

## The Drawings of Alfred Pellán

Reesa Greenberg

The National Gallery of Canada

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The work of Alfred Pellán has chronically received little serious Scholarly attention;<sup>1</sup> the work of Reesa Greenberg during the last decade, however, has reversed this state of affairs.<sup>2</sup> In her most recent contribution to the field, *The Drawings of Alfred Pellán*, Greenberg uses formalist methodology and the principles of connoisseurship to trace Pellán's "drawn oeuvre in terms of intent, chronology, and style, as well as their (*sic*) relationship to the paintings" (p. vii). The lengthy text is illustrated with reproductions of every drawing contained in the National Gallery of Canada exhibition for which the catalogue was produced, a major achievement on Greenberg's part, as most of these drawings have not been previously published. Dates and provenances are established for each drawing included in the catalogue; in addition, the catalogue contains an appendix providing a hitherto unpublished concordance of Pellán's drawings of 1948 and the poems from Paul Éluard's *Capitale de la Douleur* which inspired them. Despite Greenberg's meticulous research, thorough documentation of the drawings, and many original contributions to the study of Pellán's work, *The Drawings of Alfred Pellán* has serious weaknesses which arise out of the limitations of the author's conception of art history.

The introduction to the catalogue provides a brief overview of several major issues raised by Pellán's art, while also bringing into focus problems with Greenberg's approach to them. After broaching the thorny question of Pellán's eclectic borrowings from School of Paris artists, for example, Greenberg promptly scuttles it by dismissing it as a quirk of his "philosophy of art,"<sup>3</sup> which she details through paraphrasing and quoting Pellán's statements on the nature of his art. She does not, however, attempt to critically analyze Pellán's artistic "philosophy," a feat which could have been accomplished by exploring why he chose to be influenced by certain modes of artis-

tic expression, but not others; why his descriptions of his art return compulsively to certain aspects of his art, while remaining silent on others; or how his verbal statements relate to his visual statements. By refusing to probe into the underlying implications of Pellán's artistic "philosophy," and by cleaving it from the art produced by him, Greenberg eliminates the possibility of discussing his work on anything but purely formal grounds; the unfortunate result is that his "philosophy," like his drawings, is endlessly described, but never fully explained.

Greenberg frequently returns to Pellán's relationship to the School of Paris throughout the catalogue; her primary interest in this subject appears to be the performance of the visual gymnastics of connoisseurship, accomplished by establishing parallels between Pellán's work and a variety of twentieth-century Parisian artists on the basis of evidence which is at once superficial and obvious. The following passage is typical of Greenberg's approach:

characterized by a few, thick, firmly controlled, often stylized lines, the drawings recall certain works by Matisse in their precision, clarity, and decorative qualities, even though that artist's work was executed in ink and usually depicted the full figure. (p. 35)

While the non-specific and generalized nature of this comparison illuminates little of consequence about the nature of Pellán's style, a close reading of the passage is revealing about the kinds of conclusions Greenberg wishes the reader to reach insofar as Pellán and the School of Paris are concerned. She does not say that Pellán was influenced by, or derivative of Matisse, for such a statement would be at odds with her assumption that "art for Pellán involves an individual, exploratory process in which one is free to use any device or technique that permits a personal solution to artistic problems" (p. 2). Instead of using semantics which would reveal Pellán's heavy dependence on the formulas of the School of Paris (which would also immediately raise questions about Pellán's artistic originality and critics' perception of it),

Greenberg chooses words which stress his affinity with and equality to such artists as Matisse; the effect of Greenberg's language is to subtly insist on the *quality* of Pellán's art by implying that it occupies a niche within the mainstream of modern art, namely, alongside the work of the School of Paris. As a result of Greenberg's implicit assumption that it is a professional obligation to prove the aesthetic merits of Pellán's work, the kind of critical distance which is required to come to terms with the complex history and meaning of his art is diminished in this study.

The most lengthy section of the catalogue deals with Pellán's career from 1944 to 1952, a period which Greenberg regards as a crucial one due to its "surrealist imagery and techniques [which] provided him with a new concept upon which he would anchor his drawing for the rest of his career" (p. 3). Although Greenberg regards surrealism as being of paramount importance to the "mature" period of Pellán's career, she does not clarify the exact nature of his relationship to that internally contentious movement; she does not, for example, investigate which elements of which branch of surrealism that Pellán adopted, he either ignored or rejected, and the reasons for such choices. By evading questions of this nature, the usefulness of Greenberg's analysis of the "surrealist" phase of Pellán's career is severely circumscribed and remains at the level of superficial generalizations; nevertheless, by avoiding those disconcerting questions which are predicated on "why?", and which inevitably lead into the realm of historical investigation in order to be fully answered, Greenberg is able to remain faithful to the narrow path of orthodox formalism to which she is committed.

Despite Greenberg's refusal to go beyond the boundaries of positivistic formalism on most aspects of Pellán's career, she makes a curious incursion into the vicissitudes of history in her discussion of Pellán's career in the late 1940's:

In Quebec, the traditional views of the political, religious, academic, and art establishments resulted in a restrictive climate vigorously opposed to modern-

ism and internationalism — the foundation of Pellán's painting and of his position in the Montreal art world... Pellán deliberately changed the titles of his drawings for *Capitale de la Douleur* in an attempt to obscure their source, in response to the current anti-communist climate in Duplessis's Quebec. (p. 66)

The reasons for Greenberg's brief review of the history of post-war Québec and Pellán's response to it are ambiguous, for she does not use her historical research to illuminate the meaning of Pellán's art in any significant way. The manner in which she uses fragments of social history, however, suggests a reason for this abrupt entry of historical factors into an otherwise formalist essay. By juxtaposing Duplessis, anti-communism and anti-modernism with Pellán, Greenberg implies that Pellán aligned himself with the forces of aesthetic and political progress against those of reaction in "Duplessis's Quebec." If all of the historical evidence is surveyed, however, Greenberg's inferences regarding Pellán's attitude towards the Québec *status quo* would be called into question; the paucity of her historical evidence alone renders her conclusions on this point suspect. Since the "Quiet Revolution" however, Canadian art historians have found it difficult to accept any French-Canadian artist as thoroughly modern without attempting to prove that he or she opposed Duplessis long before the Union Nationale's fall from power in 1960. As Greenberg evidently regards Pellán as a quintessentially modern artist, she also appears to regard it as given that he was also "ahead of his time" both politically and aesthetically, and therefore opposed the dominant ideology of Québec during the late 1940's and 1950's. Accepting Pellán's hostility towards the *status quo* as a natural consequence of his avant-gardisme, Greenberg does not bother to substantiate her assessment of Pellán's relationship to historical events through reference to those events themselves, in all their myriad and complex details. Due to her reliance on conventional assumptions about the nature of an avant-garde artist's relationship to society, Green-

berg's description of Pellan's career at mid-century is a distorted one, the victim of what Sartre has called "a priorism"; "the [violation of] experience, by overlooking embarrassing details, by grossly simplifying the event, and above all, by conceptualizing the event before having studied it."<sup>4</sup>

In the preface to *The Drawings of Alfred Pellan* Greenberg states: "I am well aware that within the context of the problems raised, more can be said and that some issues have not been addressed" (p. vii). This *caveat* notwithstanding, I do not fault Greenberg for failing to account for all the issues pertinent to Pellan's career, but rather question the relevance and intentions of the purely formal issues which she regards as the crucial, preliminary ones; my fundamental reservations about this catalogue, therefore, lie with its methodology and its tacit art historical assumptions. The kind of descriptive formalism used by Greenberg constrains her from incorporating her observations about Pellan's style into a synthetic totality, and forces the catalogue to remain a series of disunited descriptions of the most superfluous aspects of Pellan's style. The fragmented character of Greenberg's methodology is only aggravated by her deviations into pointless social history and testimonials to the quality of Pellan's work.

Formalist Canadian art historians will undoubtedly regard *The Drawings of Alfred Pellan* as a meritorious addition to the study of one of the major figures of modern art in Québec. Apart from Greenberg's original research on the documentation of Pellan's drawings, to the partisans of critical art history who insist on understanding the complex relationship of art to the historical realities which impinge upon it, *The Drawings of Alfred Pellan* is a disappointing study, interesting mainly insofar as it reveals the state of crisis and confusion which informs contemporary formalism.

Judith Ince  
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#### Notes:

- 1 To date, only four monographs have been published on the work of Pellan, and only one of these during the past decade: Maurice GAGNON, *Pellan* (Montréal: l'Arbre, 1943); Donald W. BUCHANAN, *Alfred Pellan* (Toronto: Canadian Publishers, 1962); Guy ROBERT, *Pellan: His Life and His Art*, trans. George LACH (Montréal: Éditions du Centre de Psychologie et de Pédagogie, 1963); Germain LEFEBVRE, *Pellan* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart). While these works contain pieces of information which are indispensable to the student of Pellan's career, they are not, nor do they pretend to be scholarly works; they are more biographical than art historical, laudatory rather than critical.
- 2 See the following articles by GREENBERG: "Surrealism and Pellan: L'amour fou," *The Journal of Canadian Art History* I, 2 (Autumn 1974), pp. 1-11; "Surrealist Traits in the Heads of Alfred Pellan," *The Journal of Canadian Art History* III, 1-2 (Autumn 1976), pp. 55-72; "Pellan, Surrealism and Eroticism," *Artscanada* 240/241 (March/April 1981), pp. 42-46.
- 3 To describe an artist's statements about his art as constituting an aesthetic "philosophy" as Greenberg does, is to immediately surround those statements with a screen of critical inviolability; "philosophy" is charged with such powerful, positive, and elevated associations that its use in conjunction with an artist's comments about his or her art minimizes the possibility of clearly and objectively perceiving the implications of the component parts of an "artistic philosophy."
- 4 Jean-Paul SARTRE, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 23.