
The Drawings of Alfred Pellán*: Further Thoughts by the Author

To review one's own work is either to run the risk of public self-justification, self-congratulation, self-promotion, apologia, confessional lapses or to adopt an overly laudatory stance. Self-critique is as biased and as revealing as the original manuscript and its criticism by others. Yet one can argue that in specialized areas of research, an author is often more familiar with the material than one's colleagues and can contribute further insight on the subject in review format. While some might question the ethics of the practice, it offers the opportunity for self-analysis, annotations and additions that otherwise would not be made public until a much later date, usually in the form of a revised preface if there is a second printing.

Having contemplated various stylistic modes ranging through the satiric, the anecdotal, the narrative and the academic prior to writing this review, I have chosen the last. Hopefully my choice of style will not totally obscure the inherent humour I find in this situation. I have also chosen to write the review in the first person. To do otherwise would mask my responsibility for writing both the catalogue and this review.

Although drawings and drawing played a central role in Alfred Pellán's work, until recently no examination of Pellán's *œuvre* existed. As such, *The Drawings of Alfred Pellán*, published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, is an important addition to the extant Pellán literature and the study of Canadian drawings. As I state in the preface, the catalogue is a "preliminary study", not a *catalogue raisonné*. It consists of an essay, entries for the eighty-nine drawings, a list of principal exhibitions including drawings, an appendix, a selected bibliography and 121 illustrations. In the essay, I attempt to present an overview of Pellán's drawing styles, technique and content beginning with his student years and ending in the late '60's. Detailed entries and lengthy discussion of specific works in the essay either corroborate the main theses or introduce other considerations. The text contains extensive information about the drawings themselves and, with the discussion of the relationship between the drawn and painted *œuvre*, reveals unknown aspects of Pellán's art.

The essay is divided into chapters, with the theoretical construct of my interpretation outlined in the introduction. Here, I classify Pellán's pre-1944 drawings as classical or academic and the post-1944 work as Surrealist, suggesting that Pellán's dissatisfaction with the academic tradition as practised at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Montréal is the primary reason for a stylistic shift in the drawings. I believe that this not only helps to clarify the anomaly of Pellán's different painting and

*Editors' note: This exhibition catalogue and essay are reviewed on p. 123 of this issue of *The Journal of Canadian Art History*.

drawing styles in the preceding decade but also elucidates one aspect of his eclectic approach to art. Notwithstanding Pellan's corroboration, however, my premise that all Pellan drawings executed after the Maillard debacle are Surrealist is, perhaps, an oversimplification. Both here and in the ensuing chapters, I avoided directly confronting François-Marc Gagnon's assertion that Pellan's post-Paris work is *rattrapage*,¹ minimized the implications of Pellan's proclivity for image repetition after 1950 and failed to articulate the salient features of what I referred to as "Pellan's eclecticism" at the beginning of the introduction.

Subsequent chapters conform to the chronological periods of Pellan's career as determined by residence and/or style. These vary in length, depending upon the existence of extant works, the frequency with which Pellan drew and, of course, my knowledge and interests. As might be expected, there is a paucity of work dating from Pellan's student years in Québec City. Although it was difficult to formulate a notion of Pellan's style from the four works known to me (two only by photograph), I feel I was remiss in not exploring the relationship between Pellan's training and his known drawings more fully in this section. Such an investigation would have added to the knowledge of theory and practice between 1920 and 1926 at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Québec City.

An important by-product of art publications is the sudden focus of attention on a subject and the resulting emergence of "new" information. Contrary to my statement that none of Pellan's early pencil sketches survived, recently I have been informed of the existence of two. Knowledge of Pellan's Québec years will be extended when his known formal studies of casts can be compared with his more impromptu drawings of friends, particularly if their identity can be established. I concentrated on establishing typologies and a general chronology for the drawings executed between 1926 and 1940 in the Paris chapter. Its value is that of a necessary first step in attempting to sort out the period, but I admit to reservations about erecting a chronology on primarily statistic evidence and, by inference, the date ascribed to certain works.

In reference to the latter, since writing the catalogue, I have revised my opinion on the dating of the untitled drawing depicting Mlle Geneviève Tirot (cat. no. 11) which is dated 1941 on the *recto* and inscribed 1938 on the *verso* by Pellan. I initially believed it to be a work executed even earlier, corresponding to the period when Pellan favoured ink line drawings and frequently drew the model. Neither rationale makes much sense on further contemplation. The short, nervous lines are quite similar to the style employed by Pellan to render the landscape of St. Louis de Courville in a number of 1940 ink drawings. Moreover, further reflection on the apparent discrepancy of a Montréal drawing depicting a woman who was still in Paris is resolved when one accepts

the possibility that Pellán's 1942 practice of executing second versions of Paris drawings in charcoal actually began in 1941 and in ink. For these reasons, I believe the date on the recto is, in fact, correct.

The Paris chapter also attempted to explain the differences in painting and drawing styles. My contention that Pellán was more interested in traditional formal concerns than experimentation in his drawings, while probably correct, requires elaboration. The discussion of Pellán's classicism acts only as a mild antidote to otherwise dry stylistic analysis, and, at the same time, dilutes the importance of the intense emotions Pellán depicted in these drawings. Equally problematic are my comparisons with Picasso and Matisse which are, with one exception, too tentative and suffer from a lack of supporting documentation.

In the following chapter, "Montreal: 1940-1944", I document the first instance of Pellán's practice of executing more than one version of a given drawing at different times. The discussion clarifies the difference in Pellán's drawing style between the '30's and '40's and firms up the chronology. Moreover, the definition of the practice and pinpointing the time of its inception provides information about Pellán's technique.

Equally important is the section devoted to the pivotal Graida Esar drawings. They are the first instance of Pellán working in series and demonstrate that Pellán was developing a different stylistic vocabulary in his charcoal drawings prior to switching to ink in 1944. In the leaflet, *Alfred Pellán*, published by the *Musée d'art contemporain* in conjunction with the exhibition, Diane St-Amand expanded on my discussion of the Graida Esar portrait entitled *Young Girl* (catalogued by the *Musée d'art contemporain* as *Three Eyes*). St-Amand's interpretation of the third eye as "*œil de l'inconscient*" and her reference to Klee as a source clearly establish the Surrealist content of the drawing and, by implication, the related work entitled *Face and Profile*. My discussion of the drawing in both the catalogue and *Surrealist Traits in the Heads of Alfred Pellán*² was limited to an analysis of its relationship to Cubism. St-Amand's insights give deeper meaning to the drawing.

The weaknesses of this chapter are similar to those in preceding chapters and the one alluded to above; analysis that is too formalistic, insufficient documentation and an avoidance of concepts. These comments are most pertinent in reference to the discussion of the ink drawings of the period executed at Charlevoix. Hopefully, the influence of this art community on Pellán in the early '40's will be more apparent after the forthcoming "Charlevoix" exhibition at the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts. Without doubt, the 1944-52 chapter is the richest. This period of Pellán's *œuvre* and Montréal art history has been the subject of numerous studies, many of which provided information and interpretative models upon which to base my discussion. The chapter itself

is the most extensive study of Pellán's Surrealist works to date, defining their poetic content and source.

One of my major discoveries was the identification of forty-four drawings inspired by the poetry of Paul Eluard (co-related with the specific poem in the appendix). Also, I was able to solve the mystery of the "lost" drawings of the period, known to me through photographs in Pellán's archives. Many drawings were painted over by Pellán and reclassified in the painting section of his inventory. This discovery has important repercussions regarding the quantity and nature of extant work of the period as well as Pellán's technique and notions of drawing and painting. Unlike the other chapters, the stylistic analysis is integrated with a fuller discussion of Pellán's work, making reading easier.

Stressing the 1944-48 years is both a strength and a weakness of the catalogue. The period is a fertile and crucial one in the development of Québec modernism in which Pellán's role was important. Rather than following the usual practice of juxtaposing Pellán and Borduas, I concentrated on establishing Pellán's work as an independent entity, partially as a means of drawing attention to hitherto unknown or minimized aspects of Pellán's *œuvre* and partially to reinforce the viability of the option that Pellán's art presented at the time. In so doing, I admit to shirking from fully taking on the Pellán/Borduas debate. Moreover, although I offered a variety of reasons for Pellán's abandonment of the academic tradition in his drawings, I did not investigate sufficiently the implications of his battle with Maillard.

In the final chapter, I faced a problem encountered by many authors writing about the later years in the career of an artist whose reputation was established decades earlier on a different type of work, work that is seen as more serious, more innovative and less commercial than the later work. The closest parallel is the literature on Picasso where his later years are discussed primarily in terms of his preceding work and any new developments are handled somewhat indulgently. The problem was compounded in my case by the fact Pellán is still alive and active. Although his drawing activity after 1952 greatly diminished, my treatment of this work is thin. Once again I retreated behind the safety of an archaeological approach, preferring to categorize as opposed to discuss. It is not surprising, in light of the above discussion, that the interpretative text of the catalogue entries varies in detail and depth. Both the discussion of the early and late works is too descriptive. The most complete entries are those discussing Pellán's early Surrealist drawings (1944-1948). Here, in fact, description and interpretation are more balanced.

The format and layout of any publication is as subject to criticism as the content. Too often the distinction between author- and publisher-responsibility in this sphere is not sufficiently delineated. My part in determining the design of this catalogue was limited to the

enunciation of general principles: low-cost, manageable size, legible typeface, wide margins, footnotes at the end of chapters rather than at the end of the essay, as close an integration of text and illustrations as possible and a photographic layout that made its own case. With the exception of the last two points, I was reasonably pleased considering that the manuscript was published without my seeing a design mock-up. All works discussed are illustrated; the inclusion of so much visual material is one of the catalogue's strengths. Not only are the three monographs on Pellán containing reproductions of his drawings out of print⁴, none include as comprehensive a representation from as many different periods of his work. The compilation of so many good quality illustrations in one source will prove a valuable tool for future scholarship.

Author, publisher and designer, however, can be faulted on not finding or agreeing upon a more workable solution to the book/catalogue design dilemma. The main problem is the location of the illustrations⁵. All illustrations for works in the exhibition are located at the end of the relevant chapter regardless of whether the work was discussed in the chapter text. Comparative material and illustrations of works discussed in the text but not included in the exhibition are located in the essay text. This is a particularly confusing and frustrating arrangement, necessitating keeping one's fingers in three places at once, while reading the essay (four, if one wishes to consult the catalogue entry for further information on items included in the exhibition.) Furthermore, the splitting of pairs and sequences of illustrations should not be determined by inclusion of the works in the exhibition. Said split undermines the strength of the comparisons. In the text section, the grid could have been broken differently to avoid placing comparative material on the *recto* and *verso* of the same page.

Had I been given *carte blanche*, I would have designed a catalogue in which each work discussed in the essay was not only illustrated in text but also in close proximity to the relevant passages, preferably on the same or adjacent page. Rosalind Krauss' *Passages in Modern Sculpture*⁶ is an exemplar of this type. Each of the catalogue entries would be accompanied by a photographic identification, even if this meant repetition. Here, the National Gallery's own *Pluralities/1980*⁷ can be cited as a model. In addition to the identification photographic entry, essential comparative material would be repeated. Auxiliary comparative illustrations and photographs of cited related works would also be included in this section. To paraphrase Panofsky: the art historian with the most photographs wins. Put less competitively, one of the goals of scholarly publications on Canadian art should be the inclusion of as much visual material as possible. The accessibility of all forms of information is essential in familiarizing both the public and the scholar with our too little-known heritage and spurring further research in what is still a young field.

I cannot refrain from mentioning two other points of contention. The first is the practice of citing the dimensions of works only in metric units; the second, placing the name of the collection below the entry text. Both are National Gallery house style. Given the country's recent conversion to metric measure, the use of differing conversion formulae and the fact that most works now cited only in metric units were once exhibited or published with measurements given in inches, the scholar trying to determine without a photograph whether a given work is in fact one and the same with the work discussed in the catalogue is faced with needless work. Surely, both units could be included. The separation of concrete data related to a specific work by interpretative text is also tedious. The National Gallery explanation is that visual highlighting of this nature is a means of drawing attention to the lender without whose generosity exhibitions and publications would not occur. No one can argue against the desire to acknowledge the important part played by lenders in an exhibition, but the same result could be effected within the information section of the entry.

To its credit, the National Gallery initially and wisely decided to publish separate English and French editions. As a result, both weight and cost were kept low. The late Jean-Claude Champenois contribution as editor was instrumental in arriving at a more accurate, sensitive and lucid text in both versions and his presence will be sorely missed in future publications. The National Gallery should also be commended on engaging guest curators, particularly in the Canadian field. Despite the problems for both parties that out-of-town contract work presents, it is a means of enabling scholars to disseminate their work to a wider public and to collaborate with Gallery staff in a mutually instructive undertaking. Without the support of government institutions, the possibilities of publishing technical material would be far fewer. Although the catalogue has its faults, the National Gallery is to be thanked for creating the opportunity to publish a pioneer study.

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Notes:

- 1 François-Marc GAGNON, "Pellan, Borduas, and the Automatistes," *Arts Canada*, XXIX, 5 (December 1972/January 1973, 174/175), pp. 48-55.
- 2 *Journal of Canadian Art History*, III, 1 & 2, Autumn 1976, pp. 65-66.
- 3 Pellan owned a copy of Eluard's *Capitale de la douleur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945). Although it was known that some of Pellan's drawings were inspired by Eluard's poetry, neither the number of drawings nor the specific source had been enumerated.
- 4 Eloi de GRANDMONT, *Cinquante Dessins d'Alfred Pellan*, Les cahiers noirs, vol. I. Montréal: Éditions Lucien Parizeau, 1945; Germain LEFEBVRE, *Pellan*, Toronto: McClelland and Steward, 1973; Guy ROBERT, *Pellan: His Life and His Art*, Montréal: Editions du Centre de Psychologie et Pédagogie, 1963.
- 5 See "Dessins et Surréalisme au Québec", *Journal of Canadian Art History*, V, 2, 1981, pp. 142-45 where I discuss other aspects of the problem.
- 6 Published by Viking Press in New York in 1977.
- 7 Ottawa, 1980.