

n'apparaît pas nécessaire dans un index qui est un outil de travail et qui ne doit pas intervenir dans l'interprétation des documents. Tout au plus il faut signaler une erreur dans l'épellation du nom de l'artiste et non pas commencer à corriger les titres, comme dans ce cas-ci, sinon il faut corriger systématiquement et ce travail superflu pour une seule personne ou même une équipe peut facilement être accompli par l'utilisateur qui consultera l'index d'une façon ponctuelle mais qui espère y trouver des informations exactes. La plupart des erreurs non corrigées semblent concerner des noms de lieux (ex. Paul Jean Clays, 1882, 308, p. 74; Rita Mount, 1920, 184, p. 296; Percy Woodcock, 1884, 81, p. 435).

Madame McMann indique à l'occasion la localisation actuelle des oeuvres tout en précisant que le changement fréquent d'un titre rend ce travail difficile. L'initiative est heureuse mais encore une fois elle semble superflue dans un index, si elle est entreprise elle doit être poussée davantage. L'inventaire national des collections entrepris sous l'égide des Musées nationaux du Canada devrait permettre de compiler ces informations de façon plus complète d'ici quelques années. Les collections publiques font ici l'objet d'omissions graves, la plus frappante est sans doute celle concernant le beau portrait du "père" de l'Académie, le Marquis de Lorne, par Millais qui se trouve à la Galerie nationale du Canada et qui fut au centre des manifestations qui marquèrent le centenaire de l'Académie.

Nonobstant ces quelques remarques, l'index qui comprend la mention de plus de 3,000 artistes, dont 885 membres de l'Académie (je n'ai pas fait le calcul, ce sont les chiffres cités par l'auteur, y en aurait-il davantage? Ainsi je n'ai pas retrouvé par exemple C. L. May qui expose en 1880 sous le numéro 114 The Valley of Champigny, Canton de Valais, Switzerland) devient un outil indispensable pour toute recherche sur l'art au Canada. La multiplicité des informations (ex. l'activité picturale des architectes), des lectures et des usages auquel cet index se prête fait rêver. L'on en vient même à souhaiter la préparation d'un index des lieux et des noms cités dans les titres des oeuvres relevés dans cet index...

Laurier Lacroix

F.H. Varley: A Centennial Exhibition

Christopher VARLEY

The Edmonton Art Gallery, 1981
195 pages, 26 colour, 185 b/w
ills., \$20.00

In her controversial book, *American Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, Barbara Novak suggested that American painting is, in the main, conceptual in nature and objective in theme. This means, in essence, that American painters, having isolated a concept or idea for a painting, then based that work very firmly on concrete facts. The principal exceptions in this broad trend she felt were those romantic painters, including Whistler and Vedder, who were very strongly influenced by European styles and concerns. Novak concluded that the factors which provoked an identifiably indigenous American art, as opposed to an imported European one, persisted from the early limner portraits, through to the pop art of the 1960's and the photo realism of today. In Canada a concentration on facts seems to be equally persistent. However, north of the 49th parallel, facts were often approached intellectually, rigidly and rigorously, in a manner that denied room for many emotional flights of fancy. When a more romantic Canadian creator does emerge, a European influence is also paramount, giving rise to more intuitive and emotional creations.' F.H. Varley is one of those unusual romantic Canadian painters, and as such, has often been misunderstood or neglected.

Another seminal study that examines the juxtaposition of style, content and geography is Robert Rosenblum's *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*. Here Rosenblum identifies romantic themes and approaches practiced by important modern painters in Northern Europe and the United States running the gamut from Caspar David Friedrich to Mark Rothko. This romanticism, he feels, is opposed to the formalism practiced by the Paris school of cubists and subsequent stylists. Furthermore, by ignoring the usual suggestion that romanticism as a dominant aesthetic philosophy ended by about 1850, Rosenblum challenges these time restraints and opens up the latter end of

the scale so that Van Gogh and Rothko can be comfortably included. When Novak's and Rosenblum's theories are overlaid interesting results occur. Rosenblum follows the painted manifestations of a particular philosophy and thereby identifies a geographic pattern; Novak starts with a geographic entity and isolates a dominant philosophy therein.² Starting from opposite poles, these two art historians reach mutually supporting conclusions, conclusions which help to locate Varley in a broad North American and even European context.

F.H. Varley was born in 1881 in Sheffield, England and received his early art education at the local art school. As befits such an institution, this school concentrated heavily on drawing and design, giving Varley a thorough foundation in traditional draughtsmanship, an accomplishment he used to advantage all his life. By 1900 Varley was at the Académie Royale des Beaux Arts in Antwerp and did well during his two years there, amassing a number of important prizes. Both schools provided a relatively solid and traditional grounding untainted by the momentous innovations of post-impressionism. This was not inappropriate since Varley's imagination was never really caught by Parisian formalism; his was a more romantic nature. While in Belgium he had studied Buddhism, a continuation of his early interest in the spiritual in nature and in undogmatic yet exotic beliefs. Even before leaving Sheffield, Varley preferred to conduct his own prayer meetings on the moor rather than attend the Congregational Church patronized by his religiously non-conformist family. And after moving to Canada in 1912, these interests persisted. He was involved with the activities of the Toronto Theosophical Society and later in British Columbia, renewed his interest in eastern philosophies. Like the Buddhists, he attributed specific psychological meanings to his colours. In short, Varley brought with him to Canada the guiding principles of his art: a solid base in draughtsmanship, an abiding delight in the human form, and an incessant curiosity about the spiritual and the exotic.

Unfortunately, Varley could not always give his aesthetic nature full rein in Canada. The exigencies of making a

living and supporting a family too often interfered with his creative urges. Such conflicting demands promoted confusion, insecurity and uneven work. Even his famous association with the Group of Seven underlines many of these conflicts. The Group's strength, as a group, came from its members' interest in the wilderness as a nationalist symbol but Varley never shared this interest. As an immigrant he had considerable affection for his adopted country and appreciated her vast natural wealth, but he never recognized any narrowly jingoistic purpose for his art, in either subject matter or style. In fact, until he moved to British Columbia in 1926, Varley painted only one major landscape, *Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay*, nor did he participate in any of the sketching trips to Algoma, the north shore of Lake Superior or the Rocky Mountains. Rather his preferred themes were an extension of his identified interest: figures, either as portraits or set in the landscape. Nor did Varley gain much social support and camaraderie from his association with the Group. Especially after he left Toronto, his behaviour was frowned upon. Where the Seven and Varley did meet on common ground however, is in religious questioning. Harris, MacDonald and Lismer, like Varley, explored beyond traditional Christianity, probing Theosophy and Christian Science among other spiritual manifestations. However, even in these religious pursuits, Varley was not totally sympathetic to the other Group participants, finding Harris "numbing himself with theosophy" and thereby producing "cold", intellectual painting, and considered the pronouncements of many other members superficial. Varley's eclectic themes and styles, his lack of emphasis on nationalistic goals and his disregard for social convention, all ensured that his membership in the Group of Seven remained peripheral to both the Group's pronounced concerns and his own uncertain aims. In relation to the Seven then, Varley emerges as more individual, emotional and eclectic; in short more romantic.

This romanticism became more pronounced between 1926 and 1936 when Varley lived on the West Coast. Now for the first time he was able to tackle the land as a persisting subject. It was

almost as if, by distancing himself physically from the Toronto-based Group of Seven, he had a new emotional freedom to confront the land on his own terms rather than being subsumed into a Group format, a concept which he vehemently rejected. As Chris Varley notes, "the mountains, the ocean, the mists, and the long northern twilights, all captured and awakened his imagination."³ Varley began by seeking a privileged relationship with mountains and their attendant clouds. Like Ruskin, he saw mountains partly in architectural terms, as nature's cathedrals, and partly as nature's personifier, the entry into a truer and deeper understanding of man. This bifurcation — really the traditional one between god and man — is clearly evident in Varley's work of this time. His numerous mountainscapes, hedonistic attacks of rich colours and bold forms aligned with Gothic awe because of their very strangeness, are unpopulated. His figure studies, powerfully clean and majestically conceived, pushing beyond the boundaries of his Toronto portraits, are more personal and therefore more revealing. These two themes, mountains and figures, did coincide on occasion, for despite his eclecticism and insecurity, Varley never totally abandoned his aim of painting figures in a landscape. Having been less than successful in achieving this union in earlier attempts, Varley now approached the problem covertly. The personification of nature, such as that evident in *Three Clouds and a Tree*, perhaps a throwback to the Group of Seven's inordinate fondness for single pine trees, is tentative. More obvious and more powerful is the implied presence of the viewer in his magnificent open window works. Especially in *The Open Window* of 1932, where the tilted window frame opens onto an immeasurable expanse of empty sea flowing into mountains, the links to Caspar David Friedrich are clear. *Dhârâna*, surely the culmination of Varley's attempt to integrate figures into landscape, also bespeaks Friedrich in the clear subordination of the figure to a spiritual communion with the divinity of nature. While in British Columbia, Varley most clearly identified and isolated this romantic pantheism to produce some of his very best paintings.

Upon leaving the West Coast in April 1936, Varley's ebullient and focused urge seemed to dissipate. This was not entirely unexpected. When he arrived in Ottawa, officials at the National Gallery questioned his stability and took him in hand. Unfortunately the actions seem to have exacerbated the painter's well-known rebellious tendencies. Hitherto he had found his creativity in an idiosyncratic balance between the world of objects and the world of ideas. He could avoid neurosis by painting. However, as the British psychoanalyst Edward Glover notes, neurosis triumphs when an artist can no longer achieve a sense of progression or forward movement through his art. Varley's volatile temperament needed the type of environment he had found in B.C.; a combination of landscape, people and freedom. Conditions were never as propitious for him again. Not that Varley immediately gave in to his depressing economic state and concomitant mental attitude. Late in the winter of 1937 he finished his huge canvas of Christ emerging from his tomb, a work he called *Liberation*. Varley was thrilled with the piece; subsequent commentators have not shared this attitude. However *Night Ferry, Vancouver*, rich in colour and bold in technique, and *Mirror of Thought*, packed with emotion and symbolism, recall the perception and penetration of his B.C. works. It is not accidental that the subjects of his most successful eastern canvases were drawn from his memories of Vancouver. But Varley needed more than memories; following the American traits Novak has identified, Varley also had to have facts, the physical presence. That is why a sympathetic environment was the key element in his creativity. In eastern Canada, and in 1937 in the Arctic, he found and recorded local facts. With pencil and watercolour, he produced small works on paper, little gems of colour and line but hardly major creations. The best of these portraits and landscapes have an appealing freshness and directness but they lack the emotional complexity and romantic intensity of his larger canvases which successfully integrate figures into the landscape.

Varley's work demonstrates the validity of applying Novak's analysis of

American painting to a Canadian, for Varley was not only concerned with concept and dependent on physical facts, but like those atypical American romantics, brought much of his romanticism with him from Europe, in this case England. Especially in his British Columbia painting, Varley felt free to explore a more idiosyncratic, emotional and intuitive relationship with the mountains and with his close associates. In so doing he was very much part of the northern romanticism isolated by Robert Rosenblum.

Christopher Varley's able catalogue, *F.H. Varley*, does not attempt, as I have, to place Varley in a world context. Rather, wisely, it concentrates on delineating the specifics and the intricacies of the painter's relatively unknown career. This is most necessary because, despite his membership in the Group of Seven, Varley has been sorely neglected. Unlike most other members of the Group, Varley was honoured only by one major exhibition. Neither a monograph nor a retrospective was written or organized after his death until his grandson picked up the torch — the pen. All that is now past history. In 1974 Chris Varley organized the show *Varley: The Middle Years* for the Burnaby Art Gallery; in 1978 he included Varley in the exhibition *Coasts, the Sea and Canadian Art* at The Gallery/Stratford; and in 1979 he wrote the monograph *F.H. Varley for the Canadian Artists Series* for the National Gallery of Canada, all work which served as a detailed preparation for the production of *F.H. Varley*, the fullest and most complex of all the documents.

This developmental process, encompassing as it has the addition of new material and providing time to consider and reconsider the painter and his work, has been of great benefit. As Chris Varley candidly admits, his early studies did not do justice to his grandfather. Over almost a decade of work, much new information has come to light. The present production, still based primarily on the documentation carefully collected by Peter Varley, has been considerably enriched by material such as the Vera Weatherbie correspondence, records of the Sheffield City Polytechnic, a letter in the FitzGerald Study Centre, and conversations with important contemporaries. As well, research enabled the author to identify

conclusively books Varley admired and used in his painting and teaching, such as A.H. Munsell's *A Colour Notation*. Time also provided Christopher Varley with a more dispassionate overview of his earlier writings. In this catalogue he has added new analysis, including a sensitive discussion of Varley's own theories on colour and an extensive re-examination of Varley's later works. Interestingly, this reappraisal did not really provoke radically new conclusions: with the exception of a few paintings, including *The Night Ferry*, some of the Arctic watercolours and a few portraits, Varley's work, after 1936, is not particularly strong. In this new book Christopher Varley has also toned down or eliminated many of his more questionable interpretations, especially the sexual ones, although "Varley" idiosyncracies still persist: the odd "praying mantis" interpretation of *Nude on a Couch* is an example. On the whole those changes have considerably strengthened the book. Some areas of debate however remain unexplored. It would have been useful to have more analysis, not only of the works themselves, but also of Varley's philosophy, his interest in Buddhism and Theosophy, his application of unorthodox psychological interpretations, and his methods of painting. Such analyses would enable us to put Varley into the broader sphere of northern romantic art, a goal which was clearly not part of this production. These quibbles aside, *F.H. Varley* is unquestionably the most thorough and competent examination to date of this important Canadian. It will serve as a useful departure for further exploration, surely a most worthy achievement.

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Notes:

¹ For greater exploration of the differences between Canadian and American painting see Ann DAVIS, *A Distant Harmony: Comparisons in the Painting of Canada and the United States of America*, (Winnipeg:1982).

² In *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting 1825-1875* New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. NOVAK uses a different approach, identifying and analysing the routes of dominant American cultural traits.

³ Christopher VARLEY, *F.H. Varley*, p. 80.