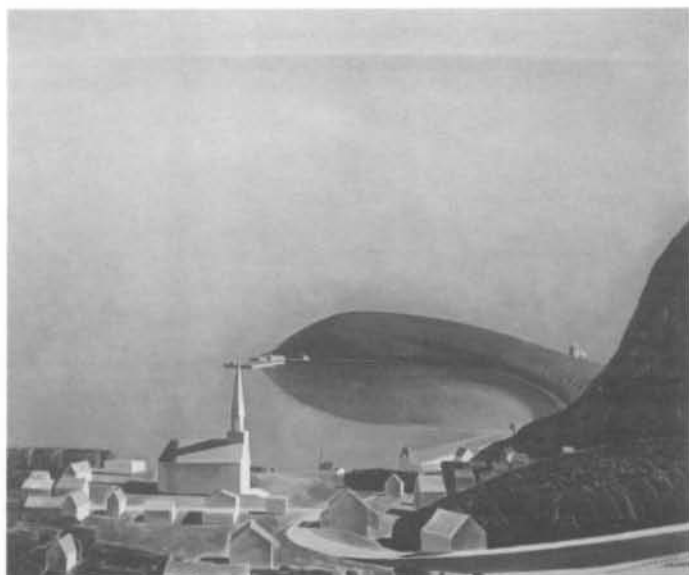


fig. 14 Charles Comfort, *Tadoussac*, 1935, Oil on canvas, 76.2 × 91.4 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, The Vincent Massey Bequest, 1968 (15,471). (Photo: National Gallery of Canada)



fig. 15 Charles Burchfield, *Railroad in Spring*, 1933, Watercolour, 70 × 105 cm, The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd (1979.7.21). (Photo: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco)

He was also well known to Canadians at that time. His *Railroad in Spring*, 1933 (fig. 15), describes the less glamorous side of a town, by viewing it from behind, so to speak. It is the view one had while passing through, and this transient aspect is clearly indicated by the train tracks prominently situated in the foreground. *Lake Superior Village* is also a place “to be passed through,” en route to somewhere else. The railroad tracks indicate the accessibility of the village, but also provide the means of escape. The hostile austerity of the landscape as Comfort described it both in words and paint, does not invite one to stay. Considering his feelings about Rossport, this mood was probably not unintentional.

One final American parallel to consider in relation to *Lake Superior Village* is Rockwell Kent (1882-1971). Not only did Kent’s moderate form of modernism appeal to contemporary Americans, but he was also extremely popular with Canadian audiences, largely due to an affinity for the northern wilderness which he shared with the Group of Seven and associates.⁴⁷ In February 1934 the Art Gallery of Toronto sponsored a lecture by Kent which was extremely well received, as was the exhibition of his paintings in April of that same year in which *Adirondacks*, 1928-30 (fig. 16), was included. Comfort met Kent the night before the lecture at the home of Lawren Harris, and presumably saw the exhibition.

There is a simplicity and order in Kent’s work that prompted Arthur Lismer to comment that he “strives after the big rhythms, creating order through the design of land, water and sky.”⁴⁸ It is not surprising that Lismer and Comfort, both of whom had experience working as commercial designers were attracted to these qualities in the work of a man who was also renowned as a graphic designer. Like *Adirondacks*, *Lake Superior Village* is conventionally structured with distinct fore, middle and backgrounds, and a dramatic lighting animates the landscape. An austere mood and feeling of isolation prevail in both. From a technical point of view, both artists have varied the quality of paint application, and treatment of the surface. But whereas Kent reserved an impastoed treatment for the building façades, Comfort rendered his buildings with an absolute flatness (reminiscent of the earlier *Tadoussac*) and applied selective glazing to enhance the dark tones. Texture is introduced through a stippled application of gesso under the layer of paint to describe the woodpiles and areas of grass in which the buildings are set. This acts as a foil to the starkly reduced architectural forms, while serving to offset the absolute severity of the work as a whole. The introduction of a livelier, more varied surface was a new feature in Comfort’s work. It seems likely that this was due to an American influence, perhaps Kent’s, for Canadian painting of the period was generally marked by an overall uniformity of surface treatment. Another contributing factor may have been the commencement of Comfort’s teaching career in 1937

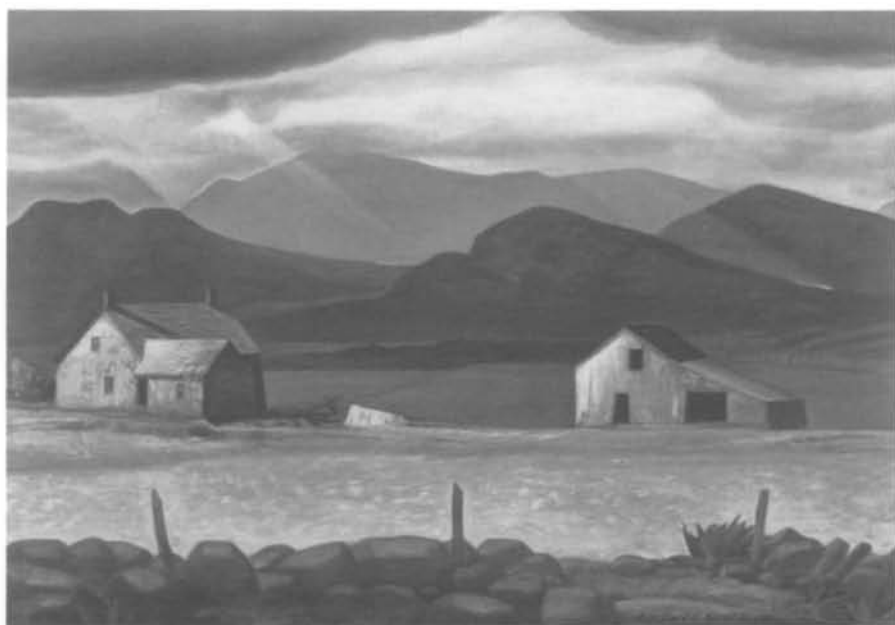


fig. 16 Rockwell Kent, *Adirondacks*, 1928-30, Oil on canvas, 97.7 × 139.3 cm, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C, Museum Purchase, William A. Clark Fund. (Photo: The Corcoran Gallery of Art)

which turned his interests towards historical techniques and may have inspired him to experiment with textural effects in his own work.

That a Canadian painting, especially one painted in a nationalist spirit, should win first prize in a predominantly American show on a regional theme, was a sufficiently rare event to warrant this study. The fact that it was highly praised by contemporaries for its subject matter and aesthetic qualities signifies that it conveyed certain values relevant to contemporaries in a visual language which appealed to their eye. This visual language and its message did not speak to the generations following the Second World War and subsequently marked the end of an era in the visual arts. Toronto artists looked less to the United States, and more to Great Britain in their pursuit of modern artistic expression during and after the war. Regionalism was also a dead issue once international issues gained prominence. This explains why the *Great Lakes Exhibition*, despite all its aspirations, turned out to be a solitary event in the history of Canadian-American contacts.⁴⁹

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Notes

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Anne Goddard of the National Archives, Ottawa, Mrs. Louise Comfort, and Mr. and Mrs. George Falconer, Ottawa for making Charles Comfort's papers and works of art available for my examination.

1 Apparently, Chicago could not accommodate the show due to a heavy exhibition schedule.

2 Gordon Washburn, director of the Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, suggested that Weiss should give the opening remarks in Toronto because he was "the godfather of contemporary art in Buffalo." He had been responsible for backing the Patteran Society and financing the exhibition. Gordon Washburn to Martin Baldwin, director of the Art Gallery of Toronto, November 8, 1938. *Great Lakes Exhibition*: Toronto, File 47.6, Library, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo.

3 anon., "Art Expression in Every City Said Different: Is Demonstrated in Great Lakes Exhibition, Expert Says," *The Toronto Telegram*, January 7, 1939.

4 "Art of the Great Lakes Region will go on exhibition here," *Buffalo Evening News*, September 15, 1938.

5 *American Art Annual 1937-8*, XXXIV (Washington, D.C.: The American Federation of Arts, 1938), 311.

6 Gordon Washburn to Mrs. Franz Visser't Hooft, February 8, 1938. *Great Lakes Exhibition*: Patteran Society and Local Support, Prizes, File 47.2, Library, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo. He refers to the Corcoran *Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Oil Paintings*, Washington, D.C. (considered to be one of the nation's most important art shows), and the *Carnegie International Exhibition* in Pittsburgh.

7 Some comparative studies have been done in the recent past; for example, Ann DAVIS, *A Distant Harmony: Comparisons in the Painting of Canada and the United States of America* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1982) and Robert HUBBARD, "Artists in Common: Canadian-American Contacts," *RACAR*, 3 (1976): 35-54.

8 Bertram Brooker to L. LeMoine FitzGerald, March 20, 1933. Bertram Brooker Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, The University of Manitoba Libraries, Winnipeg. My thanks to Michael Parke-Taylor for bringing the complete letter and present location to my attention.

9 Bertram BROOKER, "When We Awake! A General Introduction," *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada 1928-9* (Toronto: The MacMillan Co. of Canada Ltd. at St. Martin's House, 1929), 9.

10 Charles Comfort to Gordon Washburn, November 14, 1938. *Great Lakes Exhibition*: Patteran Society and Local Support, Prizes, File 47.2, Library, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo.

11 The following is a list of these exhibitions: *Exhibition of Paintings by Canadian Artists* (Saint Louis Art Museum, November 1918 and other locations); *The Group of Seven Canadian Painters* (Worcester Art Museum, Mass., November 1920 and touring); *Exhibitions of Paintings by Canadian Artists* [The Group of Seven] (Minneapolis Art Institution, Minneapolis, November 1923 and touring); *Paintings by Contemporary Canadian Artists: A group selected from Recent Works by the Canadian Group of Seven and the Canadian Section of the Sesqui-Centennial Exhibition of Philadelphia* (Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, 1926); *Exhibition of Paintings by Canadian Artists* (Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, September, 1928); *An Exhibition of Paintings by Contemporary Canadian Artists* (The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, May 1930 and touring); *Exhibition of Paintings by Contemporary Canadian Artists* (International Art Center of the Roerich Museum, New York, March 1932); and *Paintings by the Canadian Group of Painters* (Heinz Art Salon, Atlantic City, New Jersey, 1933).

12 Francis Henry TAYLOR, "United States" in the catalogue of the College Art Association's *International Exhibition*, 1933, p. 11. Critic Forbes Watson felt that "art is the only universal

diplomat,” and that international prejudices would be broken down if each nation injected its own special brand of art into the mainstream. Forbes WATSON, “The Universal Diplomat,” *Catalog of the College Art Association International 1933*, Rockefeller Center, New York (February 5 – 26, 1933):5.

13 Carolyn PEARSON, “Art and Politics in Pan-American Salon at Museum,” *Los Angeles Illustrated Daily News*, November 28, 1925. Included in the Canadian section were artists as diverse as J.W. Beatty, Archibald Browne, Clarence Gagnon, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, and M.A. de Foy Suzor-Coté.

14 Eoline ALDRICH, “18,000 at Pan-American Art Exhibition at Los Angeles,” Unsourced, undated clipping, Clippings book, National History Museum Archives, Los Angeles. Aldrich wrote: “Of the Canadian pictures, most of which are boldly executed, the stark realism of *Beaver Swamp*... [is] particularly worthy of note.”

15 A.D. EMMART in *The Baltimore Morning Sun*, January 25, 1931, quoted in *The American Magazine of Art*, XXII (March 1931): 280. This was also true of contemporary sculpture: Paulanship and Carl Milles inspired several Canadian sculptors of that period.

16 *An Exhibition of Paintings by Contemporary Canadian Artists* at The Baltimore Museum of Art, May 4 – 28, 1930.

17 Bertram Brooker to LeMoine FitzGerald, March 20, 1933. Bertram Brooker Collection, University of Manitoba.

18 Donald W. BUCHANAN, “An American Art Show,” *Saturday Night*, December 8, 1934.

19 Kenneth WELLS, “American Art is Good, But is it Really American? – Here lies a Lesson for Canadians,” *The Toronto Telegram*, December 8, 1934.

20 Augustus BRIDLE, “Massey’s Canadiana Feature at Gallery/Contemporary National Art Forms Interesting Exhibit with U.S. Canvases,” *The Toronto Star*, December 7, 1934.

21 Installation views of the *Great Lakes Exhibition* at the Art Gallery of Toronto, taken by Charles Comfort, 1939, Charles Comfort Collection, Box 5985, Documentary Art and Photography Division, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

22 Martin Baldwin to Gordon Washburn, April 9, 1937, *Great Lakes Exhibition*: Toronto, File 47.6 Library, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo. Baldwin noted that there were so many exhibitions of Canadian societies at the Art Gallery of Toronto that it was difficult to ask any individual to take charge of the selection.

23 The following is a list of the Canadian works exhibited: John ALFSEN, *The Minstrel* [The Guitar Player], 1937 (Art Gallery of Hamilton); Bertram Brooker, *Figures in a Landscape*, 1931; A.J. Casson, *Autumn Evening*; Paraskeva Clark, *Petroushka*, 1937 (National Gallery of Canada); Charles Comfort, *Lake Superior Village*, 1937 (Art Gallery of Ontario); Kathleen Daly, *Cree Family*; Fred S. Haines, *Birches*; Lawren P. Harris, *Presiding Elder*; Bobs Cogill Haworth, *Potatoes and Daisies*; Yvonne McKague Housser, *High Water*; Arthur Lismer, *Pine Wrack*, 1933 (National Gallery of Canada); Isabel McLaughlin, *Bayview Country, Spring*; Will Ogilvie, *Xhosa Women* [Washing], 1932 (Art Gallery of Hamilton); George Pepper, *Tobacco Patch, St. Urbain*, 1934 (Art Gallery of Ontario); Carl Schaefer, *The Willows*; Gordon Webber, *Sawmill*.

24 “Art Expression in Every City Said Different,” *The Toronto Telegram*, January 7, 1939.

25 Pearl McCARTHY, “Art and Artists,” *The Toronto Globe*, January 23, 1939.

26 Edward Alden JEWELL, “In the Realm of Art: Big All-American Group Shows,” *The New York Times*, November 6, 1938.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Graham McINNES, “Art of the Inland Seas,” *Saturday Night*, January 14, 1939: “Insofar as it sets out to find an approach common to the Great Lakes Region it fails – in inability to find

something that probably didn't exist can be counted failure.... If there is any regional content to the exhibition, it is to be found in subject matter rather than approach." See also "The Search for America," *Parnassus*, 10 (December 1938): 21.

29 Martin BALDWIN, "Painting in the Great Lakes Region," broadcast aired on December 27, 1938, typescript, "Great Lakes Exhibition," Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario. Baldwin was scheduled to give a talk on "Contrasts – Canadian and American painting" on the afternoon of the opening (January 6, 1939). No typescript of this talk has been located.

30 Graham McINNES, *A Short History of Canadian Art* (Toronto: The MacMillan Co. of Canada Ltd., at St. Martin's House, 1939), 97.

31 G. Campbell McINNES, "Thoughts on Canadian Art," in *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada* 1936 (Toronto: The MacMillan Co. of Canada Ltd., 1936), 225.

32 G. Campbell McINNES, "Contemporary Canadian Artists No. 3: Charles Comfort," *The Canadian Forum*, XVII (April 1937): 18-19.

33 J.C. BULLIET, "Great Lakes Region Starts Art Movement," *The Chicago Daily News*, November 5, 1938.

34 "At the Galleries," *The Toronto Telegram*, January 25, 1939.

35 "Art Expression in Every City Said Different," *The Toronto Telegram*, January 7, 1939.

36 Handwritten notes for a lecture "Oshawa," 1938, Unaccessioned material, "Canadian Art," Charles Comfort Papers, MG 30, D81, Vol. 4, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

37 Charles COMFORT, Notebook, entry for October 5, 1935, Notebooks, Charles Comfort Papers, MG 30, D81, Vol. 3, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

38 Lawren HARRIS, "Revelation of Art in Canada," *The Canadian Theosophist*, VII (15 July 1926): 85-8, as cited in Jeremy ADAMSON, *Lawren S. Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes 1906-1930* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1978): 138.

39 Entry for October 4, 1935, Notebooks, Charles Comfort Papers, MG 30, D81, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

40 Robert AYRE, *The Montreal Standard*, November 12, 1938.

41 Charles COMFORT, "Sketches from Memory" (Unpublished autobiography, c.1974), Charles Comfort Papers, MG30, D81, Vols. 8 and 9, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

42 Charles F. COMFORT, "The Painter and His Model," in William Arthur DEACON and Wilfred REEVES, eds., *Open House* (Ottawa: Graphing Publishing Ltd., 1931), 216.

43 Robert AYRE, Unpublished biography on Charles Comfort, c.1948, Charles Comfort Papers, Unaccessioned material, MG 30, D81, Vol. 26, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

44 H.M. JACKSON, *Charles Comfort, The Man and the Artist* (Toronto: privately printed, 1935): unpag.

45 Charles COMFORT, "Modern Advertising Art in Canada," typescript, Charles Comfort Papers, MG 30, D81, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

46 Charles COMFORT, "Sketches from Memory," Charles Comfort Papers, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

47 See the section on Rockwell Kent and Lawren Harris in Ann DAVIS, *A Distant Harmony: Comparisons between the painting of Canada and the United States* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1982).

48 Arthur LISMER, "Around the Galleries," *Canadian Homes and Gardens* (May 1934): p. 38.

49 Canadian-American contacts in the visual arts between the world wars is the theme of an exhibition organized by the Art Gallery of Ontario entitled *Permeable Border: Art of Canada and the United States 1920-1940*, from October 18, 1989 to January 7, 1990.

Résumé

CHARLES COMFORT : *LAKE SUPERIOR VILLAGE* ET LA *GREAT LAKES EXHIBITION* DE 1938-39

Le premier prix de la *Great Lakes Exhibition* en 1938-39, fut attribué à un tableau de Charles Comfort *Lake Superior Village* (1937, Art Gallery of Ontario), vaste panorama d'un petit village de pêcheurs sur la rive nord du lac Supérieur. L'exposition, annoncée comme un événement à caractère régional, avait été organisée par une association locale d'artistes de la ville de Buffalo, la Patteran Society, avec le concours de l'Albright Gallery, afin de présenter les œuvres de peintres de la région des Grands Lacs, en 1938. L'intention des organisateurs était de démontrer qu'il existait une tendance artistique propre aux villes des Grands Lacs et distincte de celles des autres régions d'Amérique du Nord, et que chacune de ces villes possédait une forme d'expression artistique qui lui était particulière. De toutes les villes représentées à cette exposition, Toronto était la seule qui fut située au nord du 49^e parallèle. Le fait qu'une œuvre canadienne, d'esprit nationaliste, ait obtenu un tel honneur dans une exposition à thème régional, largement dominée par les Américains, mérite qu'on s'y arrête.

Nous étudions le tableau primé dans le contexte de l'œuvre de Comfort, de la peinture américaine des années trente et des nombreux contacts entre artistes canadiens et américains pendant l'Entre-deux-guerres. Les relations entre les deux pays furent particulièrement étroites durant cette période. Ainsi, de 1935 à 1941, la Fondation Carnegie pour la paix internationale, l'université Queen's, de Kingston, et l'université St. Lawrence, de Canton, New York, organisèrent conjointement quatre conférences sur les affaires canado-américaines. On y discuta des problèmes communs aux nations indépendantes séparées par une même frontière. La conférence de 1937 fut consacrée aux tendances culturelles.

En outre, plusieurs expositions circulèrent entre les deux pays pendant ces années, faisant, en quelque sorte, office d'ambassadeurs culturels. Parmi les plus remarquables expositions d'art américain présentées au Canada on peut noter : l'*Exposition internationale d'Art moderne de la collection de la Société anonyme*, en 1927, l'*Exposition d'œuvres contemporaines par des artistes des États-Unis* organisée par la Carnegie Corporation, qui circula au Canada sous les auspices de la Galerie nationale du Canada en 1934-35, et l'*Exposition des Grands Lacs : œuvres d'artistes de la région des Grands Lacs*, en 1938-39. La *Great Lakes Exhibition*, survenant à la fin de cette période, était particulièrement intéressante à cet égard parce qu'elle réunissait des œuvres de peintres canadiens et américains qui, ainsi rapprochées, invitaient à la comparaison. Elle permettait aux spectateurs de l'époque de découvrir la production artistique de chacun des deux pays. La plupart des peintres torontois exposés faisaient partie du *Canadian Group of Painters* dont le prestige s'étendait à la grandeur du pays. Toutefois, la fermeté du dessin et la stylisation qu'on pouvait remarquer dans

la plupart des œuvres exposées trahissaient l'influence du Groupe des Sept, tel, par exemple, le tableau de George Pepper *Tobacco Patch, St. Urbain* (Art Gallery of Ontario) daté de 1934. Ces œuvres n'étaient certainement pas représentatives de l'ensemble de la production artistique au Canada, quoique, dans le contexte de la *Great Lakes Exhibition*, elles fussent inévitablement perçues comme telles.

Les critiques américains louèrent l'authenticité de l'art canadien qui manifestait «du naturel, du raffinement et du discernement». C'est à l'unanimité que le jury, composé de trois américains, attribua le premier prix au tableau de Comfort *Lake Superior Village* pour sa vigueur remarquable, sa saisissante simplicité et son dessin dépouillé. Charles Comfort est représentatif des artistes canadiens bien au courant des activités artistiques de nos voisins du sud. Il avait étudié à la *Art Students League* de New-York, dans les années vingt, et continuait à s'intéresser vivement à la peinture américaine contemporaine. Le succès de *Lake Superior Village* auprès des spectateurs américains montre bien qu'il utilisait un langage artistique qui était commun à toute l'Amérique du Nord à cette époque. Il unissait une approche figurative à un style fortement inspiré de l'esthétique moderne, révélant sa connaissance du «précisionnisme», forme américaine du «réalisme cubiste» que Charles Sheeler, entre autres, avait d'abord utilisé dans son œuvre commerciale avant de l'appliquer à sa peinture. Cette influence moderniste, importée d'outre-frontière, se greffa sur une tige canadienne, car l'art de Comfort plongeait ses racines dans le Groupe des Sept.

Lake Superior Village s'inspire des tableaux du lac Supérieur que peignit Lawren S. Harris au milieu des années vingt, comme, par exemple, *Ice House, Coldwell, Lake Superior* (vers 1923, Art Gallery of Hamilton). Comfort se rendit à Rossport, petit village de pêcheurs sur la rive nord du lac Supérieur, non loin de Coldwell, avec une idée bien arrêtée sur le sens du mot «Supérieur». Comme Harris, il désirait transmettre «les secrets invisibles du Nord». Il se sentait obligé de prendre certaines libertés avec le paysage afin de le rendre conforme à sa conception du «Nord» canadien. En éliminant les îles boisées qu'on peut voir sur une photo qu'il avait prise ainsi que sur une ébauche qu'il avait esquissée pendant son séjour, et en transformant la scène en paysage nocturne, Comfort a pu exploiter son goût pour les contrastes dramatiques de tons et pour la précision du dessin.

Son style était devenu, en 1937, parfaitement adapté à l'expression du froid et de la solitude, particulièrement par sa façon de délimiter les formes par un contour âprement dessiné. Il révélait aussi la connaissance de l'art abstrait que Comfort avait acquise par la lecture d'ouvrages contemporains sur le sujet, surtout ceux de Sheldon Cheney, et par les exemples d'art moderne qu'il avait pu voir à l'exposition de la Société Anonyme, à l'Art Gallery of Toronto, en 1927. Les États-Unis lui avaient fait connaître l'esthétique moderne; l'art américain, particulièrement celui de Charles Sheeler et de Rockwell Kent, devait raffermir et accroître sa compréhension du mouvement moderne qu'il intégra à sa propre expression artistique.

Traduction : Élise Bonnette