

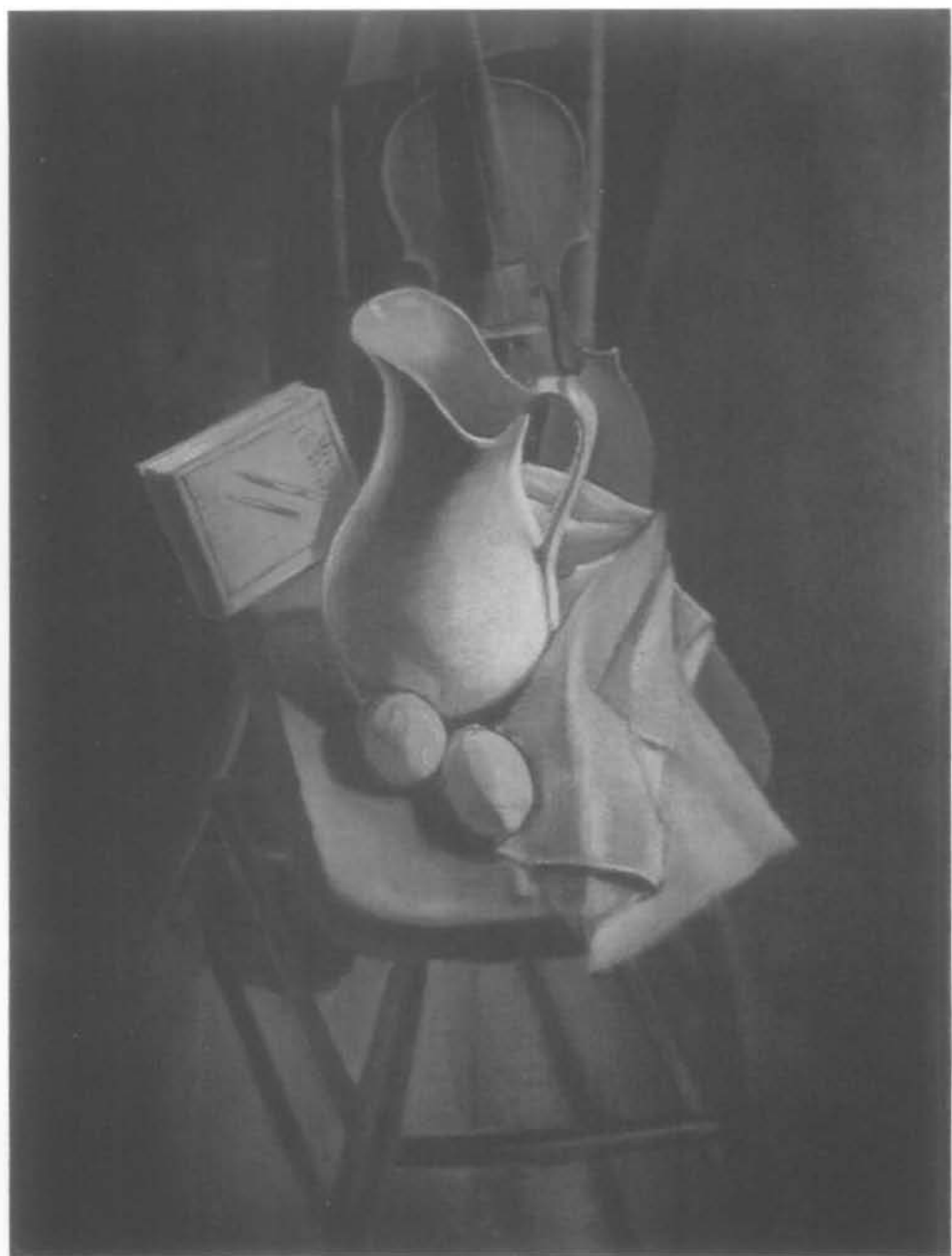


fig.3 Jack Humphrey, **The White Pitcher**, 1930, oil on canvas, 98 x 72 cm, Gift of The Second Beaverbrook Foundation. (Photo: Beaverbrook Art Gallery)

REGIONALIST OR CANADIAN 'MODERN' ?

Jack Humphrey's Claim to Fame

The work of New Brunswick artist Jack Humphrey (1901-1967) is generally understood today in the context of Atlantic regionalism. His considerable output, which included paintings of the Saint John harbour and the surrounding landscape as well as figure studies, is considered to be the expression of local subject matter, and relatively uninflected by national and international aesthetic concerns. Yet even a cursory examination of the critical discourse on Humphrey's work during his lifetime confirms his place in the history of modernism in Canada during the 1930s and 40s. Certainly Humphrey's own artistic intentions and ambitions, expressively revealed in his voluminous correspondence over the years, suggest such a reading of his *œuvre*. At the same time, such documentation raises compelling questions about the public perception and reception of his work.

The Jack Humphrey fonds at the National Gallery of Canada contain approximately five thousand letters written to and by the artist, spanning his career. His papers also include exhibition catalogues, scrapbooks, newspaper clippings, exhibition histories, reviews, biographical data, family photographs, and sales records. There is a cumulative effect to reading such a broad range of materials, and a narrative of a life lived inevitably emerges. Jack Humphrey's life was devoted full-time to art; with a few exceptions, he did not take paid employment during almost forty years of uninterrupted artmaking. That he was able to eke out a living from his art is an exceptional circumstance for a Canadian artist of any period.

During his career, from the late 1930s until his death in 1967, Humphrey corresponded with the power-brokers of the Canadian art world, including such important writers and critics of the time as Walter Abell, Graham McInnes, Paul Duval, J. Russell Harper and Robert Ayre; with senior staff at the National Gallery of Canada, the CBC, and the Canada Council; with exhibiting societies such as the Contemporary Arts Society, the Ontario Society of Artists, the Canadian Group of Painters and the Art Association of Montreal; and with dealers and collectors. Humphrey also maintained correspondence with other artists, and a few close artist-friends, notably Lawren P. Harris, Erica and Kjeld Deichmann and Lucy Jarvis in the Maritimes.

Working in Saint John, Humphrey was removed from the centres of Montreal and Toronto and he maintained this intense level of correspondence primarily as a means of managing the reception of his work. He expended an inordinate amount of time and energy defining the image that he wanted to present of himself as an artist,

forging a career in Canadian art, and seeking the fame that he felt was his due. In effect, Humphrey divided his time between his artmaking and the development and management of his career. The frustration, bitterness and disappointment expressed in his letters have more to do with his perceived failures at the latter than with the former. His struggles, which were lifelong, were with individuals, agencies and voices of authority who could establish him as one of Canada's preeminent figures; and he often felt that they diminished and under-appreciated him, or misrepresented his work.

A year before his death in 1967 on the occasion of his retrospective at the National Gallery of Canada, Humphrey consulted closely with J. Russell Harper, who was writing the essay for the exhibition catalogue. Harper had submitted a draft of his text to Humphrey, who suggested revisions in a six-page, single-spaced, typed letter. Justifying these extensive changes, Humphrey wrote to Harper: "Do you not agree that the important thing is to get as near the truth as possible and make a document of lasting value to counteract errors which have occurred and been repeated in various former articles?"¹ In other words, this was Humphrey's opportunity to set the record straight, and it was the *record* – the critical path between production and reception, between intention and recognition – that had preoccupied him all his life.

What was the "truth" that Humphrey, by then in his mid-60s, felt had been obscured, and what were the "errors which had occurred and been repeated"? Primary among them was the popular reception of his work as regionalist in nature and intent, and the interpretation of his subject matter of sombre children and deserted Saint John streets, as a constructed chronicle of life in the Maritimes informed by the tenets of social realism. In the same letter to Harper, Humphrey denied any overt interest in the social-realist agenda, arguing that his work had to do with formal and not political or social concerns: "I have not reacted at all to longshoremen and stevedores, but I have noted that Saint John is up 'till now a commercial city as contrasted with Fredericton, a university city. In the summer, years ago, I painted Saint John streets and waterfront mainly because I could find planes and color, something not easy to dig out of the summertime greenery in the country."²

In fact, Humphrey was self-actualized not as a regionalist or social realist painter, but as an artist associated with the advanced art of his time as he understood it: the modernism of the School of Paris, of Cézanne and Matisse. He continually referred to his work as "universal" and to himself as a "modern," using the word as a noun as was common at the time. Interestingly, as early as the 1930s, his work was critically received in exactly those terms, and in a national context.

Humphrey began his artistic career in Canada during the Depression and between two world wars. The collected writings of Humphrey's earliest supporter, the critic, theorist and teacher Walter Abell, in many ways best describe the two prevailing streams in Canadian art at the time: European-derived

modernism and a figure-based school generated from American models. The predominant American approaches were social realism, which was associated with the Art Students League in New York and derived from the example of the Mexican muralists, and so-called American Scene Painting or Regionalism, associated with Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood in the mid-West. The Americans also provided Canadian artists with a political ideal of art and democracy through the projects of the Works Progress Administration. A strong proponent of modernism and especially the work of Cézanne, Abell theorized about the meaning of art in numerous publications, including his own *Maritime Art* magazine. At the same time he devoted his energies to lecture tours, radio broadcasts and articles on the theme of "Art and Democracy." The shifting of attitudes of the time towards pure abstraction would also find articulation in Abell's writing.

Following the dominance of the Group of Seven in the 1920s, other critics of the day were eager to detect a modern movement in Canadian art, particularly one that was characterized by an art for art's sake approach to painting. The Montreal critic Robert Ayre wrote in 1940 that, "The trend today is away from landscape. There is a turning inwards, a narrowing to the personal and intimate, a searching of hearts and a searching after the secrets of painting."³ In a 1937 article with the evocative title "New Horizons in Canadian Art," Graham McInnes would also herald a period of formal innovation that expressed itself "above all, in a manner disciplined by the rigid requirements of the visual arts."⁴

It was within this critical climate that Humphrey launched his career in Canada. He had prepared himself by a lengthy period of study in the United States, first at the School of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts from 1921 to 1924 and then at the National Academy of Design in New York from 1924 to 1929. Both were conservative institutions. By most accounts, including Humphrey's own, the most significant influence on his work at the time was his teacher at the National Academy of Design, Charles Hawthorne, an accomplished figure painter. At his summer school in Cape Cod that Humphrey attended, Hawthorne would conduct his painting classes outdoors on the beach, often using local children as models. From Hawthorne, Humphrey learned how to paint, and throughout his life he would rely on these lessons for his conventional studio portraits, most often of children.

More critical to the development of Humphrey's early awareness of contemporary art and its issues were his visits to the numerous downtown galleries in New York City when he was a student. Catalogues and handlists in the Humphrey Papers suggest he saw numerous exhibitions of work by such artists as Arthur Dove, Gaston Lachaise and John Marin. Marin's watercolours of New York, informed by dynamic cubism and the futurists, would become influential in Humphrey's own efforts to interpret the cityscape of Saint John. There is no evidence that Humphrey's exposure to social realism in New York had any effect on his work at this time, in spite of two terms that he spent at the Art Students League – the veritable centre of



fig.1 Vaclav Vytlačil, **Still Life**, c.1920, charcoal on paper. (Photo: the author)



fig.2 Jack Humphrey, **Still-life with Oil Lamp**, 1930, charcoal on paper, 64 x 48 cm, coll. of the National Gallery of Canada. (Photo: courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada)

social-realist thought and production – which followed his studies with Hawthorne. That Humphrey's interests lay elsewhere is suggested by his decision to study with Vaclav Vytlačil, a modernist recently arrived in New York from Hans Hofmann's school in Munich. While Humphrey was a student at the ASL, Vytlačil gave a series of twelve public lectures on Cézanne and the post-cubist movement in Paris, introducing the discourse on the modern movement at the Art Students' League.

For Humphrey, however, Vytlačil was perceived as a critical, early source of information on current modernist thought (fig.1). Following his studies with Vytlačil, Humphrey took the "Grand Tour," traveling to London, France and Germany, winding up at Hans Hofmann's School in Munich. His contact with modern art in Europe was instructional. In Paris, he looked at work by Matisse and Gauguin, and saw an exhibition of paintings by Cézanne containing, as he wrote in letters home, "some beauties."⁵ He listed several titles up the margin of his letter, including *Boy in Red Vest*, a painting that may have influenced Humphrey's self-portraits from this period, which were quite advanced compared to his work of a few years earlier. In Munich, Humphrey registered at the Hofmann school where he remained for approximately three weeks, although there is strong evidence that Hofmann himself was not present at that time. Works from this period such as *Still Life with Oil Lamp* (fig.2), show Humphrey's experimentation with spatial distortion and the properties of two-dimensional planes, suggesting the cumulative influence of Vytlačil, Hofmann and his own European experience.

Other works of the time such as *The White Pitcher* (fig.3), a painting largely influenced by Cézanne's exploration of spatial dynamics, indicate that Humphrey was by now fully engaged with the modernist project. He submitted it to the 59th Annual Ontario Society of Artists exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto in March 1931. The work was, in effect, Humphrey's calling card; his first foray into the national scene in Canada following his return from Europe. The same month, Humphrey successfully submitted two other still life paintings to the Art Association of Montreal. H.O. McCurry, Assistant Director of the National Gallery of Canada, and Eric Brown, Director of the Gallery, selected one of these and *The White Pitcher* for inclusion the following year in the *Seventh Annual Exhibition of Canadian Art* at the National Gallery. Between 1930 and 1940, *The White Pitcher* would be shown another six times and was illustrated in the 1936 *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada*. The painting also garnered Humphrey his first mention in the national press. Reviewing the OSA exhibition in *The Canadian Forum*, Jehanne Bietry Salinger noted that: "There was a still life by Jack Humphrey of Saint John, New Brunswick which I should call the finest contribution to the exhibition. It is called *White Pitcher* and has qualities which are reminiscent of Cézanne's extreme sensibility."⁶

Humphrey's ambitions regarding modernism are exemplified by his decision to seek out the advice of Roger Fry, the preeminent figure associated with modernist thought internationally. Humphrey asked his cousin Ruth, who was in England, to

call on Fry in London with examples of his work for critique and review. In a letter to Humphrey, Ruth described her brief visit with Fry and reported his encouraging response to Humphrey's work:

to begin with, he said "he has more in him than he knows himself"... "Pictures show a fine sense of composition, and I like the frankness of statement." He liked best the Boy's Head, the Mask and Plant and the blocky still life (bottles, jug, books, etc) which you call Things on a Table. Of the Boy's Head, he said that you had found colour in the shadows and generally had "gone further," i.e. had "developed the statements more fully" than in some of the others.⁷

In general, Ruth believed Fry's basic advice was that Humphrey should push things further and she commented that, "I felt that his attitude was: Here is good work, able to stand up to a penetrating criticism."

Over the next few years Humphrey received critical attention in Toronto and Montreal in articles and reviews, which now not only singled out individual works for praise but validated Humphrey as a 'modern' in Canada. Significant among these was an article in *The Canadian Forum* written by Walter Abell in June 1936. Titled simply "Jack Humphrey – Painter" and almost three pages long, the article located Humphrey within the international art scene, describing him as a "creative modern." Abell recalls his first encounter with Humphrey's work, and notes that:

even for me, after early studies in Philadelphia within range of the hundred Renoirs, the hundred Cézannes, and other modern works of the Barnes Foundation, and after two years subsequently spent in Paris, the first impact was not without its shock and questioning. Something was here of the fauves – a brusque indifference to amenities, a bluntness that one was tempted to think deliberate and that struck one like a dash of salt water in the face.⁸

The next year, in July 1937, Abell put Humphrey's name before the American reader, in an article entitled "Some Canadian Moderns" for the *Magazine of Art*.⁹ Years later in a 1954 article in *Canadian Art* entitled "East is West – Thoughts on the Unity and Meaning of Contemporary Art," Abell would argue that Jack Humphrey "while dealing with local, specific subject matter (regionalism) through his treatment of it transcends it – to be a truly modern artist."¹⁰ In a review of a group exhibition at the Montreal Arts Club, published in *The Gazette* in February 1937, Robert Ayre described Humphrey as an artist "whose integrity gives authority, who works from the inside. In the two still lifes in this exhibition his colour is distinguished and his design sophisticated, though never tricky. One of them is splintered almost to Cubism but it holds fast to reality. An admirable painter, Humphrey should be far better known."¹¹ In 1938 Graham McInnes devoted the opening three paragraphs of his weekly column in *Saturday Night* to Humphrey's show of watercolours at Toronto's Picture Loan Society, calling his work "universal" and citing Humphrey as one of the finest painters in the Dominion. McInnes describes Humphrey's subject matter – the city of Saint John:

its rows of dingy clapboard houses perched on the rocky hillside...its drab glamour...its faded glory. But I do not want to stress Humphrey's subject matter; his constant exploration of it is merely an indication that he has found something to bite on in his search for full formal realization. For in the last analysis, it is form – achieved through design – that Humphrey seeks. This is rare work; I wish I could write of it at greater length.¹²

In the late 1930s Humphrey's first important sale came with the acquisition of a self-portrait, entitled *Draped Head* by Hart House at the University of Toronto. Painted in 1931 it was not exhibited until Humphrey included it in a solo exhibition in Saint John in 1934, and then in the Canadian Group of Painters exhibition in 1937, which led to the Hart House purchase. The painting was reproduced in the catalogue and it was also selected for *A Century of Canadian Art* at the Tate Gallery, London in 1939. Years later, in 1952, Humphrey described the issues that had absorbed him during the production of this work:

'Draped Head' was painted near the start of my career as a practicing artist, after I had newly returned from nine months in Europe in the early 1930s. It is quite obvious that 'Draped Head' is not a portrait. Instead it is a symbol and a generality, but specific in its language of volume and paint. It may seem surprising that the painter made use of his own head for this aspiration.

Two other heads, more portrait-like, had preceded it and were discarded.¹³

In February 1938, John Lyman wrote an article occasioned by that season's Canadian Group of Painters exhibition. Less an exhibition review and more a state of the union, the article afforded Lyman the opportunity to address the issues of modernism, nationalism, and the Group. "The real Canadian scene," he averred, "is in the consciousness of Canadian painters, whatever the object of their thought. It is what they make it and there is no other way of finding out what it is."¹⁴ The reproduction of *Draped Head* at the head of Lyman's article confers on it the exemplary status of advanced art in Canada at the time (fig.4). The following year Humphrey was invited to join the Contemporary Arts Society, founded to promote, as Lyman articulated it, "living modern art" in Canada.

In 1933 Humphrey visited Vancouver briefly and produced a number of unusual decorative paintings, such as *Night* (fig.5), which he would exhibit in 1939 with the Canadian Group of Painters.¹⁵ Among the possible influences on the Vancouver works are William Zorach, an artist Humphrey mentioned favourably in his correspondence and who had taught at the Art Students league in 1929 when Humphrey was there. In an expressionist work entitled *Hallowe'en* (fig.6), done several years later around 1940, Humphrey continued his experiments with the figure, radically compressing and tilting the pictorial space, distorting two small figures in the foreground. While it is a street scene, the work is certainly difficult to situate as regionalist. One thinks of the German artists Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Max Beckman, and it is worth noting that Humphrey owned a copy of the 1938 book *Modern German Art* with thirty-two photogravure plates of paintings by Grosz, Kokoschka, Dix, and other twentieth-century German artists.



Draped Head, by Jack Humphrey, Canadian Group Exhibition.

ART

By John Lyman

THE CANADIAN GROUP

It was a cheerful sign of the growing recognition of modern art that, after a lapse of several years, the Art Association again accorded its hospitality last month to the annual exhibition of the Canadian Group of Painters. The gallery, however, which was put at its disposal was too small to accommodate all the work originally presented in Toronto, and it was obliged to reduce it by approximately half, involving the elimination of some contributions.

The remainder was a mixed show, of uneven quality and diverse character, ranging from the "Canadian scene" to international abstraction, from simple recording to personal expression, from rigidity and dry definition to freely suggestion. It is, therefore, impossible to generalize about it without doing injustice in particular. It was not all essentially modern, though a good many people believe bright colour and heavy emphasis confer modernism. Modernism resides in neither contemporary appearance nor contemporary theme, but rather in contemporary thought. That is a larger and less easy word. Were there not people who think that to be modern in one's own time is abnormal, it would not even exist and we could talk of only good and bad painting.

That this show did, however, strike a different note from that of the recent Academy exhibition, though the two touched at points, must have been apparent to the most casual observer. There was little recourse to an appeal outside the medium. A man stood or fell by whether he had or had not something of his own to say. *Savoir faire* was not a requirement.

The difference was reflected, too, in the attitude of the public, both critics and exhibitors. Outside a comfortable number of people who had some sensitive responses, there were those whose senses transmit only habitual stimuli and didn't know what they were looking at, those who found every sign of character "too . . ." as well as those who attributed it to disrespect, perversity, bad eyesight or a loose screw. And, by the way, it seems to be a law of nature that the people who are the most unsympathetic to what they do not understand are the most ruffled when its defenders are half as outspoken.

One thing is evident in this show was that the lot of the subject was being held. That is perhaps one reason why one heard said that it was not particularly Canadian. I do not think we need worry over that. Canadianism is the way (or racial ways) of thinking and feeling of Canadians, and much we do not estimate with a will of attention. The popular notion is that the subject all but makes the picture, and this prejudice was further entrenched in the early days of the Group by their apologists, who greatly exaggerated the importance of the eternal element. What

The Montrealer with Canadian Painting Show

Feb. 1, 1938

fig.4 John Lyman, *The Montrealer*, 1 February 1938 with reproduction of *Draped Head*. (Photo: the author)



fig. 5 Jack Humphrey, **Night**, 1933, New Brunswick Museum. (Photo: the author)

In 1941, Humphrey attended the Kingston Conference. The highly conservative choice of American Scene painter Thomas Hart Benton as the keynote speaker underlined the climate for regionalism generated by the conference. Humphrey told Russell Harper that, “the Kingston conference produced little that was tangible except some further information on glazing and old-master techniques. I didn’t discuss much, if any, only listened to the programmed speakers.”¹⁶ Humphrey recognized the groundswell of interest in art and democracy in Canada, and although he produced a number of works dealing with groups of figures in the 1940s, he never avowed an interest in regional realism. Nevertheless, Humphrey’s interest in the figure, including studies of dockworkers, would be increasingly seen in a regionalist light, especially in the Saint John popular press. Even with his more traditional portraits of young children, such as *Joanne*, Humphrey insisted that there was a universal, rather than a regional appeal. He wrote to Harper: “In describing the regional portraits as no more regional than those of Rembrandt, I want to effect a proper appreciation of them by the upstart curators who were born yesterday with prejudices instead of a silver spoon.”¹⁷

Interestingly, *Joanne* was one of two works by Humphrey selected by the National Gallery for the exhibition *Fifty Years of Painting in Canada* at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1949. The local papers recognized the potential popular appeal of this work. The Boston *Sunday Post* reproduced it with the cut line: “Local flavor in the exhibition of Canadian art is found in this oil portrait Joanne painted by Jack Humphrey.”¹⁸ (fig.7) In an article in the Boston *Daily Globe*, entitled “Canada Comes to Boston,” *Joanne* was reproduced again with the caption “New Brunswick Lassie in pigtails was painted by the Saint John artist Jack Weldon Humphrey. Her name is Joanne and she obviously scrubbed her face clean for her portrait shown in the Canadian painting show at the Boston Art Museum.”¹⁹ In spite of this extreme parochialism, Humphrey registered pleasure at the attention that the work received in an international context. He wrote to H.O. McCurry: “It was really quite a lift to receive such favourable attention in the Boston Post and the Boston Globe for the portrait ‘Joanne.’ It was the best thing of its kind for quite some time.”²⁰

Throughout the 1950s and 60s, Humphrey ventured into abstraction, fueled by regular trips to New York to look at art and a year of painting in Paris in 1953. Nevertheless, he was still concerned with the perceived misunderstanding of his work as regionalist. He wrote to Robert Ayre in 1957: “More and more in order to obtain 1st rate acceptance painters must be well aware of the whole art world, must show their intimate understanding of it and proceed from that basis. If they do not they are likely to be...neglected, and placed in regional categories. To a devoted painter such categories are not tolerable.”²¹ In the exhibition prepared for Expo ‘67 entitled *Painting in Canada*, Humphrey was represented by one of his late-career, non-representational paintings. In his text for the accompanying publication, Barry Lord



fig. 6 Jack Humphrey, **Hallowe'en**, c.1940, pastel on paper, 57 x 47 cm, coll. of the National Gallery of Canada. (Photo: courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada)

Hub Locale of First Canadian Art Exhibit in U.S.

More Than 100 Oil and Water Color Paintings to Be Shown in Fine Arts' Special Galleries

BY EMMETT MANNING

Recent is looking like the first Canadian exhibit in the U.S. has just been informed the exhibition class has voted for "the girl with the painted lips."

Our upstairs neighbors—Canada—has played the host to the heads of the first exhibition of modern Canadian paintings ever held in the United States.

From next Thursday through September 21st, at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, over 100 oil and water color paintings — the cream of Canadian artwork — will fill seven rooms, under the guidance of the "Fifty Years of Canadian Painting."

It's going to be a gala event, housed in a fine old building with a superb view of the harbor, for guests from all over the world.

The Londoner H. M. W. Brown, Canadian ambassador to the United States, will arrive from Washington to open the exhibition.

"It's a matter of justification to us that the first Canadian exhibition in the United States with a claim to represent the whole of Canada," says the ambassador.

"The relations with the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston have been considerably closer than with most American galleries."

Best of the Matins

The event, though for an international scale, is the first time in the U.S. for a gallery visit and suggesting they long their family album, which the Canadian government has lost.

They just a few hundred each through their own collection and what the most extensive of the country of people collecting from Montreal's last recent district.

The result is a comprehensive and complete assembly of the finest modern art in Canada, gathered over the past 40 years. They are among the finest leadership of their artists in the U.S. and telling the world that there is a "look" at it.



Local flavor in the exhibition of Canadian art is found in this oil portrait, "Joanne," painted by Jack Humphrey of St. John, R. I. Humphrey was a student in the Fine Arts of Fine Arts, where the exhibition will be held, beginning this Thursday.

The show is free-of-charge, and not of significance to artists alone.

There are an estimated million of people of French-Canadian stock in New England. Now that 400,000 of Canadian exhibition, who were either born in Canada or whose parents were, make around Greater Boston. Putting it another way, one out of every five Bay Staters has ties with our neighbor.

So here's an ideal exhibition for those who haven't been able to see the "look" at it.

Imagine a "look" at the "look" at it.

With a well known and an art, Canada's leading artists have gathered the largest body of work in the history of their good names on canvas. All have lived in Canada and all of it is Canadian.

During the summer, Jacques Villon, Pierre Bonnard, Pablo Picasso, Victor Brauner, and others, have all the "look" at it. They are the "look" at it. They are the "look" at it. They are the "look" at it.

There'll be no added angle in the exhibition. Canadian artists have painted in a variety of styles, and when they have painted some of the most important works of the century, they have painted in the style of the century. The "look" at it. They are the "look" at it. They are the "look" at it.

Character studies of rugged French-Canadian stock are not in the exhibition. They are the "look" at it. They are the "look" at it. They are the "look" at it.

How does the first Canadian art show in the U.S. look? It's a look at the "look" at it. They are the "look" at it. They are the "look" at it.

A period from 1820 to the present is covered in the exhibition. During this time the role of women in Canada has been gathering momentum.

"Art in Canada since 1820," says H. M. W. Brown, "has been a story of the struggle for the right to be heard. It has been a story of the struggle for the right to be heard. It has been a story of the struggle for the right to be heard."

Before then, artists had merely watched the work of the artists of the world. They are the "look" at it. They are the "look" at it. They are the "look" at it.

National Feeling

The more immediate setting for the show is the art of the 19th century. The exhibition is a story of the struggle for the right to be heard. It has been a story of the struggle for the right to be heard. It has been a story of the struggle for the right to be heard.

It is a story of the struggle for the right to be heard. It has been a story of the struggle for the right to be heard. It has been a story of the struggle for the right to be heard.

They are the "look" at it. They are the "look" at it. They are the "look" at it.

Joanne and James William Morrison. Paris showed, both of whom abstracted the realistic tradition and turned to the direction of a more realistic movement.

As Director McCarty explains in his introduction to the exhibition catalog, "... the Group of Seven artists had the general influence of a variety of styles, and of the early 20th century. ... but national feeling, and nationalism, was their main attraction for Canada. They found all sorts of foreign elements and transformed them into a single new style, a style characterized by the strong, sweeping patterns of line and color and light."

In the original Group of Seven artists, the first of the "look" at it. They are the "look" at it. They are the "look" at it.

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Boston Sunday Post 10/7/49

fig.7 Sunday Post (Boston), 10 July 1949 with reproduction of Joanne. (Photo: the author)

acknowledged Humphrey as an advanced artist, suggesting that it was only through him that abstract expression made an appearance in Canada outside Toronto and Montreal. Yet in his summary analysis of Humphrey's career, Lord states that while his "cubist lessons were immediately apparent in some brilliant still-lives and self portraits of the early 1930s, more typical of his production of the next two decades were the conventional portraits and landscapes which associated him with the then fashionable regionalist ideas about painting and its proper subject matters."²²

In spite of the accumulated critical and curatorial assessments of Humphrey as a modernist, throughout his life there was a tendency, especially in the popular press, to describe him as a chronicler of the Depression, a sensitive interpreter of Saint John, and the "Dean of Maritime Realism." As a painter of his time and of his place, Humphrey did in fact produce an important body of regional scenes that ensured steady sales and made him popular during his lifetime. Since his death, his best-known works have remained his portraits of children and views of the Saint John harbour, effectively absorbed into the canon of regional realism.

In a draft of a letter to Robert Ayre, versions of which he also sent to Paul Duval and Barry Lord, Humphrey clearly demonstrated his point of view on the regionalist label, which he found so limiting, and revealed his great fear of being perceived as provincial. In another of his efforts to set the record straight, he wrote:

When I was doing the portraits I thought I was doing something universal, neither national nor regional, and "universal" is a word which Graham McInnes long ago applied to my watercolours. Evidently it is considered in some of Ontario that anything painted in Ontario, such as Algonquin Park or in the quaint villages of Quebec is national but anything painted in New Brunswick must be regional! The next step down from "regional" is "parochial" – the village painter. A problem arises here: Suppose I had my easel on the New Brunswick side of the New Brunswick-Quebec border and painted a village or some trees and clouds located in Quebec, i.e. the trees anyway. Which would I be, a national or a regional painter; and if the clouds crossed the New Brunswick border would they then become regional? I think the Group of Seven for all their past noise, were regional....²³

GEMEY KELLY

Director, Owens Art Gallery
Mount Allison University

Notes

This paper presents research undertaken during a Fellowship at the National Gallery of Canada, which houses the Jack Humphrey fonds.

- 1 Jack Humphrey to J. Russell Harper, 6 June 1966, file copy, National Gallery of Canada Archives, Jack Humphrey fonds (NGC, JH fonds). Other important archival information may be found at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton and the New Brunswick Museum, Saint John.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Robert AYRE, "Art of Our Day in Canada," *Saturday Night* (28 Dec. 1940): 25.
- 4 Graham MCINNES, "New Horizons in Canadian Art," *New Frontier* (June 1937): 19, 20.
- 5 Humphrey to Charles Percy Humphrey and Nellie Weldon Humphrey, 6 June 1930, NGC, JH fonds.
- 6 Jehanne Bietry SALINGER, "One More Exhibition," *The Canadian Forum* (April 1931): 261-62.
- 7 Ruth Humphrey to Jack Humphrey, 13 July [1933], NGC, JH fonds.
- 8 Walter ABELL, "Jack Humphrey – Painter," *The Canadian Forum* (June 1936): 16-18.
- 9 ABELL, "Some Canadian Moderns," *Magazine of Art* 30, no.7 (July 1937): 422-27.
- 10 ABELL, "East is West – Thoughts on the Unity and Meaning of Contemporary Art," *Canadian Art* 11, no.2 (Winter 1954): 44-51, 73.
- 11 AYRE, "Arts Club Exhibition by Eleven Painters," *The Gazette* (Montreal), 3 Feb. 1937.
- 12 Graham MCINNES, "World of Art," *Saturday Night* (5 Feb. 1938): 7.
- 13 Jack Humphrey's notes for the Hart House catalogue, January 1952, NGC, JH fonds.
- 14 John LYMAN, "Art," *The Montrealer*, 1 Feb. 1938, 18.
- 15 Charles C. HILL, "Jack Humphrey: Growth and Retrenchment: The Early Years," an unpublished talk given at the National Gallery of Canada, provides a compelling look at the importance of the Vancouver period in Humphrey's work.
- 16 Humphrey to J. Russell Harper, 6 June 1966, file copy, NGC, JH fonds.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 *Sunday Post* (Boston), 10 July 1949.
- 19 *Daily Globe* (Boston), 16 July 1949.
- 20 Humphrey to H.O. McCurry, 8 Sept. 1949, file copy, NGC, JH fonds.
- 21 Humphrey to Ayre, 24 Sept. 1957, Ayre Correspondence, NGC, JH fonds.
- 22 Barry LORD, *Painting in Canada* (Montreal: Canadian Government Pavilion, Expo 67, 1967), unpaginated. According to Lord, it was only after his return from France in 1952 that Humphrey created his so-called expressive works.
- 23 Humphrey to Ayre, undated draft, NGC, JH fonds.

«MODERNE» RÉGIONALISTE OU CANADIEN ?

Le titre de gloire de Jack Humphrey

L'œuvre de l'artiste néo-brunswickois Jack Humphrey (1901-1967) se comprend généralement aujourd'hui dans le contexte du régionalisme atlantique. Cependant, ses nombreuses lettres, réunies dans le fonds Jack Humphrey du Musée des beaux-arts du Canada, confirment son désir d'être reconnu comme un peintre «moderne». De Saint John, où il travaillait, Humphrey a entretenu une correspondance suivie avec des écrivains et des critiques, des sociétés exposantes, des marchands d'art et des collectionneurs ainsi qu'avec d'autres artistes dans le but de développer et de gérer sa carrière. Ses lettres aux personnes influentes qui pouvaient le mettre au rang des personnalités canadiennes éminentes laissent supposer qu'il se sentait diminué ou sous-estimé ou que son œuvre était présentée sous un faux jour.

Un de ses principaux sujets d'inquiétude était de voir sa peinture considérée comme régionaliste, et ses tableaux faussement présentés comme une chronique de la vie dans les Maritimes construite selon les dogmes du réalisme social. Il s'associait plutôt lui-même à l'avant-garde de son temps tel qu'il le comprenait : le modernisme de l'École de Paris, de Cézanne et Matisse. Il parlait constamment de son œuvre comme étant «universelle» et se qualifiait lui-même de «moderne», employant ce mot comme substantif, comme cela se faisait couramment à l'époque. Son association au mouvement moderne canadien a commencé par de longues études à Boston et New York. Des expositions d'œuvres modernistes internationales à New York ont exercé une grande influence sur sa propre interprétation du panorama urbain de Saint John, N.B. Son stage à la Art Student's League avec Václav Vytláčil l'ont conduit à faire un voyage en Europe et à suivre des cours à l'école d'art de Hans Hofmann à Munich. De retour au Canada, Humphrey a, par la suite, été encouragé par l'éminent critique moderniste Roger Fry, qui avait connu son œuvre grâce au cousin de Humphrey à Londres.

Les critiques d'art de Toronto et de Montréal se sont intéressés à Humphrey. Leurs articles ne louaient pas seulement les œuvres, mais ils confirmaient Humphrey comme un «moderne» au Canada. Un article significatif est celui que Walter Abell a signé dans *The Canadian Forum* en 1936. L'année suivante, Abell présentait Humphrey aux lecteurs américains dans un article de *Magazine of Art* intitulé «Some Canadian Moderns». En 1954, un article par Abell dans *Canadian Art* soutenait que Humphrey avait transcendé le régionalisme «pour devenir un véritable artiste moderne». Des articles des années trente par Robert Ayre et John

Lyman à Montréal et par Graham McInnes à Toronto soulignent également son langage visuel moderniste. L'autoportrait de Humphrey, *Draped Head*, peint en 1931, pouvait être perçu comme un exemple significatif de l'avant-garde au Canada.

Humphrey reconnaissait le mouvement d'opinion en faveur de l'art et de la démocratie au Canada et, bien qu'il ait peint, dans les années 1940, un certain nombre de toiles représentant des groupes de figures, il n'a jamais manifesté d'intérêt pour le réalisme régional. Même dans le cas de ses portraits plus traditionnels de jeunes enfants, tel *Joanne*, Humphrey soutenait que leur attrait était plus universel que régional.

Durant les années 1950 et 1960, Humphrey s'aventura dans l'abstraction, stimulé par ses fréquentes visites dans les galeries et musées de New York et une année à Paris en 1953. Malgré tout, il s'inquiétait toujours de ce qu'il percevait comme une fausse présentation de son œuvre comme régionaliste. Dans une lettre à Robert Ayre, en 1957, il se plaint de ce malentendu à propos de son œuvre : «Pour un peintre attaché à son art, de telles catégories sont intolérables.» Même dans son catalogue pour l'exposition d'Expo 67 *La peinture au Canada*, qui comprenait une des dernières toiles non représentatives de Humphrey, Barry Lord continuait à l'associer à des «idées régionalistes à la mode sur la peinture et les sujets qui lui sont propres». Assurément, en tant que peintre de son temps et de son lieu, Humphrey a, de fait, produit un nombre important de scènes régionales qui lui assuraient des ventes régulières et l'ont rendu populaire de son vivant. Et, après sa mort, ses œuvres les plus connues de portraits d'enfants et de vues du port de Saint John ont été effectivement intégrées au canon du réalisme régional.

Néanmoins, dans le brouillon d'une lettre non datée à Robert Ayre ainsi qu'à Paul Duval et Barry Lord, il cherche encore à tirer les choses au clair :

Quand je faisais les portraits, je pensais faire quelque chose d'universel, et non pas national ou régional, et «universel» est un qualificatif que Graham McInnes a appliqué à mes aquarelles il y a longtemps. Évidemment on pense dans certaines parties de l'Ontario que tout ce qui est peint en Ontario, comme le parc Algonquin, ou dans de charmants villages du Québec est national, mais que tout ce qui est peint au Nouveau-Brunswick est forcément régional ! De là à dire «provincial» il n'y a qu'un pas – le peintre de village. Cela pose un problème : supposons que j'installe mon chevalet du côté néo-brunswickois de la frontière entre le Nouveau-Brunswick et le Québec et que je peigne un village, ou quelques arbres et des nuages situés au Québec, du moins les arbres. Est-ce que je serais un peintre national ou régional ; et si les nuages traversaient la frontière, est-ce qu'ils deviendraient alors régionaux ? Je crois que le Groupe des Sept, malgré tout le bruit qu'on a fait autour d'eux, étaient régionaux....

Traduction : Élise Bonnette