

ARTHUR LISMER

Visionary Art Educator

Angela NAIRNE-GRIGOR

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002

472 p., 37 b/w illus., \$70.00



Arthur Lismer (1885-1969) was a man of many parts – an artist trained in the traditions of a late nineteenth-century English art-education system, an evangelist in the promotion of the work of the Group of Seven and nationalist Canadian art, and an innovator in the field of art education. As an art educator working primarily in Toronto and Montreal, Lismer inspired generations of art students and instructors. Lismer's contemporaries were interested in what he had to say, and this is supported by the detailed reports of his ideas in the many newspaper accounts of his cross-country lecture tours of 1932, 1935 and 1940, the first two on behalf of the National Gallery of Canada. He further elaborated upon his views in his numerous articles published between 1930 and 1950, as well as in lectures given during his travels in Europe and beyond. For Lismer, the history – or perhaps more accurately the development – of art, and the “release of child expression in the arts” were inextricably linked.¹

The connections between art and art education have become an essential part of any discussion of Lismer's work. This relationship is further established in catalogue essays accompanying his major exhibitions, from his first retrospective at the Art Gallery of Toronto in 1950 through to the 1985 exhibition of his later canvases, *Canadian Jungle*, curated by Dennis Reid.

Arthur Lismer: Visionary Art Educator by Angela Nairne Grigor focuses on his educational work and theories. It is a development of her Master's thesis on Lismer's child-centred art education – a system that combined the theories of Franz Cizek and of John Dewey – , and of her doctoral work on the concepts of the individual and the collective in art education. The book's extensive notes and comprehensive bibliography are sure to please the student researching Lismer's educational practices. That said, *Arthur Lismer: Visionary Art Educator* is for neither the scholar nor the casual reader. While it provides a good summation of Lismer's views on art education, it gives few new insights into the artist's work or methodology. Much of the information is familiar to those acquainted with the artist's career in education which began in 1915, when he was hired by George Reid to teach summer courses at Toronto's Ontario College of Art (OCA). Over a period of fifty years, Lismer would hold a variety of teaching and administrative positions at several institutions where he was able to express his developing views on the teaching of art. He was employed at the OCA, the Victoria School of Art (now the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design), the National Gallery of Canada, Columbia University, and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Beginning in 1936, he spent sixteen months travelling in South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, where he spread his ideas on art education even further. His evangelism was such that in a 1951 interview, Lismer estimated he had written some one hundred articles and given over one thousand lectures on art and artists (often in the Canadian context), as well as on art appreciation and instruction, and on art's place in society.²

What is surprising, and disappointing, about Grigor's book is that although it purports to be about Lismer as a visionary art educator, the term visionary is never clearly defined by the author and only one-third of its pages are dedicated to art education. In her introduction, Grigor states: "Any account of Arthur Lismer's life is essentially the story of his work." In most previously published works this link has been made only within the broader biographical context; the suggestion of an integrated consideration of both in one comprehensive volume is appealing.³ The book is divided into two parts: the

first biographical, "A Life in Art;" the other, "Arthur Lismer's Ideas on Art Education," on the maturation of his theories. Because the book emphasises the educational aspect of Lismer's career, his artistic accomplishments are not discussed. Each section is presented chronologically, beginning with Lismer's own education and training in Sheffield, and then through his many years' work at various Canadian art institutions as well as Columbia University. The presentation of the material, however, does not completely carry through on its promise. The consideration of Lismer's "vision" in the book's title is neither clarified nor elaborated on in the biographical section of the book. "A Life in Art" covers much of the same material previously presented by John McLeish, Marjorie Lismer Bridges, and Lois Darroch in their writings. In fact, his educational theories are not concretely defined until Chapter 10, "Lismer's Early Philosophy of Art Education 1916-19." The separation of the story of the life of the artist from that of his work into two parallel chronologies is particularly awkward on more than one occasion. For example, 192 pages separate the description of Lismer's life in Halifax (1916-19) from that of his role as Principal of the Victoria School of Art, his first (and seminal) experience in a position where he had a direct impact on planning art training. Discussion of Lismer's initial reactions to the school, his ideas to improve the building and its facilities, and to expose students and the general public to art through exhibitions, is included in the biographical section. The result would have been more effective had it been placed in the examination of his educational work, as the two are clearly linked. Similarly, in the description of Lismer's brief but tumultuous time at the National Gallery (1939-40), there is a 149-page gap between the eight and a half-page biographical section and the two and a half-page synopsis of his educational work in Ottawa. In other words, in order to obtain a comprehensive view of any particular period, the reader has the frustrating experience of riffling through different sections of the book.

Earlier publications have largely overlooked the impact of the Carnegie Corporation grants to Lismer and to the various institutions at which he was employed. These funds were often his principal source of financial support. The Carnegie, which sought to encourage art education on a global level, is mentioned frequently in Grigor's discussion: Lismer's meeting with its President, Frederick Keppel, in New York after Lismer's return from his first trip to South Africa; the reduction and termination of the operating grant that funded his work at the Art Gallery of Toronto; the funding of his second, and extended, South African trip. She also discusses the Carnegie's facilitation of his teaching

appointment to Columbia University and the corporation's pledge to support a national arts centre in Ottawa under Lismer if the National Gallery provided matching funds. When it became clear that a centre would not be established and Lismer's association with Harry McCurry, Director of the National Gallery, had seriously deteriorated, the Carnegie Corporation brokered the artist's move to Montreal. Lismer's relationship with the Carnegie was such that he felt at ease writing to Keppel to ask for his intervention.⁴ Grigor's references to Carnegie are frequent and widely scattered throughout both sections of the text; unfortunately this is not reflected in the index. More seriously, the author does not clearly relate the educational goals of the Carnegie, which are described in the many books by Frederick Keppel, to the art educational practice and theories of Lismer. The Carnegie's influence on education in general, and fine arts development in Canada in particular, make this omission a regrettably missed opportunity.

The period Lismer spent at the Teachers' College, Columbia University has also been sadly neglected in the past and is again in this book. Established in 1887 by philanthropist Grace Hoadley Dodge as the New York School for the Training of Teachers, it became the Teachers' College in 1892 and was affiliated with the University from 1898, not 1893 as indicated in Grigor's text. With such illustrious instructors as John Dewey, Arthur Wesley Dow, Edward L. Thorndike and Albert Munsell, it had been considered the leading institution for teacher training and art education in North America. Grigor discusses Lismer's arrival in 1939, stating: "When Lismer was hired by the Department of Fine Art and Industrial Art as a visiting professor, his joint roles as lecturer and independent assessor were specifically designed to revitalize the flagging department and provide a much needed critique" (p.309). Her short description in the biographical section of Lismer's unhappiness during this time reflects his state well. The section on his educational work provides a chronicle of the short period spent there, albeit with little analysis of how Lismer's experience at Columbia might have affected his own educational theories. In addition to giving courses in child art, Lismer had been asked to produce a comprehensive report on art education at the College, something that did not endear him to his New York colleagues. Grigor relies heavily on Lismer's report (some forty footnotes over the nine-page section) and perhaps the reader would have been better served if it had been included as an appendix. Furthermore, Grigor seems to portray Lismer as the potential saviour of the Teachers' College when she uses descriptive statements such as: he was "respected among American progressive educators,"

and as an outsider “was an ideal choice to present an unbiased view of the art department” (p.309). The discussion focuses on what Lismer found wrong with the Department, rather than investigating the reasons for its troubles and how Lismer’s “unbiased view” played out in the evaluation process. This would have been remedied if the full report, which is not otherwise easily accessible, had been included in the book.

The author’s heroicizing of Lismer permeates the text, and whether speaking of his problems at the Art Gallery of Toronto or the National Gallery, the point of view is consistently that of a man wronged; of the selfless pioneer and advocate of new ideas in art education having to fight for acceptance at every step. Certainly it is true that Lismer encouraged the continual development of his staff at great personal cost and that he was unwilling to modify his theories to suit administrators. At no time is Lismer’s personality considered as having contributed to the confrontational nature of his disputes. Grigor does mention that he “was not an easy task-master” (p.308), that he “was naturally impatient with those who saw him as overly idealistic or, worse, unrealistic” (p.348), and that his reputation was marred in Canada by reports “of his bluntness and intransigence” (p.130).

All parts of this book are affected by the numerous typographical errors. The name of fellow Sheffielder and Group of Seven member Fred Varley is misspelled on several occasions, as are those of his mentor Willis Eadon and the art historian Kenneth Clark. Mistakes in the spelling of the Blavatsky Institute and of Sherbrooke Street (the location of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts where Lismer worked for so many years) were also not caught by proofreading. As well, there are a number of factual errors. For example, the references to Lismer’s early experiences with the Heeley Art Club in Sheffield contain some inaccuracies. The Club was not founded in 1899 but in 1895, when Lismer was only ten years old, and he did not join it until 1902. He was not, therefore, a founding member (although his mentor Willis Eadon was) and it is thus unlikely that the Club’s first meeting would have taken place at the Lismer home. He became its Assistant Secretary in 1904 (not 1905), holding the position of Honorary Secretary through 1906.⁵ In another instance, William Morris (1834-96) is identified as a founding member of the short-lived Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (1848-53). Although Morris did indeed associate with the seven men who formed the group, his young age prevented him from being a member of the original Brotherhood. He was, however, a member of The Set when at Oxford (1853-55),⁶ a group which later came to be referred to as The Brotherhood, which may be the

reason for Grigor's confusion.⁷ Elsewhere, two different dates (1907 and 1877) are cited for John Ruskin's *The Elements of Drawing*. Because there are numerous editions of the critic's work, the original publication date of 1857 is used by most scholars. When Grigor cites original publication dates for Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* and *Modern Painters* these, too, are not quite accurate.⁸ While these points may seem trivial to the overall discussion of the book, they detract from its value as a scholarly work.

Grigor's book is unabashedly written from the perspective of furthering the image of Lismer as a progressive art educator who battled tirelessly to have his ideas accepted: ideas instrumental to the development of art education in his adopted country. Just as Fred Housser's *A Canadian Art Movement* (1926) authenticated the "mythistory" of the Group of Seven, Grigor's treatment of Lismer adds to the long-standing image of "rebel" educator. For those already acquainted with him, *Arthur Lismer: Visionary Art Educator* offers few new insights into Lismer's educational ideology, and the biographical section largely repeats what has already been presented by other authors. However, in spite of this and the awkward division of the text into two parts, the book has its place in the Lismer chronicle. The bibliography is impressive, and its nineteen pages are a testament to Grigor's immersion in the study of Lismer as an art educator. Furthermore, the inclusion of material from unpublished and difficult to obtain sources, such as his report on the Columbia University Teachers' College and Marjorie Lismer Bridges' reminiscences of her father, contributes to our understanding of Lismer's place in the development of art education in Canada. It has been a long wait to have Lismer's educational theories and methodology described within the pages of a single volume, despite its shortcomings.

ANITA GRANT
Ph.D. Candidate
Concordia University

Notes

1 Lismer quoted from an unfinished autobiography included by Marjorie Lismer BRIDGES in her book about life with her father *A Border of Beauty: Arthur Lismer's Pen and Pencil* (Toronto: Red Rock, 1977), 31.

-
- 2 Ken JOHNSTONE, "The Artist is a Rebel," *Liberty* 28 (May 1951): 52.
- 3 The first of these was John MCLEISH, *September Gale* (Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1955). McLeish was a former Lismer student and many subsequent writers refer to his book when discussing both Lismer's life and work, although some of the information provided is anecdotal. See also Lois DARROCH, *Bright Land: A Warm Look at Arthur Lismer* (Toronto: Merritt, 1981), the catalogue essays by Gemey KELLY in *Arthur Lismer: Paintings 1916-1919* (Halifax, N.S.: Dalhousie Art Gallery, Dalhousie University, 1982), Dennis REID in *Canadian Jungle: The Later Work of Arthur Lismer* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1985), and Michael TOOBY, *Our Home and Native Land: Sheffield's Canadian Artists* (Sheffield: Barbican Art Gallery, 1991).
- 4 There is an exchange of letters between Lismer and Keppel in which Lismer indicated he desperately wanted to leave the National Gallery. The letters are in the Carnegie Corporation Archives, Butler Library, Columbia University. I am indebted to Sandra Paikowsky for this information.
- 5 Grigor's sources date from 1991. The author of this review has subsequently provided a more accurate dating for this period of Lismer's life and education before he emigrated to Canada. See Anita GRANT, "Arthur Lismer in the Sheffield Context," M.A. Thesis, Concordia University, 1995, and Anita GRANT, "Lismer in Sheffield," *The Journal of Canadian Art History/Annales d'histoire de l'art canadien* XVI, no.1 (1996): 36-47.
- 6 The Set was founded by William Fulford, Richard Watson Dixon and Charles Faulkner, undergraduates from Birmingham and based at Pembroke College, Oxford. Fulford and Dixon were long-time friends of Edward Burne-Jones and all became devotees of the critic John Ruskin. A good description of The Set's activities appears in Fiona MACCARTHY, *William Morris* (London: Knopf, 1994), 59-65.
- 7 The reference originally appeared in Grigor's Master's thesis, "Arthur Lismer: A Critical Analysis of his Pedagogy in Relation to his Use of the Project Method in Child-Centered Art Education," Concordia University, 1982, 18.
- 8 The dates should be *Modern Painters*: 1843-1860; *The Stones of Venice*: 1851-1853.
- 9 This term was coined by Canadian historian George Rawlyk (1935-95).