



**THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA**  
**Ideas Art Architecture**

Douglas ORD

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003

464p., illus., \$49.95

Douglas Ord's *The National Gallery of Canada: Ideas Art Architecture* reads more like an extended polemic than "the first thorough analysis of the history of the National Gallery of Canada." At book's end, the reader feels as though she has been taken on an adventure tour of Canadian art and cultural politics and left with little more than one author's interpretation of a series of discrete events, documents and references bound together by their connection to the National Gallery. However the book gives no sense of the institution's history. I should state from the outset that I also work on the Gallery and, as Ord notes, my work "takes a fundamentally different approach" from his. In particular, my interest

in the Gallery's exhibitionary practices has led me to focus primarily on its collections and the narratives conveyed by the permanent and temporary displays of art within the larger context of a national institution. Ord, on the other hand, seeks to analyse the Gallery as a crucible for the varying discourses of nationhood and metaphysics that have occurred within the Canadian art world of the twentieth century. This is an ambitious project that in some ways succeeds in questioning the place of the National Gallery in the formation of a nation – particularly evident in the inability of most federal governments to support the Gallery in any material way – but ultimately his book fails to explore in any depth either the actual workings of the National Gallery as an art institution, or its complicated and often fraught history.

For readers with some knowledge of the Gallery's history, Ord's conjectures and identification of the many "unintended ironies" and paradoxes that attach to the Gallery are by turn provocative, amusing, and frustratingly superficial. For the reader unfamiliar with the Gallery, very few of the 397 pages of text clearly map out the Gallery's development from depository of the Royal Canadian Academy's diploma works in 1880 to its present monumental stature. Instead, Ord addresses what is arguably the most fascinating aspect of the NGC's history: its close association in the first half of the twentieth century with Christian Science. He constructs an elaborate theoretical model wherein the triadic relationship of art, nation and metaphysics that is at the core of first Director Eric Brown's world-view becomes the framework through which the subsequent history of the Gallery is read. In order to make this theoretical model work, Ord spends much of his book exploring the transformation of conceptions of spirit from its earliest religious connotations in Christian Science and Theosophy to its more secular iterations from the 1950s onward. Of particular relevance to the author is the concept of "national spirit" which, because the Gallery's formative moment occurred under the leadership of a Christian Scientist, is almost always given a metaphysical interpretation. In some chapters, the lengths gone to attach a religious affiliation to various figures – e.g. the aesthetic evangelism of Alan Jarvis, Vincent Massey's imperial Anglicanism, Jean Sutherland Boggs's parallels with Christian philosopher George Grant – do not produce any kind of clarification of the particular contributions of the figure under consideration. Rather, they function more to assert the legitimacy of Ord's model, which had been set up from the beginning, rather than established as a pattern or leitmotif that emerges throughout the course of the Gallery's existence.

The lack of clarity in Ord's narrative is surprising given the evident depth and breadth of his research. His familiarity with the Gallery's own archives in particular is revealed in almost every paragraph. With an enviable level of detail, he has mined the personal files of each director as well as the frustratingly incomplete minutes produced by the National Museums Corporation which governed the National Gallery between 1968 and 1990. What is irritating about

Ord's book is not the lack of research, nor the seriousness of the endeavour, but the way in which the information obtained has been used to support an argument that seems intended to demonstrate the author's cleverness rather than contributing to our understanding of the complex history of the National Gallery of Canada. There is a certain old-fashioned postmodernism at work here: a rhetorical style that seeks to privilege the author's creativity in constructing a theoretical framework within which all material is made to "make sense" rather than building an argument from the material events and discourses that he has so meticulously unearthed from the archive.

There is an important rhetorical consequence in this methodology: quotations are taken from texts with little discussion of how these particular statements/excerpts connect to the text as a whole, and there is little differentiation made between the numerous texts that have been selected. The discussion of Eric Brown is an important case in point. Brown's frequent essays in the *Christian Science Monitor*, unpublished lectures and writings, and statements made in the National Gallery's Annual Reports are all given equal weight and viewed as having similar rhetorical functions. The parallels that Ord pulls out between these sources are interesting, but their analytical power is severely diminished by the fact that he ignores or refuses to situate the text within its broader contexts of production and reception. Different audiences require different rhetorical strategies: the presentation of a Director's account of his activities to Gallery stakeholders differs in argument as well as tone from the essays of a fellow believer published in a general audience magazine. As a result, Ord's reading of the texts is often too literal.

Eric Brown is an important example because this could have been the occasion for an in-depth and rigorous analysis of the role of Christian Science in Canadian art circles specifically at the beginning of the twentieth century. There is much discussion in the literature on Canadian art of the role of Theosophy, practiced most famously by Lawren Harris but adopted by a number of other artists in the first decades of the twentieth century. Ord underlines some interesting parallels between the two faiths and their manipulation by Brown and Harris to point to the importance of the development of a national spirit in art. Despite such parallels, and despite the adherence to Christian Science by many figures associated with the National Gallery (Brown, his successor Harry McCurry, artists Wyly Grier and J.E.H. MacDonald, patrons and Directors of the Board of Trustees such as Harry Southam), this aspect of early twentieth-century Canadian cultural life has been virtually ignored by scholars. Ord again, however, does himself a disservice by selecting small fragments of Brown's writings and seeking analogues in the writing of Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy. There is seemingly little justification for the sources chosen except that they closely cross-reference one another. In addition, although Ord ponders the irony that one of the great champions of

Canadian art should rely on the writings of an American (and a woman at that), he does not look at the broader context of the practice of Christian Science in Canada. How did Mrs. Eddy's writings come into Canada? How were Christian Science beliefs adapted to the Canadian context? Why were so many people in the field of arts and business practicing Christian Scientists and why did they pledge their allegiance to the fledgling National Gallery?

Another flaw in Ord's account of the National Gallery is his almost exclusive focus on the figures of the directors. Although the director of any major museum plays a fundamental role in developing a broad vision for the institution, this role is by necessity mediated by the working relationships with curators, education and public relations departments, and boards of trustees. With rare exceptions, *The National Gallery of Canada: Ideas Art Architecture* is the story of individuals, most of them directors, whose personal vision and idiosyncrasies gave the institution its particular shape. Curatorial figures rarely appear; Robert Hubbard and Donald Buchanan are considered as helpmates to Directors McCurry, Jarvis and Comfort rather than as scholars in their own right. Brydon Smith fares much better, but this is largely because as the figure who introduced American modernism to the Gallery, he functions as a foil to Jean Sutherland Boggs whose antipathy to minimalism rendered her an unsuitable spokesperson for the Gallery's new area of acquisition. Nowhere in this account is the work of the Gallery director fully explored in relation to the myriad of other figures and offices that enable the Gallery to function at all.

This approach certainly makes sense in the early years of the Gallery when Eric Brown was hired to act as both Director and Curator of Pictures. It should be noted however, that Ord errs in his assertion that a common association with Christian Science underlay the decision by Sir Edmund Walker, first Chairman of the National Gallery's Board of Trustees, to hire Brown. Walker was not an adherent to Christian Science. The combined policy and aesthetic decisions made by the director were much more intertwined and, although members of the Board of Trustees also played a crucial role in the running and artistic direction of the Gallery, Brown's vision was paramount. The charismatic figures of Allan Jarvis and Jean Sutherland Boggs also fare well in this approach since they undertook quite significant schemes during their tenure. The spectacle of Jarvis' botched attempt to acquire paintings from the Prince of Lichtenstein, and Boggs' importance as an art historian of great stature set both directors apart from others after the Brown years. The institution itself is also a crucial player but Ord addresses it largely as a shell whose architectural allusions to metaphysical concerns frame the work of its directors. It is crucial to see the work of the institution as the product of a number of figures working together. Directors provide the larger vision of the institution and deal with the administrative side of things, but they work alongside curators who have expertise in a variety of fields and are primarily responsible for the selection of

works for purchase and for the production of exhibitions that bring the visitors to the Gallery in the first place. Finally, the particular feature of the National Gallery of Canada is its status as an arm's-length federal institution that has a mandate to "promote and protect the heritage of Canada and all its people" (NGC Act 1990). The Gallery's requirement to interpret that mandate while maintaining a position of aesthetic autonomy is sometimes fraught with tension, and often visible in the exhibition of works from the permanent collection.

Where *The National Gallery of Canada: Ideas Art Architecture* demonstrates its value is in its account of the years when the National Gallery was stripped of its autonomous status as a federal institution and made part of the National Museums Corporation (1968-1990). During this period, policies of "democratization and decentralization" brought all four of the National Museums (National Gallery, National Museum of Man, Museum of Science and Technology, Museum of Nature) under one governmental umbrella. The desired administrative rationalization, however, only resulted in diminishing the authority of each Museum's director, and for the National Gallery in particular, subsumed its development of a program of aesthetic excellence within the goals of an instrumental nationalism. It is telling that during this twenty-two-year period, three directors resigned outright (Boggs, Martin, Shih) each complaining that the bureaucracy and micro-managerial style of the National Museums Corporation made their job impossible.

The success of these chapters lies in Ord's careful mapping of the sequence of events that occurred during the NMC's management of the National Gallery, with a specific focus on the deterioration of the already difficult relationship between gallery and government. The minutes of both the NMC's Board of Trustees and the emasculated "Advisory Board" of the National Gallery allows him to fully convey the control that the NMC "mega-bureaucracy" had on the National Gallery, as well as the detrimental effect that the lack of recognition of the National Gallery as a fundamentally different institution from the other National Museums had on its collecting and exhibiting practices in the 1970s and 80s. What emerges in this account is the story of an institution under siege, with the role of the various players (in the Gallery as well as in the NMC) located firmly within the institutions they were leading. The result is a fuller picture of the constraints within which the work of the Gallery was accomplished, and the picture of the director emerges less as a figure personally implicated in a series of events, than as the relatively powerless head of an organization whose operation is necessarily cut through by other figures and organizations.

The importance of the National Gallery of Canada to the collective artistic psyche of the nation cannot be denied, and the fact that Douglas Ord's book is the first lengthy consideration of the Gallery since Jean Sutherland Boggs's 1971 volume is significant enough that it is deemed worthy of two reviews in

*The Journal of Canadian Art History*. Unfortunately, the author's focus on teasing out ironies and cross-references and almost complete lack of interest in the "workings" of this institution leaves the reader with a sense of the extent of Mr. Ord's research rather than any new knowledge about museums in general and the National Gallery in particular. This is unfortunate because it completely obscures some of his excellent critiques, such as the new building's attention to itself rather than to art and the implications that has for our understanding of the Gallery as a state-funded institution. The result does a disservice to the complexities of an institution such as the National Gallery of Canada.

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