

BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS SOCIETY/LA SOCIÉTÉ D'ART CONTEMPORAIN MONTRÉAL 1939-1948

Christopher Varley
The Edmonton Art Gallery, 1980
96 pages, 69 ill., \$9.95

In recent years, attempts have been made in several publications to place the Contemporary Arts Society within the context of modern art's acceptance in Canada. As a result, the C.A.S. seems to represent this country's first collective commitment to modernism. With Christopher Varley's exhibition and accompanying catalogue, the Society's history and achievements have now been justly documented. The catalogue undeniably confirms the essential role played by the C.A.S. in liberating Canadian art from parochialism and insularity.

To those unfamiliar with its history, the Contemporary Arts Society was a purely Montréal phenomenon and, perhaps until recently, its influence did not really extend beyond Québec. But in the heart and mind of its *pater familias* John Lyman, it was a challenge directed at the complacent national style and borderless domination of the Group of Seven. Invigorated by his experience of the energy of Paris and equally demoralized by the retrograde traditionalism of Montréal, Lyman created in 1939 his main vehicle for publicizing "modern art." The C.A.S. also functioned as a forum for the modernist theory of art that he had learned three decades earlier from Matisse. Lyman's ambition for himself and for the Society was enormous, sometimes outstripping the ambitions of its painters.

The group's position was manifested in its first official exhibition "Art of Our Day," a presentation of European modern art rather than the work of C.A.S.

members. Lyman may have intended to focus on the international pluralistic stance of the Society by first exhibiting pictures by artists beyond criticism, rather than risking the possible disapproval and wrath of the Montréal public toward local newcomers working outside the popular Canadian Group of Painters style. Having thus prepared their potential audience, the C.A.S. embarked on an energetic and relatively successful program of members' exhibitions, showing for the next ten years at several local private galleries as well as at the Art Association of Montréal (despite their intermittent conflicts with the museum).

Attempts at organizing exhibitions to gain international exposure for the Society were realized by a showing at the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Mass. But their highly ambitious attempt to exhibit in 1943 at the Metropolitan Museum in New York was sabotaged by the National Gallery of Canada, or more correctly, by A. Y. Jackson speaking through the Director, H.O. McCurry. Varley's revealing account of this scandalous behaviour is important as an affirmation of the intransigent control of the conservatives; but it is also an example of an "Ontario first" bias which seems to have continued in National Gallery policy until recent times.

That same year, as Varley points out, monumental changes were starting to occur in Montréal and within the C.A.S.. Because of the increase in Francophone members and their successful showings outside the Society, the philosophy and "style" of the group began to shift direction. Keeping in mind that the C.A.S.'s (and Lyman's) definition of modern art was twenty-five years old in the wider scheme of things, and that it fell largely within School of Paris parameters, it was a position bound to be challenged by a more avant-garde, spontaneous, expressionist stance. The Francophone painters introduced an aesthetic focus drawn from

Cubism and Surrealism alien to that of the older English members and consequently, significant cultural differences made themselves evident.

The internal ideological discontent, exemplified by the well-known conflict between Pellan and Borduas, the increased dissatisfaction with the Society's structure by the younger Francophones and perhaps, the discomfort of the Anglophone artists with the increasing attacks on the viability of representational painting eventually eroded the group's original cohesion. With Lyman seemingly uninterested in participating in aesthetic sectarianism, and perhaps feeling personally threatened by any form of avant-gardism, he no longer wanted nor was able to maintain his original position of power and influence. After a rather rapid series of three presidential elections and resignations, the Contemporary Arts Society imploded. That it succeeded in bringing modern aesthetic ideas to Montréal cannot be denied and that its liberal pluralism could not be sustained is equally true. Regardless, the Society's mandate for modernism had drastically changed Québec art, and consequently, that of Canada.

Christopher Varley's catalogue is the first major published recounting of the history of the C.A.S. That it should come from Edmonton rather than from Montréal is ironic in itself. Nevertheless, his successful chronicling of the group's private and public history goes far in projecting a sense of what the C.A.S. meant. His perceptive impression of the cultural split within the group as well as his careful presentation of the different aesthetic viewpoints brought to bear by Lyman, Père Couturier, Pellan and Borduas cannot be underestimated. Similarly, the thoughtful and considered discussion of the more important C.A.S. painters is refreshingly intelligent and without bias.

In his use of a model of successive discussions, Varley seems to view the his-

tory of the C.A.S. as the history of several dominant personalities, which is undoubtedly true. But one tends to lose the threads of continuity and interrelations among members. The links which might help to explain the internal dynamics of the group's activities are also missing. There is similarly a slight confusion about the sequence and consequences of events. These problems could have been alleviated somewhat by adding a detailed chronology to the existing appendices. Varley presents his ideas in a slightly dualistic manner. On the one hand, he recounts the history of the group; on the other, a selected appreciation of the paintings is given. Both are fascinating and enlightening in their own right; but what is missing is a fully resolved interweaving of the two themes. The lack of a total synthesis may not disturb the more familiar reader, but it could be confusing to those less at ease with the growth of Québec and Canadian art.

Similarly there is a certain feeling that the C.A.S. existed without a wider context. The lack of discussion about the painters' backgrounds, artistic training, philosophical and aesthetic attitudes as well as a limited sense of the flavour of the period are both shortcomings which detract from the impact of the material. Perhaps some of the essay's problems exist because the author had too much to say in too short a space. Thirteen pages is simply not sufficient to fully explore the complexities inherent in the story of the C.A.S., especially when one intends to incorporate detailed observations with sustaining generalizations. Varley writes in a breathless prose that stimulates his readers, but sometimes leaves them gasping for air.

In his introduction, the author states his hope that the exhibition will incite further efforts of investigation. One question that immediately comes to mind is the idea of a C.A.S. *style*. By examining the lists of members and exhibitors included in the catalogue appendices, one could say that the major-

ity (including Lyman) were "reconstructed" post-impressionists, with Goodridge Roberts the exception to this. C.A.S. paintings on the whole seem very Bloomsbury-like, but even though they were done over twenty years later, they still lack strong cross-currents from America and France. A more thorough investigation of the form and content of these paintings might help to better explain why they retain their curious "period" appearance. This category of "post-impressionists" does include a number of painters whose work and presence diminished over the years, perhaps because of the limitations of their academically reconstructed style. A much smaller group could be labelled mild-mannered "social realists" although several showed characteristics of both groups. In this case, the question of subject matter and stylistic influences would go far in separating and allying them with their American counterparts. The third and smallest group was the moderns — Borduas, Pellán, Webber and even Scott. Later of course, this more expressionist group expanded and eventually evolved a second and pointedly different C.A.S. "style."

Although Varley's catalogue does not purport to discuss all the group's exhibitions, it would be interesting to have a more complete idea of the appearance of their shows. The evident variety of stylistic tendencies in any one exhibition could be seen as a metaphor for the pluralism of the C.A.S. and as a result, perhaps the uneven quality of the work was overlooked in the greater concern to plead the case for modern art. Also the question of the stylistic interrelationships between artists as well as the kinds of influence they exerted upon each other deserves greater exploration. To this must be added an examination of external aesthetic forces, subject matter, private patronage, critical reception and even the painters own perceptions of the C.A.S. To recreate the sense of a period is a difficult task indeed, but a

necessary one if we wish a full "cultural reckoning."

To this end there is a wealth of information still to be obtained from the participating and associate members, before they pass into history. The lore surrounding the C.A.S. is as essential to our understanding as are the documentary facts. A cursory look at the list of Associate Members from January 1948 in the library of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, provides some insight into the type of public supporters of the group. For example, members like Drs. Dumas, Jutras and Dandurand were among the most important art collectors of the time. Another Associate, A. H. Gillson, Dean of Arts and Science at McGill University was responsible for founding the school's department of Fine Arts the previous year, a move possibly prompted by his association with Lyman and the C.A.S. The contribution of the Associates to the quality of artistic life in Montréal during that era certainly deserves further assessment.

Another question that arises directly out of the previous one pertains to the cultural climate of Montréal in the broad sense. Such notions as the possible effect of the leftist political ideas then in circulation among writers and artists might help to heighten our understanding of the painters' choice of subjects, or even more importantly, the particular mood of pathos and empathy so common to C.A.S. painting. Similarly to speculate on the role of World War II would be equally fruitful. Was Lyman describing his ambitions for the C.A.S. when he suggested in *The Montrealer* of November 1939 that wartime "provided an excellent opportunity... to do something to help our artists."? Was the C.A.S. a consequence of the energy left over for art because of Québec's withdrawal from federal affairs? What was the effect of the Conscription Crisis on the group; were they able to overlook nationalist politics? Historically it is a

rare thing for war to encourage art; was the C.A.S. an exception?

In the same vein is the rather fascinating fact of the surprisingly large number of Jewish members and exhibitors in the C.A.S., particularly in the first half of its history. In no other period of Québec art were Jews so actively involved in the artistic milieu. What exactly were the personal, political and cultural dynamics at work to make this possible and why was its energy not sustained after the war?

Leaving aside large issues, there is the particular question of John Lyman. As Varley correctly emphasizes, the C.A.S. and Lyman were virtually synonymous. Lyman's social contacts, his culture as of his temperament. His adherence to the aesthetic of "significant form" provided him with the resources to create a city's conversion to modern art. It is interesting to consider Lyman's own inner dualistic nature in light of his achievements.

His "puritanism" perhaps gave the C.A.S. its "thou shall not" character, most specifically engendered in its anti-academic position. Similarly he really only supported one form of art, that which reflected his particular love of "classicism" and the Apollonian mode, expressed in the tone of his own paintings. Lyman's attitude to what constituted viable art was as much a result of his culture as of his temperament. His lifelong distrust of abstract painting was as strong as his antipathy to the Group of Seven.

Lyman enunciated his basic doctrine in an entry in his private *Journal* for November 10, 1950:

The real subject of a painting is how you paint it, not what you paint. The meaning of art is deeper than subject matter, which is only something equivalent to the sculptor's armature. The artist chooses the subject that will enable him to carry out instinctive intent.

As is obvious, he is reiterating the position held by both Clive Bell and Roger Fry, but he is also denying Matisse's notion of the inherent inspiration that comes from the subject to be painted. Although the logical conclusion of Lyman's proposition is non-objectivism and abstraction, his puritanical adherence to the School of Paris could not accept either and undoubtedly precipitated his resignation from the C.A.S. In the same diary entry he bitterly wrote:

The so-called abstract and non-representational movements were genuine enough for they were founded on an intuition of nature but latterly they have simply become an easy way out for those who understand nothing and cannot attract attention any other way.

The opposite tendency of Lyman's personality was liberalism. This too may have been the result of the opportunities afforded him by his social position as well as his intelligence and cultivation. Lyman's liberalism was also a reflection of the intrinsic progressive attitudes of modernism. As the critic Milton Brown has explained "its energy was directed to purely cultural revolt," but not social change. "Its acceptance of a social condition wherein art was disenfranchised" could allow art "to reach heights of individual and personal expression without social check." Lyman's disavowal of established middle-class expectations allowed him the freedom to pursue the idealism essential to the success of the Society and modernism. For example, his desire to cut across cultural and economic lines permitted the heterogenous makeup of the group's membership. It is similarly reflected in the oft-times unbelievable variety of painters who exhibited together in the C.A.S. His openness also enabled him to recognize very early on in their careers the merits of Roberts and Borduas. However, Lyman might have disapproved of the Borduas *Portrait of Madame Gagnon* on the catalogue

cover, given his poor opinion of the painter's figurative works. More in keeping with the sentiment of the exhibition would have been one of Lyman's own pictures. Of the many examples that could be cited to indicate Lyman's progressive views is the interesting fact that in 1937 he wrote in *The Montrealer* on the A.A.M.'s unjust acceptance procedures for the Spring exhibitions, suggesting a two-jury system instead. But it was not until eight years later through the insistence of the C.A.S. that the museum acknowledged the fairness and logic of his proposal.

But Lyman's liberalism was probably more of a guiding principle than an internalized emotional response and this may go far in explaining his diminishing role within the C.A.S. However Lyman's attitude to and his notion of his position within the Society has yet to be fully revealed.

In conclusion Varley's exhibition and catalogue have finally given the Contemporary Arts Society the attention it rightfully deserves. It is a tribute to his energy, enthusiasm and insight. And now it is left to the rest of us to build upon this very solid base.

Sandra Paikowsky

DESSIN ET SURREALISME AU QUÉBEC

Réal Lussier

Catalogue accompanying an exhibition organized and circulated by the Musée d'art contemporain, Montréal.

40 pages, 31 ill., \$2.00

Despite scholarly interest in Québec Surrealism and its ramifications over the past decade, the Surrealist drawings created by Montréal's avant-garde artists during the period 1943-57 have received little attention. *Dessin et surréalisme au Québec* is a welcome publication on the subject and the first to attempt an overview of Québec surrealist drawing *praxis*.

Published in conjunction with a travelling exhibition of thirty-one drawings by seventeen artists organized by the Musée d'art contemporain, the catalogue is divided into four parts: an essay by Réal Lussier, artists' statements, plates, and a list of works in the exhibition which includes biographical information about the artists. Its value is threefold: the reproduction of little known work; a synoptic history of the movement and its artists, incorporating the findings of recent scholarship; and a published record of fifteen works from the museum's collection. Both its text and plates must be considered in future discussions of Surrealism in Québec.

While the importance of *Dessin et surréalisme* in the literature is incontestable, it suffers from limitations in content and format. In many ways, the publication typifies the catalogue style of smaller, younger Canadian museums for Canadian material, sharing both its strengths and weaknesses. Because of government cultural policy, these institutions place more emphasis on collecting, displaying and dispersing art works than on documentation, research and interpretation. One of the advantages of this policy is the ability of the museum to create interest in unknown