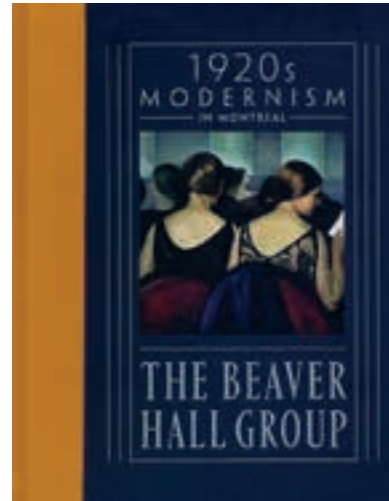


- 10 Silvia KOLBOWSKI, "An Inadequate History of Conceptual Art," *October* 92 (Spring 2000): 52–70.
- 11 Emmett WILLIAMS, *My Life in Flux – and Vice Versa*, excerpt in *The Last Art College*, 236.
- 12 KENNEDY, "Introduction," *The Last Art College*, xv.
- 13 "The New Education in the Arts," spec. issue of *artsCanada* 122/123 (October/November 1968).
- 14 For a selection of primary documents on these events, see Yves ROBILLARD ed., *Quebec Underground 1962–1972: 10 ans d'art marginal au Québec*, vols. 1–3 (Montreal: Médiarts, 1973).
- 15 KENNEDY, "Introduction," xix.
- 16 Kaley KENNEDY, "Severe funding cuts for Nova Scotia College of Art and Design," *Rabble*, 17 May 2012. Accessed 17 Sept. 2013, <http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/behind-numbers/2012/05/severe-funding-cuts-nova-scotia-college-art-and-design>. Recent budgetary manoeuvres at the College have resulted in layoffs: "NSCAD University lays off 16 staffers, says NSGEU," *CBC*. Accessed 18 June 2015, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/nscad-university-lays-off-16-staffers-says-nsgeu-1.3118369>.
- 17 KENNEDY, "Introduction," xvii.



*1920s Modernism in Montreal:
The Beaver Hall Group*

EDITED BY JACQUES DES
ROCHERS AND BRIAN FOSS

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Alicia Boutilier

"Who gets to be remembered? Why do people get to be remembered?" asks Brian Foss on CBC's Sunday Edition.¹ He refers to the Beaver Hall Group and the project that he and Jacques Des Rochers, as co-curators, have worked on for almost ten years. *1920s Modernism in Montreal: The Beaver Hall Group* is a monumental exhibition, accompanied by an equally important publication, which opened at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in October 2015 and toured across Canada. Students of Canadian art history are familiar with Beaver Hall, but perhaps not in the way that this

exhibition presents them. Outside the classroom the Group is not very well known at all. Paintings by its members do not grace calendars and mugs in the same way as those by another Canadian artist group, of a certain number, founded in the same year.

The intention of *1920s Modernism in Montreal: The Beaver Hall Group* is to acquaint us with the group's activities and *all* the artists who either held membership in or were closely associated with the Group. The project also makes strides in unpacking assumptions about Beaver Hall that have blossomed over the years. *1920s Modernism in Montreal* is an investigation of both history and historiography, and along the way it accomplishes two great things: physical assemblage of a remarkable body of works, many not seen publicly for decades, and remarkable depth of research given the paucity of records. As Des Rochers points out, the Group did not have "a manifesto or an official list of its members" and there is little written about its programs and activities.² So why should we care? Because many of the Beaver Hall artists were course-changing contributors to and proponents of modernity, particularly figurative, in Canada. Despite its short run as an organized entity, the Group, as outlined in the exhibition's introductory panel, "provided rich soil for abundant and substantial art-making, now inextricably linked with the history of art in Montreal, Quebec and Canada." The catalogue contains essays by leading scholars in the field – Des Rochers and

Foss, as well as Hélène Sicotte, Esther Trépanier and Kristina Huneault, who build upon specializations they have honed for years – and extends beyond the exhibition itself to become a valued document.

What's in a group? "Everything in the way of such groups does good, I think," wrote National Gallery director Eric Brown upon hearing of the Beaver Hall Group's establishment in Montreal.³ The Group officially lasted three years, from 1920 to 1923, little more than the length of its lease at 305 Beaver Hall Hill in Montreal. So much can happen in three years, or rather in the ensuing decades. Thereafter the Group's name stuck to several members, particularly the women, during their lifetimes and in the annals of Canadian art history. However small, informal or short-lived (some members later downplayed its importance), the Beaver Hall Group was at the time a network of support, an opportunity for exhibiting and financial pooling, an assertion of modernism as an aesthetic option, and for the women members an organization they could actually be a part of, when so many in Montreal were restricted to men.

Retrospectively, we like to hang our art historical and curatorial hats on groups. As Richard William Hill recently pointed out, "Solo exhibitions are extremely important, but it is often group shows that define artistic movements."⁴ In *1920s Modernism in Montreal*, the Beaver Hall Group becomes a lens through which to examine "a form of modernity peculiar to Montreal."⁵ "At the heart

of a changing city” in the post–First World War era,⁶ the Group is also an apt springboard for considering the broader context of cultural presentation in Montreal – theatre, cinema, dance and music, particularly jazz, the latter becoming a metaphor under the pen of contemporary critics for everything bad or good about modernism in art.

Focus on a historical group can sometimes lead to undue emphases, about which the curators and writers were all too aware, as they cautiously unpacked the group-ness of the Group in the publication. Historiography reveals two intertwined elephants in the room: one is the Group of Seven and the other the “feminization” of the Beaver Hall Group. From its inception in May 1920, just days after the Group of Seven’s inaugural exhibition and with A.Y. Jackson (1882–1974) elected *in absentia* as president, the Beaver Hall Group has been compared with its more famous Toronto counterpart in various ideological ways – from “derivative offshoot” and “supporting role” to the “Group of Seven’s aesthetic and ideological antithesis.”⁷

Along the way, and hand-in-hand, the Group has also been “feminized.” Since its first retrospective in 1966 at the National Gallery of Canada, it came to be defined, for the most part, as a group of women artists. Part of *1920s Modernism in Montreal*’s project is to put men back into the group, or rather to recognize the group’s gender parity, incomparable in its day. At times, the project can appear at pains to point out male erasure. (Quoting Blodwen Davies’s

general reference to “a particularly strong group” of Montreal women artists, within the context of reviewing a women’s art exhibition, for a women’s magazine, is hardly a convincing example. And Melvin Hammond’s inclusion of Montreal modernists in a chapter on women painters, in his 1930 *Painting and Sculpture in Canada*, speaks to a different form of gender segregation altogether.⁸) However, the group’s equal membership is key to understanding its modernity and, as Huneault points out, “a turning point in the history of Canadian art, as women began to play a greater role in its development.”⁹

At the project level, it’s hard not to continue comparison with the Group of Seven. In its thorough assembly of archival data, *1920s Modernism in Montreal* takes its cue from the Charles C. Hill brand of exhibition cataloguing and is not unlike his 1995 *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation*. There is a wealth of resource material beyond the scholarly essays: sidebar discussions of individual works of art; timelines charting art school attendance; artist biographies clarifying degrees of Group involvement; and a history of exhibitions 1920–33 involving Group members. The publication is richly illustrated with not only artwork reproductions, but also archival images such as photographs, newspaper clippings, invitations, book illustrations, and artist cartoons. Admittedly, conditioned by online research, I wish I could click some of the detailed thumbnails to enlarge.

One consequence of so much investment is the impulse to include

everything found – a curatorial reluctance to cut (which can extend into exhibition didactics) – and occasionally there’s a whiff of that here. The fact that, for example, Hal Ross Perrigard’s (1891–1960) paintings went straight from an Art Association of Montreal exhibition to his art dealer four times, in 1920, 1922, 1923, and 1925, could perhaps go into a footnote. On the other hand, with such volume of detail, a solid base is, and at last, established upon which new scholarship can build. This getting-to-the-bottom of the Beaver Hall matter is extremely satisfying to the art historical soul.

1920s Modernism in Montreal is not just about assembling the record and setting it straight, it’s also about an expanded and a changed art historical outlook, particularly when it comes to the question of what constitutes an artists’ group. This approach is compelled in part by the lack of definitive membership lists and officialdom as well as the feminist feminization of the Beaver Hall of recent decades, which prioritized the women’s experiences over the group itself: “After decades of writing on the group’s women, including the ‘non-official’ members such as Heward, there can now be no question of omitting those artists whose manner of participation does not conform to the institutional criteria of more conventional scholarship.”¹⁰ What emerges is a diverse group of twenty-nine artists (give or take) that (more or less) shared a city and a building; contributed to similar local, national, and international exhibitions;

attended certain art schools and had the same teachers; and pursued common thematic and artistic approaches, which also intersected with Montreal’s broader modernist arts and entertainment scene in the 1920s and early 1930s. Our view of the Beaver Hall Group will never be quite the same again.

The Group had both modern and conservative members, and the exhibition is certainly a showcase of the former, further balancing the view, in more ways than just gender, of Canadian art in the early twentieth century, still heavily weighted toward the Group of Seven. The span covered, 1920 to 1933, in fact takes its cue from the latter group, extending past the Beaver Hall’s end-date to the year the Seven folded into the much larger, nation-wide Canadian Group of Painters, which many former Beaver Hall artists joined.

What was striking, in stepping into the exhibition, was the relative simplicity of the introductory space (even further pared down at the hosting institutions), reflecting the modest run and record of the Group. The playing of a 1920s film and two paintings depicting Beaver Hall Hill provided urban context for the Group’s locus. In a display case was the original invitation to the Group’s 1920 exhibition, the only remnant left of its very first show. Randolph Hewton’s (1888–1960) stunning *Miss Audrey Buller* (ca. 1925) was fittingly highlighted nearby, the only portrait confirmed to have been in a Beaver Hall exhibition. The adjacent section “A List of Artists as Introduction” conveyed how the Beaver Hall was more an informal network than

an official roll-call, with a rather intimate display of portraits that the artists made of each other and themselves. While not necessarily proclaiming the boldness of approach associated with the Beaver Hall, this section really revealed the diversity of its membership and associations.

Moving from these introductory spaces, the exhibition opened up into vibrant colour, where the figure for the most part prevailed. Thematic sections were primarily subject-based: The Humanized Landscape, Portraits of Women, Out on the Town, The Nude: New Canons of Feminine Beauty, and The Urban Landscape. Perspectives from Abroad featured paintings that had been in international exhibitions of Canadian art, while the “Jazz Wall” theme took its cue from critics of the day. These paintings really popped from their dramatic black-purple walls, the largest space in all the venues, encompassing “Jazz Wall” and Out on the Town. The Feminization of the Beaver Hall Group – though a necessary topic for analysis in the catalogue – felt a bit out of place in an exhibition space, art historiography being a difficult theme to constitute (oddly enough) through art. But didactics are also ignorable; they’re there if you want to read them, providing visitors with choice. The theme The Ongoing Adventure ends the exhibition with a “where they went after this” summation, introducing the Canadian Group of Painters (CGP).

Touring exhibitions bring different works and adjacencies to the fore at every

venue, with different space configurations and curatorial considerations. At the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, toward the end of the exhibition and before the pop-up tchotchkes shop, Lilius Torrance Newton’s (1896–1980) *Nude in the Studio* (1933) served as conclusion and new beginning, having been accepted into but then ejected from the 1933 CGP exhibition for what was deemed immodest nudity. In Hamilton, this nude with full pubic hair and green shoes appeared alongside Prudence Heward’s (1896–1947) *Girl Under a Tree* (1931), underscoring the boldness of bodies with which these women artists reversed traditional female objectification. At the Art Gallery of Windsor (where Newton’s nude apparently continued to have a fraught exhibition history and was not allowed to travel), *Girl Under a Tree* cleverly claimed a whole wall hovering between Humanized Landscape and Portraits of Women.

So rarely acknowledged in critical analyses of exhibitions is the difficulty in sourcing artworks – the long process of connecting a historical title, or a description in an exhibition review, or a past reproduction (often black and white and small), to an actual artwork somewhere in the world today – and then obtaining loans (not always granted) for the exhibition display. What one saw in 1920s *Modernism in Montreal* could only have been the result of an incredible amount of work on this front. There was so much to love and some sweet surprises, such as Sarah Robertson’s (1891–1948) rough sliver

of a horse-and-sleigh in *Laurentians in Winter* (ca. 1924), Randolph Hewton's jazzy pastiche in *Carmencita* (1922, or earlier), John Y. Johnstone's (1887–1930) quiet *Chinatown, Montreal* (1915–20) (so little is seen by this artist), and – echoing the smoke stacks of Adrien Hébert's (1890–1967) *Montreal Harbour* (1924) from afar – Prudence Heward's *The Immigrants* (1928) in full colour, which had been “location unknown” in the art historical world for a long time.

While a number of works were familiar to me from other exhibitions or even having used them in exhibitions myself, the pleasure and feat of 1920s *Modernism in Montreal* was finally being able to see them *together* in a public institution under the banner of Beaver Hall: André Biéler's (1896–1989) *The Shoe* (1931); Emily Coonan's (1885–1971) *Girl in Dotted Dress* (ca. 1923); Adrien Hébert's *Grain Elevator No. 3* (1928?); Prudence Heward's *At the Theatre* (1928), *Sisters of Rural Quebec* (1930), *Rollande* (1929), and the unbelievably modern *The Bather* (1930) (Heward really does steal the show a bit); Edwin Holgate's (1892–1977) *Ludivine* (1930) and *Totem Poles, Gitsegukla* (1927); Sarah Robertson's (1891–1948) *In the Nuns' Garden* (1933) and *The Blue Sleigh* (ca. 1924); Mabel May's (1877–1971) *Indian Woman, Oka* (1927); Kathleen Morris's (1893–1986) *Nuns with Children* (ca. 1927); Liliás Torrance Newton's *Self-Portrait* (ca. 1929); Anne Savage's (1896–1971) *The Plough* (1931–33); Regina Seiden's (1897–1991) *Dora* (ca. 1923). They're all here and many more. There's a satisfying tome-

marked resolution in this exhibition, after decades of constituting the Beaver Hall Group in different ways. One that allows us to ask, refreshingly: Where can we go from here?

NOTES

- 1 Alisa SIEGEL, *Who Gets to Be Remembered?*, Sunday Edition with Michael Enright, CBC, first broadcast 21 Feb. 2016.
- 2 Jacques DES ROCHERS, “Defining the Beaver Hall Group Today,” in *1920s Modernism in Montreal: The Beaver Hall Group*, ed. Jacques Des Rochers and Brian Foss (Montreal and London: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and Black Dog Publishing, 2015), 110.
- 3 Quoted in *ibid.*, 70.
- 4 Richard William HILL, “9 Group Exhibitions That Defined Contemporary Indigenous Art,” *Canadian Art* (28 July 2016). Accessed on 19 Aug. 2016, <https://canadianart.ca>.
- 5 Esther TRÉPANIÉ, “The Beaver Hall Group: A Montreal Modernity,” in *1920s Modernism in Montreal*, 162.
- 6 DES ROCHERS, “Setting the Stage: The Emergence of the Beaver Hall Group,” in *1920s Modernism in Montreal*, 40.
- 7 Kristina HUNEAULT, “‘As well as men’: The Gendering of Beaver Hall,” in *1920s Modernism in Montreal*, 276 and 279.
- 8 DES ROCHERS, “Defining the Beaver Hall Group Today,” 103.
- 9 HUNEAULT, “‘As well as men,’” 264.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 274.