

MODERN PAINTING IN CANADA.
MAJOR MOVEMENTS IN TWENTIETH
CENTURY CANADIAN ART
Terry Fenton and Karen Wilkin
Edmonton, Hurtig Pub. in co-operation
with The Edmonton Art Gallery, 1978.
119 p., 52 col. illus.
\$18.95

Modern Painting in Canada is an important book, the significance of which lies in its treatment of twentieth-century Canadian painting using the method of modernist analysis, in which "the new" is seen as a pivotal attribute. Because this is the first important example of formalist analysis brought to bear on modern Canadian art, its contribution to the development of more rigorous and intelligent art writing in Canada is unquestionable. The book's structure is a series of seven short essays: five by Terry Fenton and two by Karen Wilkin. The sequence of the essays (or statements) is determined by the authors' adherence to the theory of the inevitable, dialectical evolution of art as advocated by Clement Greenberg. This explains why, by necessity, there is no mention of the less influential painters or groups who were active during the past eighty years. Because of their exclusion, the authors avoid the question of the integration of the successive stages in the development of Canadian art.

The authors' own active participation in the Canadian art world gives authority to their desire to focus on the effects (both positive and negative) of the long-standing quarrel between the nationalist and internationalist painters. This particular emphasis, along with the authors' often pointed remarks on the art produced, results in essays with a healthy spirit of iconoclasm. Ideas are frequently put forward which perhaps have been thought but certainly never spoken by other writers. This is most evident in Fenton's observations on the enduring eloquence of the Contemporary Art Society paintings, the limitations of David Milne and the effects of the polarity

caused by Lyman's insistence on pure content-less painting. Wilkin's analysis of the differences between Montreal and Toronto art since the 1950's is equally provocative.

But despite their infusion of new ideas into the historiography of Canadian art, the book has its failings. While it may be possible to say that "modern painting in Canada developed hand in hand with Canadian nationalism," to combine their history of nationalism with modernist critical analysis of the art movements is unavailing. The authors, on the face of it, advocate Michael Fried's statement that the history of modern painting "may be characterized in terms of . . . an increasing preoccupation with problems intrinsic to painting itself."¹ But if this premise is joined to the tenets of political philosophy, it is doomed to failure, or at least a weak compromise, unless the whole question is treated in the broader framework of art historical methods. To appreciate nationalism, with all of its societal and historical determinants, demands a thorough consideration of the extrinsic values of art, including content in the traditional sense of the word. Emphasis on intrinsic qualities alone prohibits the raising of issues inexorably tied to nationalism: patronage, collecting, subject matter, symbolic values, function, etc. If one believes art is "a social act inextricably entangled with a history which . . . is itself not evolutionary in its development,"² then the dialectical process in explaining art's own evolution cannot explain its relationship to nationalism.

The authors, particularly Fenton, have apparently tried to adapt the paradigm of the aesthetic conflict in American art during the 1930's and apply it to a Canadian context. But to quote Fenton on Lyman's "failure" perhaps the "art scene" is still "too frail to bear it." The history of the deep and political factionalism in Canada is labyrinthine. To be sure, Fenton is aware of the inadequacy of his presumed model and bends over backwards to compensate for its short-

comings. But in doing so, he often makes confusing and contradictory statements.

The most striking example that affects the book's argument is the question of the "modernism" of the Group of Seven. Given the artists' didactic aim of promoting nationalism in both their choice of subject matter and in their polemics, can they therefore be considered "modernists?" They did adopt the styles of Post-Impressionism, Art Nouveau graphic design and the devices of the New English Art Club and combined these with nationalistic content. But did Thomson really "claim Canada for modern art?" Or, rather, did he and the Group produce a parody of modernism which was only rectified by the bare-bones aesthetic of Lyman's Contemporary Art Society? In the context of a purist history of modernism, would not the Group be relegated to the same kind of obscurity to which the authors banish the Canadian Art Club and the Canadian Group of Painters? While the Group of Seven certainly offered a more modern alternative to the paintings of the Royal Canadian Academy establishment, do they truly merit this new mythic status?

With this in mind, one wonders about the omission of James Wilson Morrice. Fenton, in one essay, dismisses him by saying only that "although he was Canadian-born, he saw Canada through European eyes." In the following essay, he goes on only to say that "in the 1920's and 1930's, many of the best Canadian artists were expatriates. James Wilson Morrice, the Canadian Post-Impressionist who introduced French modernism to Montreal, died in Tunis in 1924." There is no further explanation for Morrice's ostracism. (It could not be because of his death date for Thomson had died seven years earlier.) Such an attitude is rather perplexing because Morrice embodies all the characteristics of an archetypal modernist painter. That "he saw Canada through European eyes" is irrelevant given the authors' approval of other internationalist artists. Morrice's place in Canadian art was well estab-

lished by John Lyman's early defense of him as a *Canadian* painter. Lyman, in fact, felt that he was more "French" than Morrice, and interestingly was also the victim of "forced" exile, in 1913.

That Morrice was by necessity an expatriate was Canada's failing, not his. To quote Fairfield Porter:

...until the second World War American culture was predominantly the product of amateurs, while those artists who wished for professional status expatriated themselves. These could not carry the burden of native indifference and hostility: abroad their status alone commanded respect. Respected in Europe, they were on the defensive here against the popular suspicion that they made aristocratic claims. At home, the American artist could be professional at the cost of provinciality, ...³

These statements are equally descriptive of the period situation in Canada. Morrice was our first modernist painter in terms of form, content and ambition. His influence as a role model for Canadian artists is only the first reason why he has remained a seminal figure in Canadian art history and practice to this day.

The book presents many other ideas which could be debated, but the cogency of the arguments put forth by the authors is not helped by the apparently hurried and rushed editing of the essays. Threads are missing between paragraphs which only leave the reader helplessly frustrated. Confusion also occurs when one attempts to relate the fuzzy full-page colour reproductions to the text; or tries to fathom why the biographical section contains entries on artists not mentioned in the essays, and omits painters who are discussed at relative length. While a ready explanation may be that the book evolved from the exhibition catalogue of *Modern Painting In Canada*, the Edmonton Art Gallery, 1978, it

is still the authors' responsibility to make this publication read as a piece.

The sequence of the essays is established by virtue of the dialectical method. But given the limited space which the writers bemoan in the preface, one wonders why the same factual statements are frequently repeated. Also, one questions why the authors devote so much time to general issues which may have only a tenuous relationship to the particular problems at hand. This is an unfortunate weakness of Wilkin's instructive "Montreal and the Collective Unconscious" where a lengthy and over-simplified discussion of Surrealism allows for only a few token sentences on Borduas, without analysis of his painting.

The authors are at their very best when discussing that issue directly related to modernist criticism: painting's internal artistic logic. But too often they fall into the predictable, over-worked rhetoric used to explain the premise of the inevitability of art. This is most evident in Fenton's "Western Canada and the Emma Lake Workshops." His defense of Greenbergian "taste" could have been better stated without the clichés and verbiage. Fenton generally seems to be uncomfortable in dealing with any kind of regionalist painting and covers what appears to be his biases with Talmudic reasoning. Another example of the weakness of the linear progression model occurs in Wilkin's comments on the evolution of Jack Bush. To neglect noting his contacts with the Abstract Expressionists and Gottlieb detracts from a fuller understanding of his stylistic morphology. Similarly there is no mention of the orientation of Toronto painting towards graphic design since the time of the Group of Seven and nurtured thereafter by the Ontario College of Art.

In conclusion, the authors' downfall is in their unsatisfying attempt to link nationalism with the development of modern art in Canada. Despite their evident success in the use of modernist criticism, they appear much less at ease in hand-

ling the methods of contextual art history.

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Notes:

¹ Michael FRIED, *Three American Painters* (Harvard Univ.: Fogg Art Museum, Boston, 1965), p. 5.

² Jeremy GILBERT-ROLFE, rev. of *Progress in Art*, by Suzi Gablik, *Artforum*, Nov., 1977, p. 70.

³ Fairfield PORTER, *Art in its Own Terms, Selected Criticism 1935-1975* (New York: 1979), pp. 251-52.

QUEBEC AND RELATED SILVER AT
THE DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

Ross Allan C. Fox

Wayne State University Press, Detroit,
1978.

176 pages, 109 illustrations. \$12.00

L'ouvrage de Ross Fox est un très bel exemple de catalogue d'une collection restreinte mais importante. On doit lui créditer de nombreux aspects positifs tant pour la présentation que son contenu. Le livre est très beau, la mise en page soignée, les illustrations abondantes et d'une excellente qualité. Relié carton, le livre s'utilise facilement comme ouvrage de référence. Le plan clair et ordonné est avantageusement complété par un glossaire très bien fait et un index utile.

Le corps de l'ouvrage est constitué par 47 notices de catalogue qui codifient, décrivent et analysent autant de pièces d'orfèvrerie. Base de l'ouvrage, ces notices sont de loin la partie la plus intéressante et novatrice. À toutes les étapes de l'étude de l'objet Ross Fox a déployé une méthodologie sophistiquée, d'une gran-